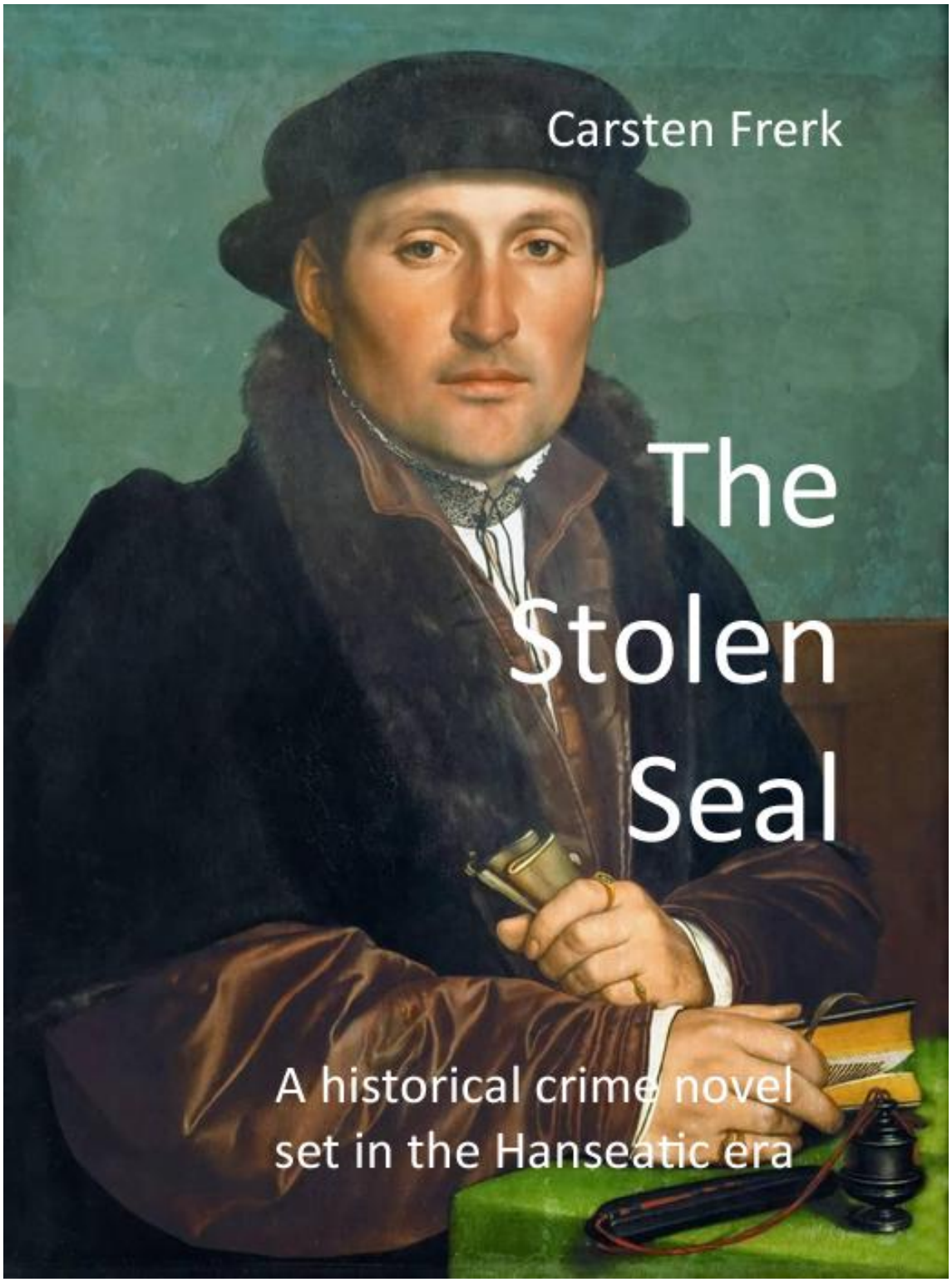
Carsten Frerk
The Stolen Seal
A historical crime novel set in the Hanseatic era

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A historical crime novel set in the Hanseatic era

2003 / 2026

For Alexander

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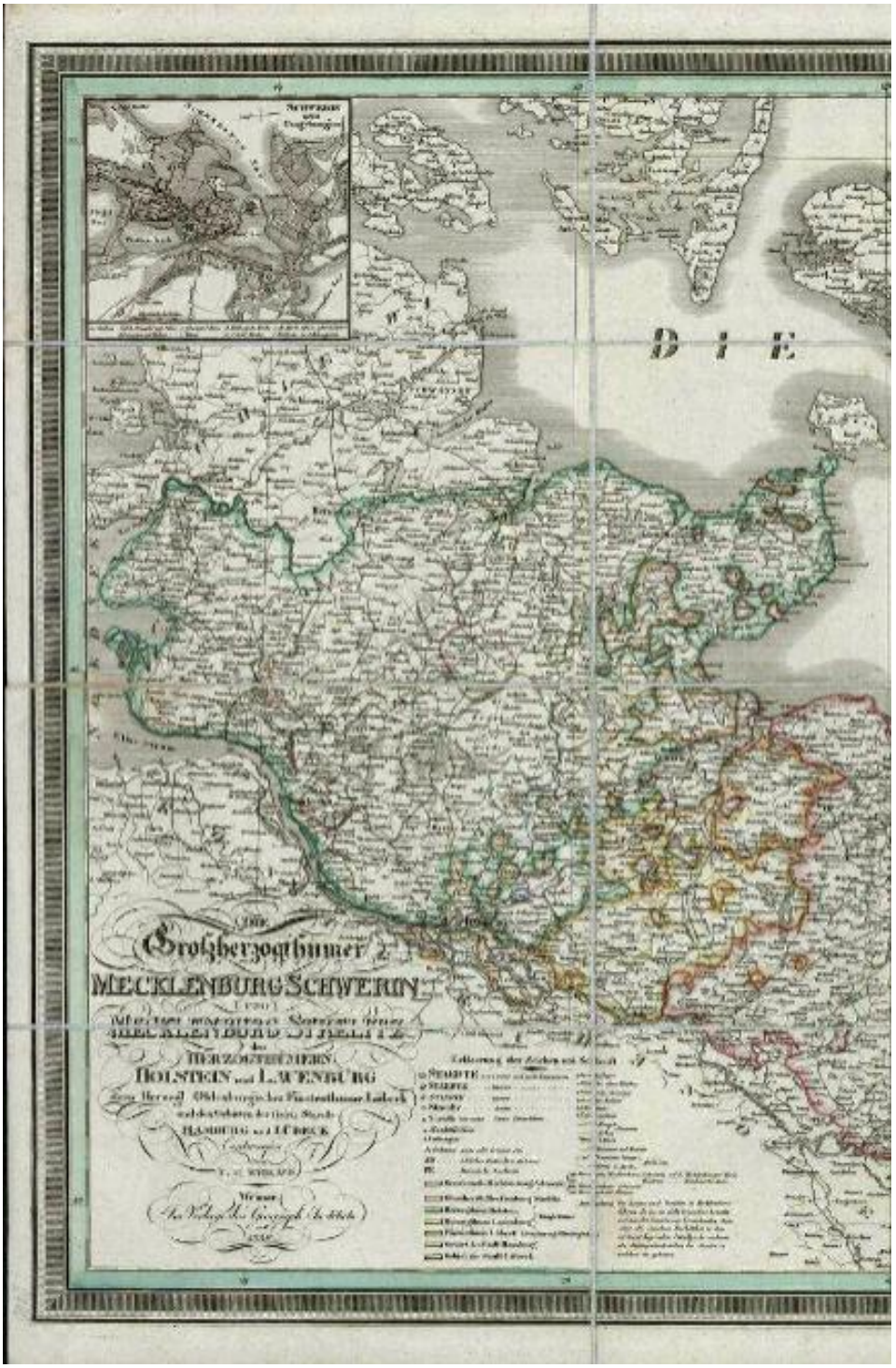
Who can do anything else in
such a time,
but to put one's own skin
onto the line?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HOLSTEIN und LAUENBURG
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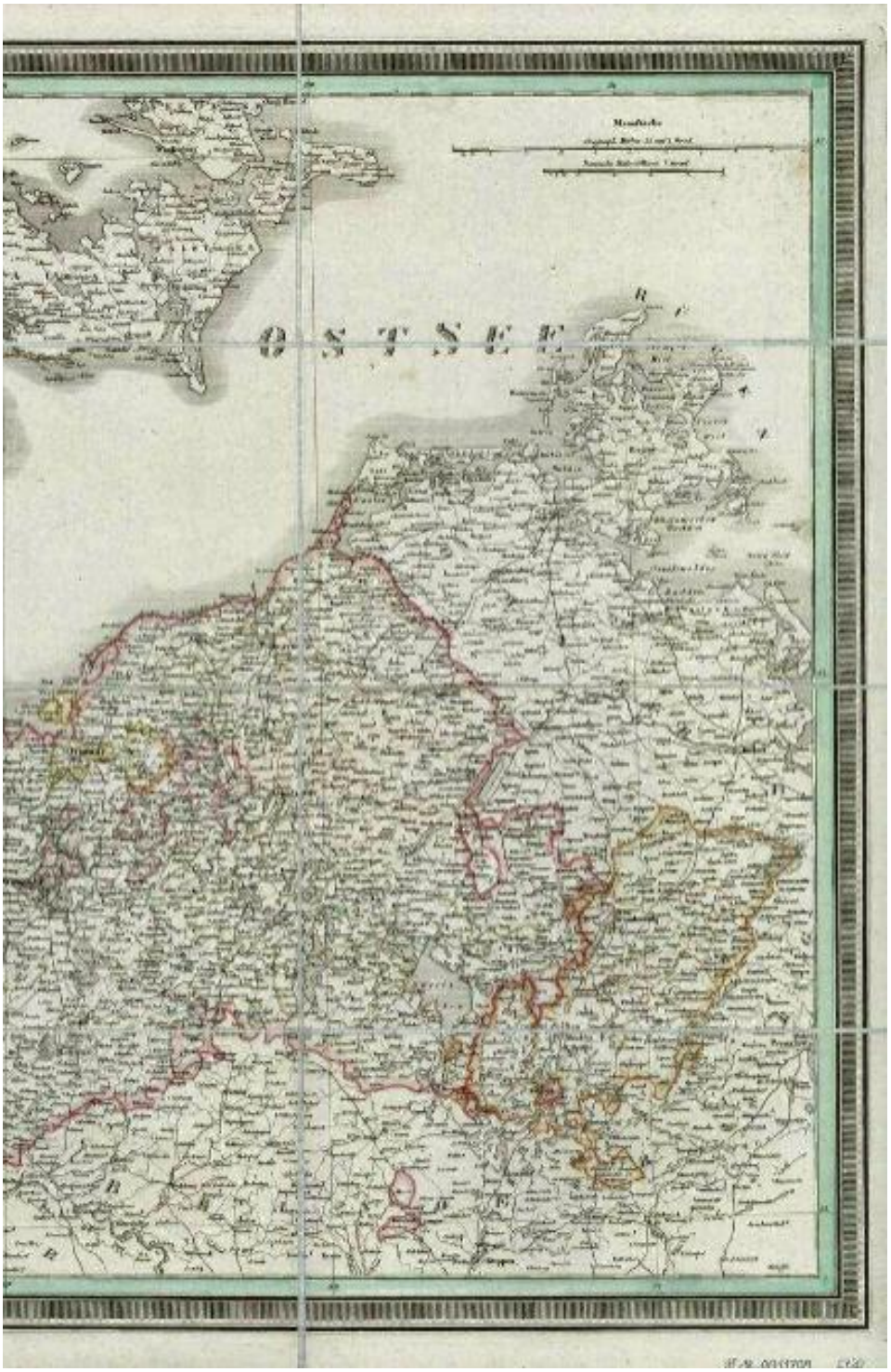
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THE DEAD MAN IN THE RAMPARTS

Class-specific clothing from the first half of the 17th century
Regional History Association for the Mark of Brandenburg e.V.

The iron ring of the door knocker was struck with force against the front door. Everyone in the front of the house were immediately awake. A hard blow, silence, then another blow, as if storming soldiers, under cover of darkness, were seeking to take the enemy by surprise and smash open the locked gate with the powerful thrusts of a battering ram.

Soon, hurried footsteps thundered down the stairs, and the violent pounding fell silent. Instead, a loud babble of voices pierced the night-time stillness. Amidst the clamour, Albrecht Moellendorff heard several times "I've got the job." The old footman, Winfried, apparently wanted to show the nocturnal troublemaker the door, but the thudding of heavy boots on the stairs suggested he would not succeed.

Marie, who had been lying in Albrecht's bed beside him and had pulled the duvet over her head in fright at the first bangs, now sat up straight beside him.

The knocking at the bedroom door confirmed Albrecht's assumption that the visitor was there for him. After a brief "Come in", the door was opened, and one of the town guards stepped over the threshold. In the circle of light cast by his lantern, he did not seem irritated by the late hour, nor did he deem it appropriate to apologise for disturbing their rest. He did, however, make a sincere effort to look only at the councillor and not to glance at Marie's bare breasts. With an awkward movement of his arm, he made a gesture resembling a military salute. 'Councillor! Your presence is required. A lifeless man has been found, and judging by the way he looks, he did not die of natural causes!' Albrecht nodded, and the city guard quietly back into the corridor, panting.

Marie hastily threw on her nightdress and then gathered up his clothes. Lost in thought, he pulled the shirt and loose trousers, the waistcoat and the jacket over his body. He had been considering handing over the office of Chief Magistrate to someone else for several months now, yet he still held the post. It must have been a particularly important death if they'd sent for him in the middle of the night rather than waiting until the next day or waking the younger of the two magistrates, to whom the day-to-day cases were entrusted. Finally, he pulled up his thick stockings and squeezed his feet into his knee-high boots; he stamped his foot firmly once – the leather fit perfectly – and he was ready to go.

The town watchman stood by the stairs, holding the lamp to one side so that the steps were lit for both, and stamped his way down the flight. Winfried had, in the meantime, woken Hinrich, the councillor's personal attendant. He slept in the rear servants' quarters and was now waiting, already dressed, at the foot of the stairs. Albrecht merely nodded briefly in agreement but declined the leather cloak held out to him and simply threw his cloak over his shoulders. Then he pulled his wide-brimmed hat down over his head and left the 'Zum Goldenen Schiff' inn with his two companions.

As the magistrate asked no questions, the city guard also kept his mouth shut. In silence, the three men walked through the deserted streets of Hamburg's old town, illuminated only by the moon's pale light. The tall city guard marched ahead with long strides, so that Moellendorff and the council servant had to make an effort to keep up with him.

Soon they passed through the former Ackertor gate in the old city walls, crossed the street Neuer Wall—which still bore that name, even though it now stood in the city centre—and turned north into the Neustadt. The harsh sound of their boots on the cobbled streets of the old town was muffled by the sand and clay of the unpaved paths in the Neustadt. Far ahead, by the ramparts of the new city fortifications, a cluster of lights and people could be made out.

Four night-watchmen with their lanterns and a few soldiers from the town garrison carrying torches were illuminating an area along the inner ramparts where the final earthworks and fortifications were not yet complete: the north-western Dammtor.

When he recognised the councillor, the lieutenant of the rampart soldiers who was present saluted and reported: 'A city watchman saw four figures tampering with the ramparts. He rushed over; the men took to their heels, and he saw two boots sticking out of the ground here, whilst the body to which they belonged had already been buried in the earth. Apparently, they intended to bury the dead man here. The agitated guard tried to blow his horn but could only manage a series of squeaking sounds; he then fired his pistol, which alerted not only the other city guards but also the garrison. We have already exhumed the body, and it seemed appropriate to me to summon you. The dead man was clutching this in his hand." With that, the young officer handed the senator a heavy silver clasp, formed from the intertwined letters G and A and held together by the golden double bar of a Roman numeral two. The officer saluted once more and then stepped aside.

Moellendorff recognised the clasp immediately and already, without even needing to look, who the pale corpse was, lying there in the dirt between the beams of the scaffolding with his features contorted: His Excellency Colonel Ingmar Graf von Dottingsfron, secret envoy of Gustav II Adolf, King of Sweden.

Dottingsfron! A man who loved to laugh, was sure of his cause and so at peace with himself that one might have thought nothing could shake him.

Whilst Moellendorff stared speechlessly at the frozen features of the dead man, which now looked more like a grimace cast in wax, thoughts raced through his mind: Why had they wanted to bury him here, rather than throwing him into the Elbe with a large stone tied to his feet? Was he meant to be found? Why was Dottingsfron clutching the silver clasp in his hand? He had been wearing this clasp hidden beneath his buttoned waistcoat. Only yesterday afternoon, twelve hours ago, he had bid him a warm farewell. Dottingsfron did not want him to accompany him to the harbour. It would have been too conspicuous if a well-known councillor had taken him to the ship; too great an honour to bestow upon an insignificant Swedish timber merchant. Many strangers came and lived in the city, and in the second-rate clothes of a simple merchant, he would not attract anyone's attention. He had tapped his leather briefcase and laughed with a wink: 'No one will notice what a valuable item is contained in this ordinary travel bag.'

Moellendorff pointed at the Swedish envoy.

"Did you find a leather briefcase on him?"

"No, sir. Shall we look for it?"

"Yes. And send for a stretcher so that we can remove the body from here."

Whilst the officer gave his orders, one soldier ran off to fetch the stretcher and the others dug through the earth with their sabres and pikes, Moellendorff slipped his coat from his shoulders and concealed the Swede's body beneath the fabric.

He was certain the soldiers would not find the leather pouch containing the documents. Yet it seemed wiser to him to keep them occupied than to have them standing around gawping, giving rise to unnecessary thoughts and questions to which they would find no answer, and then whispering about town as to whether anyone might know anything about it.

It wasn't long before the soldier returned with the stretcher. Dottingsfron was lifted and laid on the cloth between the carrying poles. The night watchmen, under the supervision of the council clerk, were sent off to take the body to the courthouse.

Judge Moellendorff beckoned the young officer over. "You were right to summon me. Have the ground restored to its original state, as if nothing had happened, and then order your soldiers to keep the incident strictly confidential. If even the slightest word of this leaks out from your men, I shall make you pay dearly!"

Without waiting for the astonished officer to salute, he turned on his heel and hurried to catch up with the night watchmen, so as to bind them too to absolute secrecy.

As he strode briskly through the moonlit, silent streets, he mused: Who, apart from myself and the other councillors, knew of this Swedish envoy's mission? To whom might the papers be of use—the ones Count Dottingsfron carried with him and defended with his life? Could it be that Christian of Denmark behind this murder?

Without the protection of his cloak, he began to shiver in the chilly October night – he really ought to have put on his leather coat – quickened his pace and was glad when he reached the courthouse.

The briefing of the night watchmen was a matter of just a few sentences. They all nodded that they would keep silent as the grave and were then left to their night duty once more.

Council servant Hinrich stood in the small consultation room behind the courtroom next to the covered stretcher and looked at the councillor with a silent, questioning gaze.

After a moment's thought, Albrecht had made up his mind. "No, Hinrich, you don't need to keep vigil. We'll lock the room. It'll be enough if you come here first thing in the morning and then take up your post outside the door." Hinrich breathed a sigh of relief. Although it would not have been the first night he had spent keeping vigil beside a corpse, he had not felt entirely at ease at the thought of possibly having to sit here for the rest of the night, all alone, beside a dead man whose features seemed to resemble the grimace of a devil.

Once the soldiers had cleared away the traces of the digging on the rampart and the sand had been smoothed and compacted as before, the lieutenant gave orders to put the spades back in their place and to fall in.

When the crunch of the soldiers' boots on the sand had died away, a man emerged from the black shadow of an archway and scanned both sides of the houses.

The man turned to the three other men who had been hiding with him in the darkness of the archway.

He whispered hurriedly to them: “You’ve already received the second half of your pay. The night watchmen are still on their way with the stretcher. So, make haste to find your way home, and don’t let yourselves be caught!”

The three men pulled the hoods of their cloaks over their heads and were about to slip away when one of them reached out to take the leader’s hand. “Thank you for the payment, Sir Johannes. You know where to find us. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to earn my money so easily.”

“Now get out of here at last,” the man addressed urged his three accomplices impatiently, shoving them out of the shadow of the archway onto the street. He himself lingered for a moment, absent-mindedly running his finger over the poorly healed scar on his cheek, which had been with him since his days as a mercenary. The whole affair had in fact been easier to carry out than he’d expected. And the fact that they hadn’t been able to bury their victim? He shrugged indifferently. That was beside the point now. He seemed to chuckle as he thought about how much easier it was to kill a person than to bring one into the world. And the fact that one of those three scoundrels who’d just made their escape thought he might need them again spoke volumes about his stupidity. As did the fact that he thought his name was Johannes. He never hired the same people twice, and he never used his Christian name.

Then the so-called Mr Johannes tucked the leather bag more securely under his arm, checked once more that no one was to be seen on the street, and then disappeared as well into the shadow cast by the front of the house.

Albrecht couldn't get back to sleep. Marie had gone to her room in the servants' quarters, and he lay awake for some time. Even after pondering the matter at length, he could find no solution. He got up again, wrote a few lines on a sheet of paper, lay back down in bed and finally drifted off to sleep.

After a brief breakfast together, Hinrich, the council clerk, set off for the courthouse. He had with him the piece of paper that Albrecht had written on during the night and was to hand it over to the mayor at the town hall.

Albrecht walked across the corridor into the office to be alone and think.

He stopped involuntarily at the door; it would not have surprised him if his uncle Karl had been sitting at the large oak table right then. He still hadn't come to terms with the fact that Karl was no longer alive. He felt he could still smell the scent of his tobacco, as if he'd merely stepped out for a moment and would be back soon. Karl had been like a father to him: helpful and admonishing, encouraging and a nuisance, but always on his side, and without him he would not have become the man he was today.

Lost in thought, Albrecht's gaze drifted to the large oil painting beside the filing cabinet. Dominating the space, his grandfather Laurentz sat upright in the centre of the picture in an armchair, dressed in the black traditional costume of a Hamburg councillor, complete with the large white ruff worn on official occasions. To his left stood his broad-shouldered son Karl; to his right, Albrecht himself, looking younger but with the same narrow face he had today. Both had placed a hand on Laurentz's shoulder. That was how he had decreed it as his legacy.

He had been a merchant and a councillor at the same time, and his son and grandson, who were each carrying on one aspect of his life, were to be constantly reminded to act as one.

On the table lay a long scroll of parchment which he had studied two days earlier with Ingmar, Count of Dottingsfron, and which he now, lost in thought, unrolled slowly across the tabletop. He smiled wistfully, thinking of how this map had come into the house and what it had brought about.

A year ago, a travelling map merchant had called at the offices of the long-distance traders and offered his maps and city views for sale to the merchants. He had also laid out his wares at the House of the Golden Ship and spoken at length with Karl.

These merchants travelled far and wide, journeying throughout Europe, and were a valuable source of information about what was happening in other countries and cities. Their views were recorded not only in their maps and plans. Based on everything they saw, heard and observed in the wealthy merchant houses and in the inns where they found cheap lodgings, some of them were wiser, more far-sighted and better informed than many of their customers, who had entrenched themselves behind high city walls.

This dealer had been one of the shrewder ones, and after a long conversation Karl had bought several cards from him. One of them – this very one, which Albrecht now saw spread out before him – had also been laid on this table for the first time on that very day. Karl had been chewing dryly on the stem of his pipe – a sign of the utmost concentration for him – when he had entered the room. With his index finger, he had traced imaginary routes and country roads and seemed to have been lost in thought. He had startled when Albrecht had stepped up

beside the table and had looked curiously at the parchment. "The Baltic Sea?"

"Mmh, commonly known as the East Sea," Karl had murmured in agreement, then pointed to the map. "Look here," he had tapped the map with his index finger, "Denmark and Norway, united under the majestic Christian, who loves to hold magnificent festivities at his court in Copenhagen and who, were it up to him, would lead us too by his royal rein." He had looked up, and Albrecht had nodded in agreement. The Danish monarch's ambition was only all too well known.

"And here," Karl had spread the fingers of his left hand to cover a whole area: "Sweden."

He had left his left hand resting on the map and swept his right hand north-east "Finland," and then swept his hand down towards the south. "Ingria and Kexholm! As these territories now belong to Sweden, Gustav Adolf has cut off the Russians' access to the Baltic Sea. And as the map dealer told me earlier, he is currently preparing a campaign against Livonia and his Catholic cousin Sigismund III of Poland – a relative who has been challenging him for the throne for several years now. If the Swedish king wins this campaign too – which is to be expected – he will rule the whole of the north, the east and soon also parts of the southern shore of the Baltic Sea and…", Karl had taken his hands off the map, leaned back, suddenly banged his fist on the table and laughed as if a weight had been lifted: "Yet he sits there like a trapped animal! Christian of Denmark controls the Sound, the only outlet from the Baltic Sea into the wider world. And as one hears, he has not the slightest intention of showing Gustav Adolf any favours whatsoever.'

Albrecht had stared at the map in bewilderment and then shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, what does it matter to us if these high-born clans are at each other's throats – as long as they leave us in peace.

Karl had waited a moment longer and then propped himself up, looking puzzled. "Good heavens, Senator, don't you realise what that means?"

"No." Albrecht really had no idea what Karl was getting at.

"No? For heaven's sake! The Swede needs a way out of this trap! A way to get round the Danes and their ships in the Sound! He can't go north – there's nothing but land there, and he'll get stuck in the ice. South? He won't get far there either; there's nothing but vast expanses of land and the kingdom of that spiteful Sigismund. So, he must head west and find a way out there. Ideally, a major river, a town with a safe harbour and high walls, which – if all goes well – has just as little in common with Christian as he himself does, is a reliable partner to him, and can thus free him from the Danish stranglehold!"

"Yes, why not?"

Karl had shot Albrecht a withering look, as if he were standing before a slow-witted ox. Then he had ranted impetuously, as was his wont: "Do we actually have to grab senators by the ears and then shove it right under their noses before they understand what's at stake? If you were a merchant, you'd have understood it straight away! I'm talking about us, our city, our harbour and the Elbe! Then the Danes can go ahead and fill the straits with cow dung for all I care, because with our harbour, the Swedes would have the gateway to the wider world!"

"And you reckon the King of Sweden wants that too?"

Karl first widened his eyes, then clasped his hands together and pretended to be praying: "Oh, almighty God, send this man your help!" He had stood up so abruptly that the chair scraped across the tiles and had planted both fists on his hips: "If, as a merchant, I were always to ask first whether anyone even wanted to buy my goods, then I'd limit myself exclusively to beer and grain; people always want to drink and eat." Then he had put on a flattering expression: "We must make this opportunity appealing to him. He might not think of it on his own. Someone will have to go there and sell it to him."

Without Albrecht realising or even suspecting it at the time, that very sentence had been the decision that had ultimately led him to Stockholm as a negotiator.

Erik, Karl's younger son, who had handled the correspondence for his father's business dealings, entered the office, panting. "Good morning, Senator, have you heard anything from my brother Eberhard yet?" Albrecht shook his head. The letter summoning Eberhard to Hamburg had been sent by courier four weeks earlier, immediately after Karl's death, to his eldest son in Amsterdam, who was managing the Moellendorffs' branch there. As the elder son, he would take charge of the business at the head office, and the younger Erik was to go to Amsterdam in his place.

Albrecht rolled up the card, placed it with the other rolled-up cards, and set off for the town hall.

The mayor had been puzzled as to why Albrecht had sent him the letter asking him to convene the members of the so-called Swedish Council, but had then grumbled his way into complying with the request: 'Moellendorff will have his reasons for this!'

The nine councillors and the two acting mayors had gathered in the small room next to the council chamber.

Albrecht looked round the room and nodded: Soltow, Rodenborg, Schoweshufen, Rheders, Hartzwich, Twestreng, Ambsing, Wetken and Penshorn. All councillors from families whose trading houses were involved in trade with Sweden. They looked at him questioningly, and he recounted to the men, who listened in silence, what had happened the previous night.

"A grave matter you are telling us about, Moellendorf. And since you asked me to summon only the members of the Swedish Council, do you suspect that a member of the rest of the Council might be involved?"

"I cannot rule anything out at the moment. Not even that. But it points to our group and the treaty with Sweden."

After a brief pause for thought, everyone presents suddenly began talking over one another: "So someone we don't know has the Swedish copy of our treaties in their possession!"

"What does this person stand to gain from it? These treaties are worthless to them, after all!"

"Why on earth should it have been just one person?"

"What do they want with our treaties?"

"To them, these contracts aren't worth any more than the paper they're written on."

"Do we still have our copies of the contracts?"

The mayor nodded in affirmation at the last question and raised his hands in a soothing gesture: "You can hardly make out a word when everyone's talking over one another!"

In the silence that followed, Albrecht's voice could be heard clearly: "It's not the contracts."

"What else, then?"

"What Dottingsfron was carrying with him as well!"

"The leather folder?"

"Nonsense, who gets killed over a leather folder?"

"People have been killed for far less!"

Now Albrecht raised his hands to cut off the torrent of words: "Dottingsfron had in his case a copy of the royal Swedish seal, by which any document bearing it becomes an official document. A Swedish state seal!"

"Of course," grumbled the circle of councillors in unison.

Councillor Wetken beckoned to one of the council attendants and ordered him: "Bring wine! How is one supposed to endure this world without wine?"

The mayor was the first to recover from his shock; he cast a disapproving glance at Councillor Wetken and then turned to Albrecht: "What can we do?"

Albrecht had been staring at the wall and seemed on the verge of despair: "I don't know!"

"But knowing you as I do, you've already given this some thought. What do you suggest we do?"

Now Albrecht looked round the room and spoke with great determination: "The death of the Swede must be shrouded in secrecy. Count Dottingsfron's body still lies safely hidden next door in the courthouse, but we must remove him from there as quickly as possible."

"Do you think the night watchmen and the Wall Guards will keep quiet?"

Whilst Albrecht merely shrugged – how was he to know? – Councillor Twestreng, who was one of the four lords of Wedde, nodded: "The Wall Guards keep to themselves. They have no contact with the town's inhabitants.

And the night watchmen will keep quiet, as otherwise they'll lose their jobs and their extra income – they shine torches to guide citizens home at night, in breach of the regulations, for which they demand and receive payment."

The mayor was surprised: "You know this, and yet as the police you do nothing about it?"

Twestreng smiled: "Yes. It is always advisable to turn a blind eye to something that can be used against a man at a later, more opportune moment."

All the councillors scrutinised the Chief of Police and wondered whether he might secretly know something about them too, and might one day, when it suited him, use it against them?

The mayor shook his head, as if to dismiss the question, and picked up the thread of the conversation again:
'What should be done with the body of the Swedish envoy?'

Councillor Twestreng spoke up again: "How about wrapping him tightly in lengths of cloth and then hiding him in a beer barrel stuffed with rags? A trustworthy Swedish carrier could then mix this 'coffin-barrel' in with his normal load of beer and transport it to Stockholm unnoticed."

"A beer barrel? As a coffin? That's a good idea. But who will be in Stockholm to receive him there? We can't just let the Swede roll the beer barrel into the castle, only for them to suddenly find their count wrapped up inside it."

A perplexed silence spread through the room. Finally, Councillor Penshorn had an idea: "Wouldn't it be best if Moellendorff travelled to Stockholm once more to arrange everything as we wish? Or do you know a better man to whom we could entrust this task?"

The mayor stared at the floor as though another name were written there on the floorboards, looked up again and then nodded. “You’re right, even if it is an inopportune time of year.” He paused, as if searching for further arguments. Finally, he placed his hand on Albrecht’s shoulder.

“We had our reasons for not submitting the treaty with Sweden to the town council for approval, as we should have done under the agreements between the council and the hereditary landowners. Whilst you are away, there is no need to unnecessarily increase the number of people in the know. Your family plays a leading role in trade with the Swedes, and you have already been introduced at the Swedish court. So set off, for God’s sake and under His protection.”

Albrecht Moellendorff nodded but still hesitated. “Although we cannot make a big fuss about Dottingsfron’s death, we would have to let the bailiff in on the matter. Even though we constantly harbour a great many strangers within these walls, his servants could casually ask around in the taverns and keep an eye out to see if anything catches their attention. They should, however, only mention the Swedes in passing as timber merchants.”

Councillor Twestreng was about to object, but the mayor had already risen from the bench: “Twestreng, if your people from the Wedde , everyone in town will soon know about it.

I’ll speak to the bailiff. Now go, Moellendorff, arrange for the Swede to be shipped out, and make preparations for your journey.” He placed his hand on Albrecht’s shoulder once more.

“Are you travelling by ship and accompanying the contraband?” Albrecht shook his head in denial. “I shall take the overland route to the Baltic Sea. Then I’ll reach Stockholm faster than the ship with the beer barrels and can prepare for its arrival.”

Perhaps he could ask for overnight accommodation again at the Noble Abbey in Preetz, in the Holstein region of Wagrien, a good mile from Kiel; and this time it would not be a coincidence, as it had been on his first journey to Stockholm, when an axle on the carriage had broken on the return journey, they'd had to ask for help there against their will, and he'd met a widow at the monastery whose carefree laughter had kept coming back to his mind ever since. He might be able to see her again, for judging by the way she'd said goodbye to him, he could assume that she, too, would not be averse to a second meeting.

Fate is kind to people when it does not let them know what lies ahead. Otherwise, Albrecht would have known that the first journey, which he had found torturous, had been a reasonably tolerable excursion by land compared to the journey that lay ahead, which would subsequently make him realise all too clearly why Gustav Adolf was mocked as the 'Snow King' at the Catholic court of the Habsburgs in Vienna. On the other hand, however, this also meant that the Protestant Swede and his troops possessed a crystalline toughness that everyone was yet to experience as a living nightmare.

The magistrates' court building was locked. Albrecht had set to work with the councillor. They lifted the body onto the table, cut open his clothes and stripped them from his body. Whilst Hinrich washed the dead man, the councillor's gaze remained fixed on the two long, blood-encrusted cuts, as if someone had tried to tear the count's heart from his chest.

Albrecht startled as the washcloth splashed into the basin on the floor and Hinrich retrieved the prepared strips of cloth from a jute sack. The councillor wiped two tears from his eyes and stepped up to the table.

Hinrich had certainly noticed the senator's grief: 'Does the Swede's death affect you so deeply, sir, that you must weep?'

"No, not him. It is another dead man whom I was reminded of again when I saw you washing the body."

Four weeks earlier, Karl had fallen from his horse, which had buried him beneath its heavy body. It had grown quiet in the house known as 'Zum Goldenen Schiff'. After the surgeon had left, Death had knocked unmistakably at the door for everyone and claimed Karl for himself: his allotted time was up.

Mechthild had been sitting on the right-hand side of their shared bed, whilst Karl, propped up with pillows, sat upright with his back against the wall. He did not want to face death whilst lying down.

Amidst groans and moans, he had endured having his body wrapped in strips of linen, spitting up blood time and again. His tanned complexion had grown progressively paler and then turned ashen.

Albrecht, not yet ready to accept his fate so easily, had been pacing restlessly around the room, and Karl's eyes had followed the shadows cast by the candlelight as Albrecht moved about, casting them against the walls of the room.

"Senator!" Karl had raised his voice, and Albrecht had stopped in his tracks. "Do me one last favour and sit here, on the other side of my bed, next to me!"

Albrecht had looked his uncle up and down, wondered whether he should comply with the request, and then decided to grant his wish. To break the expectant silence, he had dragged the chair across the wooden floor with a scraping sound.

Karl did not seem in the least affected by the sombre mood. “Don’t pull such faces. Haven’t we already endured other blows of fate?” *He* had tried to comfort them both. “I am dying in peace. I have lived my life! God has been kind to me. And the cards he dealt me – I think I’ve played them well.”

Karl had taken his wife’s hand, gently stroked her skin and looked at Mechthild for a long time.

“My dear, we knew you would outlive me. I am closer to you than to anyone else. – Don’t we have wonderful children and grandchildren! Perhaps they, as a reflection of our lives, can be the joy of your old age.”

With tender firmness, he had clasped his wife’s hand; she had kept her head bowed, then looked up at her husband and covered both their hands with her other hand.

Karl had turned his head, briefly closed his eyes to stifle the sounds of pain, and then looked at him: “And you, Albrecht – you, my dear superior – how I had doubted when our late father Laurentz had chosen you, young Spunt, to be a councillor. And even though you allow yourselves to be called ‘senators’ in Latin for the sake of honour, you have always remained a good councillor. You have always taken my advice.”

The door had opened silently, and the twins, holding hands, had approached hesitantly.

“Matthias and Hannes! Come here, you little rascals! There’s still time for a little story.” He had tried to pat the bedsheet with an inviting wink but closed his eyes again with a stifled groan. Immediately, his two grandsons let out a sigh of relief and plonked themselves down on the bed, unconcerned that Karl was being further wave of pain.

Mechthild had looked at her husband and her two grandsons, who were hanging on his every word with wide eyes. She had been painfully reminded once again that those years when Karl had sailed the world's seas as an English privateer captain under the command of Sir Francis Drake – and about which he so loved to tell stories to his grandsons – had been his happiest years.

Whilst individual words had interrupted her musings – 'storms' and 'flying fish' – ah yes, Karl loved that image of flying fish, rising from their natural element and soaring like birds — he had always been honest with her; she had never regretted marrying him. She could feel his firm handshake, hear him speaking whilst Matthias and Hannes listened intently. 'And when the sun rose after the raging storm, it was as if a new life were beginning every single time.' His gaze had drifted into the distance as he recalled images of his past that only he could see. He had paused and then continued in a quiet voice: "And then in Africa..."

Matthias and Hannes immediately protested: "Grandad, that was in America!"

Karl's eyes had widened; he had muttered, "Yes, in America…", and then closed his eyes again.

"Is Grandad angry now?" the twins had asked into the silence that had fallen, in which only Karl's rattling breath could be heard.

Once again, Mechthild had felt the pressure of Karl's hand, which then unexpectedly went limp, and she had known at once that her husband had left the house of life at that very moment.

With a deep sigh, Mechthild had stood up, gone to the window and opened both panes so that Karl's soul could slip away. Then she had returned to the bed, stroked his forehead thoughtfully and gently closed his eyes.

The twins had watched what was happening in silence, their eyes full of questions, and then asked, 'Is Grandad asleep now?'

"Yes, Matthias."

"Won't Grandad Karl tell us any more stories now?"

"No, Hannes, he won't be able to tell you any more stories."

Hannes had pouted and nudged his brother. After a brief, knowing glance, the two of them had slid off the bed and slunk away, looking dejected.

Later, the maids had come in with large bowls of hot water. They had undressed Karl, washed him, cut his hair and nails, and then dressed him in his best coat. Karl had asked, as a precaution, that nobody should 'tink as he had put it', and this was now being observed. Finally, Mechthild had placed a 'St Peter's penny' under his tongue so that he would have his entrance fee with him at the gates of heaven, and old Winfried had asked to be allowed to hold the wake.

He himself had said nothing about the 'St Peter's penny' and had accepted Mechthild's view that God's ways were inscrutable. And if it pleased Him to call Karl to His side, then so be it. It was His decision. As a secular judge, it was not for him to pass judgement on the matter.

Albrecht was startled out of his thoughts when there was a loud knock at the door of the courthouse, and he was back to the present.

"That must be the coopers with the beer cask. Let them bring it in through the door, and then they can leave again."

He heard Hinrich speaking to the coopers, then the barrel rumbled across the stone floor. When it had gone quiet again, Hinrich stood in the doorway to the adjoining room, looking puzzled, and muttered: "Well, I'm not sure whether…"

"Whether what?" The judge was impatient. He found it increasingly difficult to tolerate it when anyone – be it one of the defendants or a member of the household staff – wouldn't come round to the point.

"Whether the dead man will fit inside that barrel."

Albrecht stepped into the hallway of the lower court and immediately agreed with the council servant. He could and should have realised it himself: the barrel was too small. After all, they couldn't fold up Dottingsfron's body or chop it up like whale meat just to cram it into the barrel. He thought for a moment. Then he had made his decision. "We must have the measure Dottingsfron's dimensions, and the coopers are to make a barrel to fit by tomorrow."

Whilst Hinrich was measuring Dottingsfron's body, the councillor was still gazing thoughtfully at the barrel standing before him and examining the bunghole for filling. Dottingsfron certainly wouldn't fit through there. So they also needed a barrel that initially had only a solid base, so that they could lower the body in through the open side. Only then could the second base be sealed. He would speak to the master cooper himself; the man was well aware of the Moellendorffs' frequent requests for special barrels for their cargo and never asked what was to be transported in them.

THE JOURNEY TO SWEDEN

'Two Weather Witches', 1523
Painting by Hans Baldung Grien
Städel Museum

Hinrich, the clerk, strutted about the office in his merchant's livery, running his hands over the fine fabric draped over his belly. "Never thought I'd become a merchant in my lifetime, let alone set sail on a trading trips!"

The young lieutenant of the Wall Soldiers, who knew of the Swedish envoy's death, had also been appointed by the senator to accompany him. He would have preferred to keep his uniform on rather than wear this bourgeois disguise, and so he looked at the portly merchant, shaking his head, whilst mocking: "Judging by the look of you, you're apparently your own best customer, drinking your beer yourself instead of selling it. Or why, as a well-to-do merchant, are you so frugal that you squeeze your belly into a jacket that's far too tight?" Hinrich didn't give a second thought to his belly, with which he was no doubt well acquainted. He saw the problem solely in the clothing, which was new to him. 'What can I do about it if the late Mr Karl was such a cheapskate and preferred to smoke tobacco rather than eat properly?"

The lieutenant, whose pay and rations were not generous enough to allow him to put on weight like the servants of the merchants and the council, shrugged. "Well, it'll do as a bit of decoration, I suppose. I've seen plenty of other merchants whose coats didn't fit any better than the one on your paunch."

Whilst Hinrich was still pondering whether, as a proud merchant, he ought to regard these remarks as a defamatory insult but then refrained from replying because he knew full well that his sword was indeed nothing more than a decoration and that the soldier knew how to make good use of his sabre, Albrecht Moellendorff had entered the room and was scrutinising his two companions.

"It'll be all right if you leave the talking to me. We can set off now."

The young officer wondered why they were riding out through the Dammtor in the north of the Neustadt and why the councillor clearly did not wish to travel via Lübeck to Stockholm. Although no one had told him the purpose of this journey or where it was to lead, he could guess as much following the death of the stranger, whose clasped badge he had recognised as a Swedish officer's insignia. But it did not occur to him to ask any questions, and so they rode side by side in silence. He rode alongside, right next to the councillor. Hinrich, who was unaccustomed to sitting on a horse, swayed along some distance behind, taking care that his horse did not accidentally step into one of the many hollows in the ruts of the track and that he might fall from the saddle. That, he thought, would have been incompatible with his new outward dignity as a Hanseatic merchant.

The red-painted toll barrier marked the border with the territory of the County of Pinneberg, which the Emperor in Vienna had granted as an imperial fief to the Counts of Schaumburg. Albrecht and the officer had to wait for the councillor's servant to pay the road toll. They then kept to the right-hand side of the broad road until it eventually forked: to the left, the road led north-west via Krempe to Dithmarschen; to the right, it headed north via Bramstedt and Neumünster to Kiel.

After half a mile's ride northwards, they passed through Eppendorf, and it became abundantly clear to the councillor that they had been riding for some time through areas that all belonged to the former Herwardeshude Abbey, which was wealthier than Hamburg. On more than one occasion, the city's treasurers had visited the abbess of the present-day had gone to the convent to enquire about a loan.

Mechthild, Karl's wife, had purchased a place there after his death and now lived in the convent in the company of many single women. She did not want to become a nanny to her grandchildren.

As they rode out into the open Harksheide, Moellendorf set his horse into a brisk trot. Hinrich, who until then had been observing the walkers, beggars and the heavy transport carts that they encountered or passed by on their light horse, now concentrated on the mare and his balance so as not to fall behind.

The senator loved this silent ride. Whenever possible, he preferred it to any journey by carriage. On his horse, he could be at one with himself, keep his distance, close it or widen it, ride at a leisurely pace to discuss matters, or gallop ahead when he wanted to feel the thrill of movement and the wind. In a carriage, he felt confined and at the mercy not only of the harsh jolts of the wheels, but also of sitting amongst people with whom he actually had nothing to discuss, simply because he had to accompany them or they had to accompany him, and of the silence born of estrangement – what a contrast to the freedom of a horseman.

Around midday they reached a river ford, where a few people were camped, wishing to avoid crossing the cold water on foot. They were waiting for the next goods wagon, whose coachman might let them ride along on the loading area, so that they could cross the shallow but wide stream without getting their feet wet.

Albrecht reined in his horse so that it could walk through the water at a steady pace, when a strikingly tall man broke away from a nearby group and, leaning on a long stick, came towards him towards him. The dirty, tattered coat, the grimy face and the unkempt hair led him to expect the usual.

Sure enough, from a few metres away, he heard the man call out: "Have mercy, sir, and give a poor wayfarer, whose guts are already beginning to gnaw at themselves with hunger, small alms, sir, so that he may quench his thirst."

Whether it was because Albrecht made a defensive gesture at the stench wafting towards him, or because his horse shied away from the rough voice and veered off to the side, or whether it was his words: 'Get lost. If I gave money to every beggar, I'd soon be as poor a man as you yourself!' – The wretched wayfarer was suddenly beside him in three long strides, his face contorted with rage; he raised his staff and, with a powerful blow, knocked the senator off his horse.

Albrecht, who in his surprise was still clutching the reins as if he could not believe that he was suddenly lying on the hard ground and his chest ached, saw the burly man coming round the horse, his club already raised for the next blow, when a long blade flashed in the sun and the heavy blow of a sabre struck the beggar, his head now dangling between his shoulders, and his wide-open eyes staring blankly at the sky.

Albrecht hurried to get back on his feet. No sooner had he stood up than the man's heavy body crashed down exactly where he had been lying just a moment before. Blood spurted pulsatingly from the severed carotid artery, and, gasping, he tried to claw his way into the earth until his twitching movements ceased.

The lieutenant, who had spurred his gelding on, simultaneously drawn his sabre and struck at full gallop, returned at a light trot. Seeing that the group of beggars standing together had dispersed and the individuals were making their escape, glancing fearfully around to see if he was following them, he dismounted.

'Why didn't you leave him to me?' snapped the senator, who only now felt the shock course through his limbs, at the young officer in exasperation.

The lieutenant was not a man of many words, and how was he supposed to rebuke the agitated patrician – merely by asking how the senator would have wanted it done? He replied simply: "Because it is my duty to protect your life."

"But then you wouldn't have had to kill him straight away! A firm blow with the blunt side of the blade against his raised arm would have been quite enough!"

The lieutenant looked at the councillor, who was pressing one hand against his aching chest, and merely shrugged; the hilt of a sabre was not designed to allow one to strike with the blunt side of the blade. "Can you mount your horse again and ride on?" He had been a soldier long enough not to argue with a civilian—even if he were a senator and chief justice—about what was necessary to counter an immediate threat. He was a soldier, and his trade was to kill an attacking enemy.

Reluctantly, he dragged the body to the side of the road and left it there. Then he returned to the horses, picked up the club, threw it over to the highwayman and called after him as a eulogy: "He who sows violence shall reap death!"

In Neumünster, they took up quarters at the first inn they came across. A barber-surgeon who had been summoned examined the blue-red bruises on his aching chest, concluded that nothing was broken, and then had an ointment sent over, which the councillor was to rub vigorously into the affected areas.

In Preetz, where they arrived around midday on the second day, they were told that the nobles of the chapter were not present. No one could provide more precise information as to which of the women had travelled where, and so the disappointed Albrecht had only a short letter delivered, so that his detour via Kiel had not been entirely in vain. The shorter route via Lübeck would have saved him two or three days.

Twilight had already fallen as they finally reached the town of Kiel, whose six streets were dominated by the castle situated on higher ground. After crossing the town moat, they made their way towards the landing stage for the ships, one of which, with its tall masts, towered above the gables of the houses.

A celebration seemed to be taking place at the castle. All the windows were lit, and the landlord of the harbour tavern, into which they entered after a brief search, grumbled morosely: 'Yes, Your Highness, the Duke has issued invitations to his youngest son's wedding – up there.' It was all too clear that he did not think much of the nobility, even though they reigned supreme over him.

Albrecht had three roast pigs and millet porridge brought for them, and the landlord asked whether the guests might care for some Krude or beer.

'Krude? What sort of drink is that?'

'It tastes delicious and is made by boiling down wine, sugar, cinnamon and paradise seeds.'

Albrecht shuddered involuntarily; it seemed to be a sweet, sticky concoction. He had beer brought and asked the innkeeper whether, by any chance, a fisherman with his own boat was present. The landlord looked around the taproom and then pointed to a table by the wall. "Over there, Your Honour, the man with the grey beard sitting there on his own – he's the sort of person you seem to be looking for."

The senator picked up his beer mug and sat down at the table with the grey-bearded man. He waited until the man looked up. "I hear you've got a fishing boat?"

"That may well be."

"Could I hire it for a trip?"

"Where would you like to go, sir?"

"To Stockholm, and as quickly as possible."

The fisherman stared at the Hamburg councillor as if assessing how much this unexpected catch in his nets might be worth. He pushed out his lower lip and chewed on his beard. "Stockholm?" Albrecht nodded. "Thirty Lübeck marks," he growled from behind his beard. When he saw Albrecht's eyelids twitch at this outrageous demand, he grumbled on: "If it's worth it to you and if you're in a hurry… We could set sail this very evening."

Albrecht didn't hesitate for long. He didn't want to buy the ship, but as he had no choice, he said nothing about the extortionate price. Money wasn't going to be a problem. And if they could set sail that very evening, that was fine by him. That was another reason he'd come to Kiel. The city was scarcely fortified, so even at night there were no obstacles to sailing out of the harbour. "You shall have the money. Let your men know."

Now the fisherman blinked in surprise at his supposed prey in surprise and wondered, growing annoyed, why he hadn't demanded forty marks straight away – the stranger would

have paid that too. Well, he consoled himself inwardly, it wasn't over yet, and before they set off on the return journey, the price would unfortunately have gone up. He grinned surreptitiously. How did the saying go? He who has the power – and he had the ship – has the law on his side.

The fisherman called his youngest son over – since he wasn't going out fishing, he didn't need to pay the boatmen – the councillor bid farewell to the lieutenant of the wall guards with a tip, stabled his horse and that of the councillor's servant in the harbour inn's stables, had provisions packed for a few days, and they went on board.

In the shelter of the fjord, it was rather unpleasant due to the setting rain, but they made good progress. The fisherman sailed below the outlying farm on the northern shore of the fjord, so that they could not be spotted, and Albrecht went below deck to rest.

The wind was favourable, and when Albrecht came back on deck the next morning, the fisherman's son was at the tiller: 'Good morning, sir, we're making good progress.'

The senator looked around in surprise but saw no one else apart from the boy.

"Are you looking for my father? He's gone to lie down for a bit. With this good wind, I can steer the ship just as well."

"So, you're an experienced helmsman, then?"

The boy ran his fingers through his straw-blonde hair and laughed carefree: "Not at all, sir. My father just takes me along sometimes. But with a steady wind, I can steer the boat on my own."

Hinrich had also woken up by now; he brought the provisions sack up on deck and handed the Senator some bread and wine.

Sheltered by the railing, they dozed away the morning. Albrecht pondered the whole affair and wondered whether it had really been necessary to keep the supply contracts with Sweden secret. That was the real reason why he was now sitting on this ship, travelling to Stockholm. Yet, he decided, it had been the right thing to do. These supplies had at least three adversaries who must not find out about them. Firstly, the Danish king, who would supply the Swedes with nothing that was of any use to their military. Then the other Hanseatic cities, which had already taken a dim view of Hamburg's unilateral actions on several occasions in the past. And finally, the other trading houses in the city, which repeatedly suspected that the merchants represented on the city council were granting themselves advantages – which, in this case, was quite simply true. Not to mention the possible discontent of the residents, should the price of grain rise again in winter and they then blame the exports to Sweden for it.

Around midday, the fisherman appeared on deck, yawning, and looked sceptically at the sky. He clicked his lips and took the helm. "Looks like the weather's turning rather gloomy."

Now Albrecht, who had been lost in thought, also looked up at the sky and saw the grey clouds.

"Do you think we're in for some rough weather?"

The fisherman narrowed his eyes. "You never know, but it doesn't look good. These days, the autumn storms often come too early, earlier than we're used to from our youth. But if you'd like, I can show you a few tricks so you can help me if things get worse."

The Senator thought it would be a useful way to pass the time, and so he stood beside the fisherman, who explained at length and detailed explanation of how to keep the boat steady in the wind, what to do when the wind shifted, and how the sail was secured.

Hinrich also joined them and, although he understood even less than the Senator, he nodded his head earnestly.

It was getting increasingly chilly, and towards evening Albrecht retired below deck. After a while, however, the swell seemed to be growing stronger, and he preferred to climb back up on deck rather than be at the mercy of the increasingly violent rocking in the dim belly of the ship.

No sooner had he set foot on the planks than he sought the nearest handhold to cling to: the boat tilted so suddenly to one side under the force of a surging breaker that the fisherman was hurled across the deck into the railing, cried out in pain, and the fierce, stormy companion of the waves tore the sail with a deafening crash.

Albrecht screamed as if out of his mind: 'You're too early, Old Hein!' In three leaps he was at the tiller, which was swinging back and forth, and clasped the long piece of wood with both hands.

As if his cry had been heard, the storm ceased abruptly. The waves grew flatter and the boat straightened up again, creaking at the joints. Albrecht looked around in amazement. Debris from the ship lay scattered across the deck, the remnants of the sail flapped gently against the mast, and the whimpering fisherman clung to the railing with both hands.

"Hinrich!" Albrecht shouted into the sudden silence, and from the cubbyhole leading to the quarters below deck, the pale face of the councillor's servant emerged.

"Get some large nails and a hammer and bring them to me!"

Now the fisherman's son also appeared on deck, grabbed his father and dragged the man, who was screaming in pain, below deck.

Albrecht had heard stories often enough that this sudden lull in a storm boded ill and offered only a brief respite before the next hellish frenzy began.

Out of breath, Hinrich slammed the toolbox down on the deck next to Albrecht and looked at him questioningly.

"Come on! Hammer and nails! Nail the soles of my boots to the deck and then make sure you find a scrap of cloth to tie to the yardarm!"

Hinrich asked no questions and was already down on his knees. With trembling hands, he began driving the nails through the soles at the edge of the boots to nail the Senator to the deck planks, as ordered. With every blow, he swore to himself never again to leave the firm land and the safety of his hometown, to confine himself to the quiet work of a councillor's servant, and to leave the merchant's life and travelling to others without envy.

Albrecht tried to move his boots, but they wouldn't budge an inch. "That's enough," he said, putting an end to his servant's never-ending silent vows. "Now make sure you find the sail so we can hoist an auxiliary sail; otherwise, we'll be at the mercy of the waves and the storm!"

Hinrich raised his eyes to the sky – as if they weren't already! The torn clouds he saw in the sky immediately gave him a new spring in his step. A short while later, he reappeared on deck with the fisherman's son. The latter quickly lowered the yard, tied the small spare sail securely in place and then hoisted it up.

As if the wind had been calmly watching to ensure that everything was ready for the next dance, it immediately tugged at the sail, as if to test whether it would be an easy task. The fisherman's son looked fearfully at the fluttering fabric and, after a brief glance at the senator, had disappeared below deck again.

Albrecht shrugged. If he wanted to cower below deck like a cowardly wimp, that was his business. “Hinrich, take the crate back below deck so it doesn’t slide about up here on the planks, and then come back to me.”

The council servant merely nodded, tossed the hammer into the box, and as a bolt of lightning cracked from the clouds at that very moment, he too had vanished below deck in a few strides, as if fleeing to a protective cave.

The storm still seemed to be circling the ship as if lying in wait. It was only when Albrecht wondered where on earth the council servant had got to and shouted “Hinrich” that a gust of wind tore the name from his lips and carried it out onto the open sea amid a mocking whistle.

Albrecht no longer had time to wonder why it was he, of all people – who knew next to nothing about seafaring – who was now the only one left on deck. He, whose knowledge consisted solely of the few fragments he had heard and picked up from the fisherman in the short time since he’d come on board. He gripped it with both hands, clamping the wooden tiller firmly between his arm and his body, and hoped that, amidst all the confusion, fortune would smile upon him and the boat would not drift any further out to sea, nor be driven too close to the coast and possibly hurled against a rock.

In one of the brief lulls between the storm’s tugs and the crashing of the wave crests, Albrecht thought he could make out a shadow protruding from the water . He burst out laughing like a madman when it suddenly occurred to him that it might be that Dutchman.

His thoughts wandered back to the past once more. A few weeks earlier, at home during dinner, Karl had sat quietly at the head of the table, occasionally glancing over at him and, time and again, smiling almost imperceptibly as he looked at his two grandchildren. He'd been at the harbour with them that afternoon, and they'd been whispering to one another as if they shared a great secret that they simply had to share with the whole family. Mechthild, too, had noticed that the twins had a story on the tip of their tongues and could hardly wait until dinner was finally over, Albrecht cleared the table, and they were allowed to chatter away about the exciting things they'd experienced that day.

He had certainly noticed the questioning looks from the two children, wondering why on earth dinner was taking so long today, but he wanted them to practise a little patience and waited calmly until the very last farmhand had put his spoon down, thus bringing dinner to an end. "Well then, Matthias and Hannes, why don't you tell us what was so exciting at the harbour today?"

"There was, there was, there is!" Matthias had taken a deep breath to give the next words special emphasis, when Hannes immediately seized his chance and excitedly interjected: "An underwater vehicle!"

"Pardon?" He had leaned forward, narrowed his eyes slightly and smiled at his excited nephews to encourage them to give a more detailed account.

"A box, made of leather, that suddenly popped up out of the water where there'd been nothing to be seen before, and it gave us all a right fright!"

"You mean the box was travelling beneath the surface of the water?"

"Yes!" A vigorous nod of the head had accompanied the blurt-

ed-out word, to make it perfectly clear to him that everything was exactly as they'd described.

He himself had glanced over at Karl, who, however, happened to be filling his pipe at that very moment, calmly concentrating on his tobacco and hadn't even thought to look up or comment on anything.

"Mmh!" He had been undecided. Everyone at the table, apart from Karl, had looked at him intently, waiting to hear what he would say.

"And it's got twelve oarsmen!" Hannes had gushed excitedly. "And we spoke to the man who built it!"

"Mr Cornelius van Drepel, that's the man's name," Karl had added, and as if on cue, all their heads had turned to the other side of the table to peer through the cloud of smoke that had now spread around Karl.

He'd asked Karl, "But there weren't any fish flying around the box in the air, were there?"

Karl had grinned mischievously; after all, he knew that all the residents of the house, apart from Matthias and Hannes, regarded his tales of flying fish in the Pacific Ocean as tall tales, sailor's yarns or, worse still, the figments of a drunken buccaneer's imagination.

"Why on earth would there be fish flying about? There weren't any fishing boats nearby from which the fishermen could have hauled their catch ashore."

He'd then found it difficult to explain to the children that he considered the story of this underwater vessel to be just as much a figment of the imagination as those supposedly flying fish. Indecisive, he'd wondered how he could get to the bottom of the truth without dampening the children's credulous enthusiasm, when there was a knock at the front door.

Winfried, the footman, whose duties included opening the door, had immediately stood up, disappeared into the hall and returned accompanied by a stranger. He had scratched behind his ear sheepishly and then announced the visitor: “Mr Cornelius van Drepel, a Dutch engineer in the service of the British Admiralty, honours us with his visit.”

Karl had said nothing at all. His grin had only grown wider. It was now clear that the story about the flying fish was true too, and he, Albrecht, had risen from his seat in surprise to greet the unexpected visitor. The Dutchman had taken his wide-brimmed hat off his head, shaken Albrecht’s hand heartily and said: “You must be Senator Moellendorff. Merchant Karl Moellendorff, whom I met at the harbour today, invited me here and said you might be interested in my invention.”

The British Admiralty had shown no interest in it, as they rightly suspected that it could also be used to launch surprise attacks on their own ships. Nor had the Hamburg City Council or the mayors been convinced that such a submersible vessel would serve any purpose. Whilst the ability to remain invisible to Dutch patrols at the mouth of the Elbe would certainly have been interesting, this submersible’s cargo capacity was too small for it to have been economically viable.

So why, now that he himself was unsure whether he would survive this storm, did he think again to Karl and that mad Dutchman? Was one safer from death underwater? Or were the storm and the waves merely a superficial foretaste of what lay hidden in the depths?

The waves leapt over the railing onto the deck, parted at the

superstructure, and wrapped themselves around the timbers, eager to find the weak spot in this smooth wood so they could break it. The water flowed back together, over the planks, through the railing, to become part of the sea from which it had sprung. Each wave was like a accomplice to the one following it, which, as it gurgled and trickled away, continued to spew forth: 'There it is, there—the weak timber of the mast, there the rotten timber of the railing; there are the weak spots, and you can smash them to pieces with ease!'

Albrecht stared at the mast as if his life depended on it – and gradually he realised that this was indeed the case. If the mast broke, the ship would be helplessly at the mercy of the breakers and the storm and become a plaything of their whims.

How did the saying go? In court and on the high seas, one is firmly in God's hands! He laughed in despair. In court, from the defendant's point of view, he was God; and here at sea, he was the one at the mercy of the elements. Had his hands been free and his boots not nailed down, he would probably have fallen to his knees, prayed to all the gods and implored all the weather witches to spare him and the boat. Since he could not pray fervently, he drew on his courage—which was more like sheer desperation—and steered the ship as best he could.

The cry of a seagull startled him. He jerked his head up and was about to rub his eyes, but his numb arms and hands had clung so tightly to the wood of the tiller that he and concentrated entirely on prising himself, muscle by muscle, finger by finger, away from the wood of the tiller.

During the course of the stormy night, he must have been overcome by unconsciousness due to exertion and exhaustion.

The sea was calm and rippled playfully in a light breeze. The boat drifted slowly along, as if the past day and night with their towering waves had never happened. A fine mist enveloped the boat, and Albrecht felt the dampness on his bare skin.

He slowly spread his fingers, stifling a groan at the painful movement, and tried to move his feet, but immediately grabbed the tiller again to prevent himself from falling straight onto the deck.

Puzzled, he looked down at his trousers, which were soiled with faeces and urine, then at his boots, and wondered in bewilderment whether they had grown fast to the deck, before bursting into raucous laughter and simultaneous sobs – after all, he himself had ordered his servant to nail the boots to the planks.

There was no one to be seen on deck, so he laboriously wriggled his feet out of the leather boots, which were squelching with absorbed moisture. With stiff limbs, he hobbled across the slippery, wet planks, angrily flung open the hatch behind which the stairs led below deck, and slowly descended the steps.

Even as he opened the hatch, he thought he could hear a grunting snore coming from the belly of the ship. Indeed, lying beside the motionless captain were his son and the peacefully slumbering ship's steward.

As he bent over his servant – since he wasn't wearing boots, he couldn't deliver a painful kick– a wave of schnapps fumes hit him so strongly that it nearly turned his stomach. He grabbed the councillor's servant by the collar and hauled him to his feet. Hinrich's eyes flew open and he stared at his master as though a supernatural figure were standing before him. "Is it all over? Are we in heaven?"

Now the councillor's patience snapped: "Perhaps in drunkards' heaven, but otherwise still damned on earth and alive!"

He'd spotted a belt lying by the stairs; in a few strides he was beside the steps and grabbed the long, wide strip of leather. He swung it through the air twice to test it, then the belt cracked down with all his might on the bodies of the boy and the councillor's servant, who seemed to have fallen asleep again. "You drunken rabble," Albrecht shouted furiously as he lashed out at the two of them. "You cowardly wimps, get your act together!" And the blows rained down once more.

Groaning, the two drunks slowly turned their bodies. Instinctively, one after the other, they began to pull their arms up to cover their heads, thereby exposing their chests to the furious blows, until at last the pain reached their clouded minds.

Exhausted, the councillor finally let go of the two men and staggered towards the stairs. He collapsed onto a step and leaned against the wooden banister. He felt like crying. As the two battered men slowly staggered to their feet, he thought he heard a scraping sound against the side of the boat, followed by voices on deck. He turned away from his victims, who were standing there in a daze, and made his way up the steps of the companionway.

"Hello, is there anyone on board?"

He pushed open the door to the deck, saw a larger ship moored alongside and four men standing on the deck of the fishing boat.

"Oh, there's someone there after all!"

Albrecht struggled to get to his feet and was more on his knees than standing. "Sorry, I don't understand your language."

"Bloody hell, a German," replied one.

Another laughed: “We’d already thought this was a ghost ship and that you’d found your grave on the open sea!” The third grinned: “You’re lucky we found you. Your boat is drifting straight towards the coast and would soon have crashed into the rocks.”

The fourth seemed to be the most level-headed: “Are there any other people on board apart from you?”

Albrecht nodded silently, pointed downwards and stepped aside so that two of the strangers could pass him and go below deck.

The fourth stranger appeared to be the captain of the other ship. He had scrutinised Albrecht and his wet clothes, examined his stockings, then, after glancing across the deck, spotted the nailed-on boots next to the tiller and finally nodded as the other two strangers came up the steps and reported: “One dead man and two drunks. The dead man seems to have been the captain.”

“Why did you set sail in this storm instead of staying in the safe harbour like we did? Your captain seems to have been very reckless.”

Albrecht shrugged. Whether the captain had been not only greedy but also reckless – how was he to know?

“Where were you heading?”

“To Stockholm.”

The foreign captain nodded, seemed to be thinking, at the battered but still afloat German fishing boat, huffed, and then made up his mind: “Stockholm is our destination too. You can come over with us; the other two will stay here on board.” With that, he turned to the other three: “We’ll tow this boat along; perhaps we can get some prize money for it.”

He held out his hand to Albrecht and helped him climb over the rail, whilst the others fetched a rope and tied the two boats together.

Whilst Albrecht was given dry, clean clothes, boots and a hot punch, the sails were hoisted, and in the cold morning breeze the convoy slowly picked up speed.

He'd been given a warm blanket when he wanted to sit out on deck, and the weather was gradually clearing up. The drizzle died away, the clouds grew lighter and lighter, the first patches of blue appeared in the cloud cover, and the sun came out. Now, as the convoy of the two ships glided swiftly through the water in the sunshine, Albrecht suddenly felt a shiver run through him. He felt a sense of humility at his own good fortune, and gratitude that the storm had subsided and that he had survived the terrors of the night. He closed his eyes and felt, at the same time, the warm autumn sun and the sore, chafed patches on the skin of his hands. A deep sense of gratitude for the warmth of the sun and the beauty of life filled him. He felt this previously unknown humility – the kind his father had told him about – so intensely that he almost laughed out loud. Humility has no place in situations where one has been in dire straits and fighting for sheer survival.

At the Noble Abbey in Preetz, Melissa von Tralau looked in wonder at the seal on the letter that had arrived with her return from Kiel, waiting for her on the table in the entrance hall. Then she noticed her pulse quickening. Hastily, she folded the paper, broke the seal, unfolded the sheet and scanned the lines.

Yes, he had been here, had wanted to visit her, but had had to leave urgently and would be delighted if he could meet her on his return journey, even though he could not yet say when that would be.

She pressed the paper to her chest, closed her eyes thoughtfully and called into the house: "Trine?"

Her maid shuffled over – the lovely days of peace whilst the mistress was away now over – and she saw Melissa waving the paper: "Did he say where he had to go next?"

As it was the only letter that had been delivered whilst her mistress was away, the maid knew who the 'he' referred to.

"No, *he* didn't."

She emphasised the 'he' so strongly that Melissa von Tralau paused in surprise. "Come on, Trinchen, tell me what you know!"

The maid tried her very best. "There was another gentleman there, even if he only looked the part."

"And?" Melissa waited impatiently for the farmer's daughter, who was not destined for greater things, to finally continue her story.

"Yes, he – the other one – he was strutting about here – he brought the letter later – and announced – I didn't ask him – that they were on their way to the capital…", she seemed to be thinking more intently, furrowing her brow in concentration, and then it came to her, "from Sweden."

Melissa merely whispered, "Stockholm", and let the paper drop in disappointment. Then it was hardly surprising that he couldn't write to say when he'd be back. Winter was approaching, and once the Baltic Sea froze over again, no ships would sail. Yet she would have loved to take him in her arms, this Albrecht Moellendorff, this fine man from the big city, whom she'd taken to her heart straight away on his first visit.

Inside, she rejoiced. Oh, yes, he was so proud of his hometown and everything they had achieved in recent years: a grammar school as a secondary educational institution, a Hamburg bank with its own mint, the town fortifications… She was curious to see for herself, with her own eyes, everything he had told her about.

He'd probably even been to Kiel. Whilst she herself was celebrating in the castle, he'd been down at the harbour looking for a ship for the crossing. Presumably they'd been so close to one another without even knowing it. She let out a quiet groan.

She was tired of country life. Her husband, Heinrich Ritter von Tralau, had been killed seven years earlier as a Danish officer in the Kalmar War against Sweden. She snorted as she thought of her wedding. When he married her, he had made her a widow.

Her secluded widowhood had now lasted seven years. And, for a respectable widow, she felt, she was simply still too young. Her glance in the mirror proved her right. The high-necked, floor-length dress, whose flowing, heavy fabric was held together beneath her breasts by a wide sash, emphasised her slender figure rather than concealing it.

The endless embroidery to pass the time, the endless conversations with the other ladies of the convent, who interested her less and less, and none of whom could or would play chess. Ah, and the rare parties at the Residenz in Schleswig or the castle in Kiel…

There were plenty of admirers who fawned over her, but she did not want another officer as a husband – to be alone for months on end, waiting, only to become a widow once more. And the younger men or those of her own age who would have suited her were all officers in the Royal Danish Army or in Christian's navy. And the others, who weren't officers, were either so stupid or so sluggish and sycophantic that they hadn't even managed to secure an officer's commission. She sighed. No, none of them would do. This peaceful and cultured councillor, who led a tranquil life in a large city – that was what she had in mind for the rest of her life.

Stockholm

Chancellor Graf Axel Oxenstierna (1635)
Von Michiel van Mierevelt - www.nationalmuseum.se

Albrecht had taken lodgings for himself and the councillor's servant in a German inn, bought himself some new boots and had presented himself at the royal residence.

He had reported the accident in Hamburg to the Court Marshal and was now waiting for the Swedish ship carrying the beer barrels, the last consignment for that year, into the harbour.

After four days of waiting, the moment had finally arrived. The ship from Hamburg docked in Stockholm harbour. Albrecht supervised the unloading of the beer barrels and sent his servant Hinrich to the palace with a message.

The royal court marshal walked around the pile of unloaded small and large beer barrels on the quay in astonishment, coming to a halt beside the solitary barrel, which was noticeably longer than the others and marked with a cross. He looked questioningly at the councillor. The latter nodded. The court marshal tapped the wood. It sounded hollow.

He put his hands on his hips and asked, with a threatening undertone in his voice: "Are these the coffins for the dead in Hamburg?"

Albrecht was taken aback. He hadn't even considered that possibility. Now he wavered between honesty—admitting that in Hamburg, too, coffins took the form of long chests—and the diplomatic option of allowing the evidently uninformed Swede to remain under the impression that this was the custom, and that Count Dottingsfron had received the kind of coffin that was standard abroad. What had Karl always said? You have to sell your case to people! He opted for the art of diplomacy: "Yes, that's how it is in Hamburg. As you may know, we are the largest brewing city in the north of the German Nations' Empire, and our coopers are hard-working folk..."

The Swedish Court Marshal breathed a sigh of relief that his suspicion had not proved true – that a Swedish nobleman, and a relative of the King at that, had been treated with disrespect in Hamburg and stuffed into a stinking barrel like contraband.

He tapped the belly of the beer barrel again and nodded with satisfaction. "Clever. There's more room in there than in the narrow coffins we usually use, and if you don't have any helpers, you can roll the deceased to the cemetery on your own." He seemed amused and was clearly impressed by this clever Hamburg custom of transporting and burying the dead in barrels. He would report it immediately to the Imperial Chancellor and propose that such a practice should also be introduced in Sweden.

Albrecht remained silent on the matter.

The next day, he was standing at one of the windows of the Stockholm Palace and looked out to the broad Norrström. It had begun to snow during the night, and the thick white snowflakes were set dancing by a breeze before settling, exhausted, on the paths and on the surface of the Norrström.

He was to arrive at the castle in the early afternoon and would then be granted an audience with the Chancellor of the Realm. The King was with his troops in Livonia, and the affairs of state were being managed by the Chancellor of the Realm. Next to his king, the most powerful man in Sweden: Axel Count Oxenstierna. He came from an ancient Swedish noble family and was regarded as a man of great judgement and a matter-of-fact sobriety which, it was said, complemented the king's tempestuous temperament and lofty flights of fancy.

Moellendorff was alone in the room and composed himself. Apparently, he had been led into an adjoining room, whilst the general flow of visitors was taking place in other rooms.

Eventually, he sat down on one of the benches lined up along the walls throughout the room and looked at the murals with which the room was decorated. Whilst looking at the third painting, he noticed out of the corner of his eye how a false door on the narrow side of the room opened silently; a soldier in uniform glanced over at him, then, once he had met his gaze, stepped beside the open door and made a slight bow.

Moellendorff nodded to him warmly, walked through the door, which closed immediately behind him, and strode towards the man who was waiting for him beside a large desk and now held out his hand: the Chancellor of Sweden.

As they shook hands, Oxenstierna asked: "Shall we speak Latin or German to one another?"

Albrecht blinked in surprise; he hadn't expected that question, and the Reich Chancellor shook his hand firmly. "Welcome, Senator. Yes, I studied law and philosophy in Rostock, Wittenberg and Jena, and so I speak not only the universal language of academics and diplomacy—Latin—but also the language of your Lutheran citizens: the German of Doctor Martin Luther and Saxony."

Albrecht immediately felt that he did not need to bend over backwards in any way with this man and said: "I'm rather out of practice with Latin and would prefer to speak German."

"Very well, then let us get straight to the point. I thank you for having, following the sudden death of our envoy in Hamburg, settled the whole matter so thoroughly without causing a stir. Although," he raised an eyebrow, "the story about the coffins that you told the good Court Marshal—and which he recounted to me with such enthusiasm—is quite a tall tale!"

When Albrecht merely smiled, Oxenstierna nodded and murmured appreciatively: "I can see you're apparently a fine diplomat yourself."

He walked over to a map stand, pulled out a map and unrolled it on the table: "But now to your business. You have surely already discussed everything with the assassinated Dottingsfron in Hamburg but let us briefly recap so that we are both on the same page."

Albrecht stepped up to the map and pointed to the eastern side of the Baltic Sea. "Your King is in Livonia, which means the Swedish encirclement of the sea is continuing to advance. Dottingsfron was unable to explain to me why the two islands of Gotland and Ösel are still under Danish rule."

Oxenstierna raised one of his sharply angled eyebrows again and looked at the map.

"I know – right in the middle of the Baltic Sea – so far from Copenhagen – we'll get them yet." He raised his head and seemed to be looking out of the window, as if his thoughts were carrying him far away to his king.

"As it says in the Old Testament, in the Book of Ecclesiastes: 'To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.' Now he pointed once more at the map and Livonia. "After this campaign, a Swedish pincer movement will have formed around the eastern Baltic Sea, and then we shall use it to crack these two Danish nuts as we see fit." He pointed to the south-west of Sweden. "After that, we shall settle the question of who rules in Schonen. King Christian still has his troops stationed there and controls the Belt on all sides..."

Oxenstierna noticed the councillor's silence and looked up from the map. "You're looking at me so questioningly?"

"Yes. I had thought you were older."

The Imperial Chancellor looked at Albrecht Moellendorff in astonishment and then shook his head. "Even older? Yet I am already eleven years older than our King, who will turn twenty-seven next month." He laughed: "At the age of fifteen, he had

already taken command of his first army as a field marshal and administered a duchy with the utmost prudence. At seventeen, he became king and is now in the very process of bringing the third of the wars he had to inherit to a victorious conclusion."

Hearing the Swedish Chancellor's enthusiasm for his king in his words and seeing it in his eyes, Albrecht decided to forget that he had heard Oxenstierna had, only a few years earlier, been the leader of the noble opposition against the young king in the Imperial Council.

"And" Oxenstierna seemed to gaze into the distance once more, "we are only just beginning." Without seeming to realise it himself, he ran his hand along the coasts of Poland, Pomerania and Mecklenburg until his hand came to rest on Lübeck. "This summer, the new articles of war came into force in Sweden, calling every peasant to the King's colours whenever he commands it, and that puts an end to the unpatriotic mercenaries who fight only for their pay and whose hearts are not in the cause."

He had stepped up to a window to watch the swirling snowflakes and seemed to be speaking to himself: "The war in Bohemia, which has been raging for four years now, in Bohemia, far away from us. But why has it gone on for so long? The commanders are sparing their expensive mercenaries, tiptoeing around one another instead of engaging in a decisive battle early and resolutely. Because they are strapped for cash, they cannot pay their mercenaries properly, and to prevent them from simply running off, they have invented the principle that 'war feeds war'. There is terrible burning and slaughter amongst the peasants, who do not wish to hand over their grain and livestock to the foreign troops voluntarily and for free... That is not our principle."

He turned back to Albrecht and shrugged, as if to say that he didn't care how other countries waged their wars.

"But now to us. What have you agreed regarding transport?"

Albrecht stepped up to the map: "The Brandenburgers are on our side. You will let your transport ships sail past Stettin on the Oder as far as…", he searched the map for a specific place, "Oderberg. From there, the transport will continue overland from Havelberg, as far as which our ships on the Elbe from Hamburg will meet the carters. The overland route between the two rivers means only seven days' journey through Brandenburg for heavy carts." He seemed satisfied. "A fast horseman would need only two days for the overland leg, so that with a week for the one-way journey, we would have a rather swift connection between us."

"I see," said Oxenstierna as he looked at the map, "It is admittedly much longer than if we were to have the supplies loaded in Lübeck, and we have to tranship twice, but the Danes will have no access to them, and it is of no concern to them that Hamburg trading houses are supplying our troops with everything they need."

Albrecht had only been half-listening – after all, everything had been finalised with Dottingsfron, the contracts for grain and gunpowder supplies had already been signed and the first deliveries prepared – and he watched with greater interest the Imperial Chancellor's hand, which once again rested heavily on Lübeck.

"And have you finally severed your old ties?"

Oxenstierna had followed his gaze and only now realised that his hand was resting on Lübeck.

"Severed? We have freed ourselves from them! You are fa-

miliar with our history with the Hanseatic League's northern capital?"

"It was an eventful one."Chancellor Oxenstierna looked at the senator in astonishment. "I'm generally regarded as a level-headed sort, but when it comes to understatement, you Hamburgers seem to be even more adept at it than I am."

He twirled the right-hand tip of his moustache and then nodded. "But you're right. How else can one sum up the whole story in a few words? From the days a hundred years ago, after the Stockholm Massacre – when the Dane who was our lord at the time had a hundred of our nobles and citizens executed. When the people of Lübeck supported us by helping our future King Gustav Vasa – who was being held hostage in Copenhagen – to escape to Lübeck disguised as a stable boy, and from there to Sweden. They also voted for him when he was elected king at the Riksdag in Strängnäs – although we only realised too late that we had been chained to a damn tight golden chain. Right up until the days when we helped the Dane to free him from the rebellious Lübeck mayor Wullenwever, who wanted to regain Lübeck's supremacy in the Baltic Sea. Yes, it was a very turbulent time. But whilst a farmer counts only the good harvests and quickly forgets the bad ones, the Swedish nobility has a good memory. We have no interest in seeing this fallen head of the Hanseatic League raise its brow against us again or gain any advantage for itself at our expense."

In stark contrast to his angry words, he had maintained the even tone of his voice and now also lifted his hand from the map on the table.

Almost silently, a liveried servant entered the room and lit the candles on the candlestick beside the Imperial Chancellor's desk.

Albrecht now took the Hamburg copy of the treaties from his folder and allowed the Imperial Chancellor to read the documents at his leisure. Finally, the Chancellor examined the seals and nodded. “So that means we must send our ships out soon, since you have already prepared your shipments?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“I shall see to it.” Then he looked at the treaties. “Could you leave the documents with me for two days? I shall have copies made in my chancellery, so that we are both once again in possession of these agreements.”

Albrecht folded the papers, handed them back to Oxenstierna and asked him: “How far does Sweden’s interest extend in having the death of your envoy investigated?”

Chancellor Oxenstierna stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Dottingsfron is a bitter loss for us. Even though he did not die on the battlefield, we have already lost too many of our country’s finest sons country’s sons.” He shook his head slowly.

“Yet I believe it was not so much an attack against us; rather, this cowardly murder is directed against your city. You ought to have an even greater interest in solving this bloody crime than we do ourselves.”

“You mean Lübeck?”

“Who knows? Bear in mind that a rival who is already down and out and has little left to lose is often a more treacherous opponent than one who stands up to you with strength and with whom you know where you stand. It is not the strong, no, but the weak whom we must fear. They are prone to the cowardice of the hidden deed.”

Thoughtfully, Oxenstierna continued: “And yet we cannot simply accept this murder of a member of the royal family as if he had lost his life on the open battlefield.”

He looked up and met Albrecht’s gaze. “It will take time for you to get to the bottom of this matter. However, it would strengthen our willingness to strengthen trade relations with your city if, within a year, you were to find the murderers and either punish them yourselves or hand them over to our jurisdiction.” He twirled his beard again: “In particular, it is of great importance to us to have the Swedish seal back in our possession. Otherwise, whoever holds this seal unlawfully could validly seal treaties in our name.”

Moreover, this seal – with its unusual mechanism as a foldable travelling seal – had been a personal gift from the King to his Chancellor and was therefore of particular value to him. He had only entrusted it to Dottingsfron because the first state seal was with the King in Livonia, the second had to remain in the chancellery in Stockholm, and so his own had been available.

“Provide me with a report on your findings by the end of the year.”

Albrecht briefly considered what that meant. It was now early November: November, December, January, February, March. They still had five months until the end of the year on 31 March. That should be enough. Although phrased in diplomatic terms, it had been very clear that Oxenstierna was making the continuation of trade relations dependent not so much on the investigation of the crime as on the recovery of the seal.

He nodded, then fumbled at his waistcoat and pulled Colonel Count Dottingsfron's silver brooch from the large inside pocket, which he now held out to Oxenstierna.

"I have something else to return to you, which your envoy was carrying and evidently defended with his life."

A surprised smile flitted across Chancellor Oxenstierna's face. "I had already feared that Dottingsfron's clasp might also have been lost." He took the clasp and spoke, more to himself than to anyone else: "All Swedish officers wear this silver clasp. Apparently, Dottingsfron's murderers did not know what it was; otherwise, they would have taken it."

Oxenstierna looked up and gazed at Albrecht. 'The golden two, which complete our King's initials, confer upon the wearer the status of a Swedish special envoy on behalf of His Majesty, whom all Swedish soldiers are bound to protect and assist. Imagine if a man of the Duke of Friedland, Wallenstein, were to come into possession of this clasp: throughout Sweden, in Finland, Ingermanland, Kexholm and now also in Livonia – wherever Swedish troops are stationed now and will —our Swedish soldiers would help this enemy; indeed, they would be obliged to help him!"

The Imperial Chancellor examined the badge, blinked briefly, took a step forward and pinned it to Albrecht's waistcoat. "Keep this badge with you. We have a common cause, and perhaps it may be of use to you one day."

He shook the Senator's hand and thereby dismissed him from the audience. "It would be an honour if our soldiers could be of service to you."

A servant in royal livery handed him his cloak, which he draped loosely around his shoulders. As he left the castle, passing the saluting guards, he pulled the densely woven fabric tighter around his shoulders.

The snowfall had grown heavier, and the streets lay like white cloths between the dark houses. Only the crunch of the loose snow, pressed into the tracks of his boots by his body weight, accompanied his footsteps. The town seemed deserted, or were the thickly falling snowflakes merely swallowing up the everyday evening clamour of bustle and soaking up the sounds, which he then squeezed out of them again with the pressure of his boots? Instinctively, Albrecht envied the dark houses, their equanimity, their composure in enduring the times.

He was full of questions and could feel the pressure of the clasp he wore on his waistcoat. It seemed to be more important than merely entrusting the wearer to the protection of Swedish soldiers, as the Reich Chancellor had said. Was it a token of the King's favour? And what of Oxenstierna's suggestion that the attack was not primarily be directed against Sweden, yet he made the expansion of trade links contingent upon the return of the seal and the investigation of the crime? Would they find the cowardly perpetrators who had hidden under cover of darkness and for whom, apart from Oxenstierna's conjecture, there was no evidence whatsoever?

And how he had spoken of Lübeck as the falling head of the Hanseatic League, lying weakened on the ground and treacherously seeking to save its interests? No, he could not and would not agree with the Swede's view.

The Swede might hold this view on the basis of his experiences – but the city of Lübeck was still the decisive authority – in the truest sense of the Lübeck coin and Lübeck law. And why should the few remaining Hanseatic cities wish to harm one another so ruthlessly in this way? Had not Bremen, Lübeck, Hamburg, Lüneburg, Braunschweig and Magdeburg formed an alliance of the corresponding Hanseatic cities just five to ten years ago, to defend themselves jointly? Why had they appointed Count Friedrich of Solms-Laubach as their joint commander-in-chief? As a military commander holding the office of Hanseatic Colonel-General on land and at sea, he was in charge of all soldiers on horseback, on foot, on ships and in the artillery. Yes, that was their proclaimed common ground. But why, then, had the people of Lüneburg, two years ago, raided and burnt down the Hamburg outpost of Zollenspieker with a band of warriors? Had the inner nature of the Hanse changed so much? It had previously been customary for each Hanseatic city to use the Hanseatic League for its own purposes, yet never had any of the Hanseatic cities taken military action against the interests of another city within the League. Had the new century altered this moral code?

Albrecht quickened his pace to reach the German quarter more swiftly and, from there, the heated parlour of the inn where he and Hinrich, the town councillor's servant, were staying. With every step, further doubts crept into his mind. What had one of the Lübeck councillors said just a few months ago during his visit to Hamburg?

He tried to recall: 'The shadow of your new, imposing city fortifications falls far across the Holstein countryside and is increasingly obscuring God's gracious light, which until now has bathed our city in splendour: our Lübeck, the Queen of the Hanse!' It had sounded bitter.

But what does a queen want when her kingdom threatens to slip further and further from her grasp? And what of this city's time-honoured imperial freedom, which for centuries had proudly been answerable only to the Emperor and now languished under the Danish yoke? Why did the Lübeck Council cling to its glorious past? Because, in its weakness, it could no longer see a future? Was it the powerlessness to do anything to prevent one Hanseatic city after another from leaving the League? Some had been expelled from the Hanseatic League, some had left of their own accord, and some because a sovereign who had grown powerful had forced them to do so? Yet still: they maintained friendly relations with Lübeck. Did not Hamburg, in a six-year rotation with Lübeck, jointly administer the Bergedorf district and the Viermarschlande? The Swede, however clever he might be, he couldn't be right.

The following day, he spent his time strolling around the city. The Moellendorffs ran did not themselves have a branch in Stockholm.

The offices of the merchant families with whom they were on friendly terms, he did not particularly want to show his face, so as to avoid unnecessary questions about his stay in the city. So he had turned up the collar of his coat and, with Hinrich trotting alongside him — who had become silent ever since the blows with the leather strap — he looked at the shop windows.

Hinrich's wish that the Senator should not buy too much—which he would then have to lug back to the inn—came true. His master bought only a gold ring with a line of crystals set into it, which he then kept safe in his own coat pocket.

When they returned to the inn around midday, the innkeeper waved excitedly at him, a letter in his hand: "A royal messenger has delivered this for you. He said it was urgent!"

Albrecht broke the wax seal on the letter and skimmed through the lines. It was a summons from the Imperial Chancellor to appear before him that very same day. Why such haste, Albrecht wondered; he instructed his servant to remain at the inn and set off immediately for the castle.

Thoughtfully, he observed the soldiers of the Royal Guard in front of the castle, whom the snow and the cold did not seem to bother. They stood impassively at their posts and saluted leisurely as he passed them.

He had barely taken off his cloak and taken his seat again in the separate room when the panelled door opened and he was invited in.

Chancellor Oxenstierna had various documents lying on the table; he greeted Albrecht warmly and pointed to a pile. "The copyists in the chancellery were quicker than I thought, so I can return your contracts to you today."

Albrecht stepped up to the table and paused. He had seen the colour of the Hamburg paper too often not to notice now that the sheets on the table differed from it—barely perceptibly, but unmistakably. "With all due respect, Your Excellency, these are not our contracts!"

"No?"

"Not at all. The colour of the paper is different, and the Lübeck seal wasn't on the contract either."

Oxenstierna had settled into an armchair and was now laughing heartily: “My good Senator! I knew I could rely on you!”

Albrecht straightened up. “After all, I am a lawyer, and the reliability of our city of Hamburg rests, amongst other things, on the fact that the Council is composed of twelve merchants and twelve lawyers.”

Oxenstierna looked at him curiously and offered him an armchair next to his own. “And has that proved its worth?”

Albrecht sat down as well. “We’ve never made any secret of the fact that so-called political interests always have an economic basis. However, the merchants’ plans, which can sometimes be rather ambitious, require formal correction by the lawyers. And the merchants are sometimes helpful in spurring on the lawyers, who tend to get bogged down in the letter of the law.”

“And who appoints the mayors to the Hamburg Council?”

“Always a merchant and a lawyer. But it is the merchants who call the shots. Only they have the foresight and prudence to steer the fortunes of our city! They always seek their own advantage and know that, in the long run, they must not unduly.”

He had said it with such fervour that he now laughed at it. “However, the citizens have ensured that treasurers were appointed to act as a check on the merchants, as even the merchants are all too prone to being rather generous with the city’s finances—which do not belong to them—that is to say, to burden the city with excessive debt.”

“And the lawyers?”

“They ensure the legal validity of our city’s contracts and also form the other branch of our council, which serves simultaneously as the High Court and the court of appeal for the lower court. That would be too much for the merchants to handle.”

"So, you've divided power in your city amongst three bodies that keep each other in check? And that works without any problems?"

Albrecht nodded. "Between these three bodies, as you call them, overall, yes. But there is also the Convention of the Hereditary Citizens, the councils of the Senior Elders, the '48ers' and the '144ers' of the four parishes, all of whom have their own ideas and demands. Sometimes the two mayors must steer the Council's ship with great difficulty, as if we were in stormy seas, when the various opinions clash."

Oxenstierna seemed to be pondering this, whilst Albrecht stood up again, walked over to the table and picked up one of the sheets of paper. "Where did you get this contract from?"

"It arrived at the State Chancellery this morning via the Thurn und Taxis postal courier. The secretary is, so to speak, my right-hand man; he is therefore privy to most matters and brought it to me instead of filing it away in the archives." Oxenstierna also stood up and handed him a sheet. "That was the accompanying letter in which Dottingsfron reports that he has concluded this treaty with Lübeck and that he is sending the papers to the State Archives in advance before continuing his journey to Hamburg."

Albrecht sat down in one of the high armchairs in surprise and seemed to be struggling to understand what the Imperial Chancellor had just told him.

Oxenstierna looked at him intently and then remarked: "A neat forgery."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Dottingsfron has never been to Lübeck. He travelled by ship directly from Stockholm to Hamburg and has never set foot in that city."

"Then the treaty is a forgery too!"

"You could see it that way, but the two seals are genuine. So they are also valid treaties."

"But…!"

"Yes, of course we'll have the contract annulled. However, as Lübeck is an imperial city of the Holy Roman Empire, we'll have to take the matter to the Imperial Chamber Court in Speyer."

"But surely those who concocted this contract know that too. So, what do they hope to gain from it?"

"Commercial gains. Firstly, we won't be sending anyone else to Speyer this year. Secondly, you too must be aware of the appallingly slow pace at which the Imperial Chamber Court reaches its decisions, so it will take years before this treaty is declared null and void. Perhaps they also assume that we will not expose ourselves to ridicule if we must admit that a state seal has gone missing?"

"Are you certain that these treaties come from Lübeck?"

Oxenstierna paused. "Who else would stand to gain from this? Apparently, they didn't expect you to be here in Stockholm. You may keep this treaty until the end of the year. Perhaps it may be of use to you in clarifying the circumstances of Dottingsfron's death. Our delegation will then take the treaty with them to Hamburg on their way to Speyer. And by the way," he pulled open a drawer of the desk, "here are your originals back. My copyists have indeed worked faster than I could have imagined yesterday."

The senator briefly examined the papers, found them to be in order, and nodded: "I shall keep you informed of any developments in the matter."

There were no further complications, and so Albrecht was glad that he would soon be able to set off again. The question of what should be done with the dead captain's boat was settled by the German Shipping Association.

For the return journey, he would, as far as possible, avoid travelling by sea and travel overland to Karlskrona. He had not yet decided whether to choose a carriage or a closed box sleigh for the overland journey when a royal messenger arrived at the inn and asked for him.

Albrecht paused when he caught sight of the Captain of the Guard: this must, then, be a matter of greater importance. The officer beckoned in a porter, who was carrying a large bundle of cloth on his back, and saluted. 'Your Excellency, His Highness, Imperial Chancellor Count Oxenstierna, sends you his greetings and best wishes for a safe journey home through me. As you are travelling overland, he is sending you this gift as a token of his esteem." With that, he signalled to the porter to set the bundle down on the floor, whereupon the man let it fall onto the floorboards with a sigh of relief.

Albrecht was astonished. "How does the Imperial Chancellor know that I am travelling overland?"

The officer looked at him with obvious astonishment. "If he didn't know everything, how could he possibly govern this country on the King's behalf?"

Lost in thought, Moellendorff searched his waistcoat for a coin for the porter; as he did so, the fabric of his jacket shifted just enough for the officer to catch sight of the silver clasp bearing the golden Roman numeral II. The officer took a step back and, this time with even greater respect, saluted, turned on his heel and withdrew. The porter bowed deeply at the sight of the silver coin and was likewise gone.

"What am I to do with a bale of fabric?" Moellendorff wondered. "If it were valuable fabric from Italy, that would be a very circuitous journey this bale has made—not only here, but now back to Hamburg as well."

He signalled to Hinrich to carry the bundle to their luggage, but then, curious to know what Oxenstierna had in store for him, he had the council servant untie the cord. What spilled out left him speechless. He bent down and felt the fur, which was remarkably light: Russian sable, the likes of which he had never seen anywhere before.

It was a gift of the most exceptional quality. Although Albrecht had no precise idea of the value of this sable blanket, it must have been considerable. Alongside his delight at this valuable gift, something else slowly dawned on him: on the one hand, just how important the supplies from the and everything else that was being transported were to the Swedish army in Livonia; and secondly, he thought to himself: 'The higher one is honoured, the harder one can fall.'

Even though he already knew to whom he would be passing on this fur, there was something more pressing to sort out first: with this fur blanket, he would not be cold, and so he decided to take a sleigh to Karlskrona. His meagre luggage was quickly loaded, and the coachman—to whom the innkeeper, who had been observing everything, had casually whispered that he was transporting an important figure—was more cautious than usual and took care to ensure that the heavy sleigh did not start to skid.

The senator had spread the warm sable blanket over himself and over the council servant sitting beside him, who, basking in the soothing warmth, was ready to forget his resentment at the painful blows with the leather strap.

In Lübeck, at the home of the merchant and councillor Engelhaar, the Corresponding Society… , as it called itself, had gathered. Merchant Engelhaar from Lübeck, Flemming from Hamburg, Rittersporn from Magdeburg, Hornhufen from Lüneburg, Wetterkamp from Bremen and Leonis from Braunschweig. All six had got to know one another during the negotiations on the treaty between the 'Corresponding Hanseatic Cities'. They had agreed amongst themselves that, if no one else would do so, they would jointly defend the time-honoured principles of the Hanseatic League.

Merchant Flemming had organised the meeting and reported: "This self-appointed 'Swedish Council' in Hamburg has not only already loaded the first ships but has also sent one of its members to Stockholm."

"So, these long-distance traders are determined to carry on encroaching on our domain!" someone interjected.

Flemming remained undeterred: "Why was it not possible to let this Swedish envoy slip away more discreetly with the treaty?"

Engelhaar was being addressed directly and smirked: "If you know everything better, Flemming, why didn't you take on this task yourself? It was our decision to keep you out of suspicion, and it simply seemed to my servant to be the safest option to bury the dead man in the earth of the new ramparts. There he would have remained hidden for the next few centuries. And the fact that this night watchman caught them in the act was unforeseeable."

Leonis soothed the rising resentment: "That's just how it happened. Lamenting it won't change a thing. Has our contract reached Stockholm yet?"

Engelhaar calmed down: “Just as we’d discussed. Bearing both the Swedish and the Lübeck seals.” He grinned again: “That envoy from Hamburg and the Swedish Chancellor, to whom he’ll surely have to report this utterly embarrassing and dreadful incident, can get as angry as they like in Stockholm, as far as I’m concerned. It’s a legally binding treaty, and it guarantees us all good profits.”

“And what if Sweden challenges the legal validity of the contract?”

“Oh, that could take years, and by then the Swedes will have become quite accustomed to our prompt deliveries. Besides, we deliver more cheaply than the Hamburg long-distance traders, who have to take quite a detour!”

Flemming was not as enthusiastic as his colleague from Lübeck. “We do, however, have a problem with the dead man. Councillor Wetken, who has always faithfully reported to us on what was discussed in the Swedish Council, regards this act as a declaration of war against that very Council.”

Leonis from Braunschweig laughed out loud. “What is trade, after all, if not war by other means?”

Flemming did not share this view. “This is about percentages and commissions, not about killing.”

Engelhaar of Lübeck was no fan of rambling, generalised discussions. “Do you mean that Councillor Wetken, who carries the weight on his own two shoulders, finds this burden too heavy?”

“That seems to be the case.”

“Are you willing and able to sort out this problem yourselves this time?”

Merchant Flemming hesitated and thought it over. Then he had made up his mind. “I think so.”

AT THE NOBLE ABBEY IN PREETZ

Gate of the Noble Abbey in Preetz.
Photo: Anja Wendt / Nordkirche

The approach to the abbey, with its wide gatehouse and heavy oak gates, seemed to Albrecht Moellendorf like an invitation. This was now the third time he had ridden through this gateway, full of anticipation as to whether he would finally hear that enchanting laughter again that he remembered so well.

Dusk was already falling, and the gatekeeper was reluctant to let him in, as the gates were soon to be closed. After some back-and-forth and the persuasive argument of a Lübeck shilling, the gatekeeper was finally willing to let the councillor in, provided the councillor's servant waited outside with the horses.

Walking briskly to make the most of the little time he had, Albrecht crossed the courtyard, past the church and the convent, to the house where he knew Melissa von Tralau lived. Using the iron ring in the lion's head, he knocked loudly on the door. After a short while, Trine opened the door, her eyes widening as she recognised him, and, with her hands over her mouth, she disappeared into the dark hallway.

He didn't have to wait long before a woman's body practically flew into his arms, then took a step back, and he heard her say, "At last."

She beamed at him with such unabashed joy that he took her by the hands and seemed speechless. Her name seemed to be slipping from his memory. He knew he would remember it and sought a bridge to his hiding place, detours via other names that sounded so similar, and then, just as a hunter had flushed out a herd of deer, he found the name he was looking for amidst the confusion: "Yes, Melissa. I'm finally back here, and we're seeing each other again. Unfortunately, I can't stay long today!"

And at last he heard her bright laughter again: "Oh yes, the strict discipline at the convent. Once the gates are closed,

anyone who has no business being here has no business staying here either!"

Her handshake was firm, and she seemed determined not to let him go. In silent understanding, they looked at one another, felt the warmth of their hands and remained still until Melissa took a step towards him, kissed him gently – just as she had enchanted him when he first said goodbye – and said: "See you tomorrow, then!" With that, she had vanished into the darkness of the hallway.

Albrecht remained standing beneath the door for a moment, lost in thought, then locked it and walked slowly back across the inner courtyard to the gatehouse, where the gatekeeper was already waiting impatiently, as the schilling had been losing its persuasive power with every passing minute. He hastily bolted the second gate leaf behind him, as the bailiff of the monastery could arrive at any moment to check the locked gate.

The next morning, shortly after sunrise, Albrecht was already standing in the doorway to her house; he was let in, and they talked for hours on end. Discussing the past few months, drinking herbal tea, eating a platter of cold cuts, chatting about this and that, until Albrecht grew tired.

He must have dozed off briefly. The exertions of recent times apparently demanded longer periods of rest than he would otherwise have needed. How could he have known, or even suspected, that Melissa had dripped a fair amount of valerian juice into his herbal infusion, precisely so that he would fall asleep? Whilst he was still pondering this, he realised that he was lying quite flat, and when this surprised him – after all, he'd been sitting upright – it became very clear to him that his head was

resting on a woman's shoulder, for his hand was unmistakably resting on her breast.

A soft candlelight filled the room; it was already dark outside, and Albrecht started: "I really must go," he said, but was held back by the gentle pressure of her arm.

"It's already too late for that," he heard her voice whisper softly in his ear, and he didn't need to look to know that she was smiling. "As you know, the abbey gates are locked tight for the night, and it's been dark for quite some time now."

"And my servant?"

"He has been told not to wait for you tonight: you would be staying here overnight."

"And you don't think he's come here to check whether that's true?"

"Servants have no business asking questions."

Now, however, the councillor sat up resolutely and protested: "That may well be true of your servants—or to be more precise, your serfs — but not of a Hamburg councillor's servant, who is a free man just like myself."

Melissa gently drew him back into her arms, stroked his hair and tugged at his ear: "You're not going to tell me that old fairy tale about 'city air sets you free', are you? Just because your city laws free their bodies from the grasp of their lord, that doesn't mean their existence is free by any means. You are free, just as I am, because we not only have the right to be so, but also the money that makes us independent of a master. Without money, you will never be able to be free. And even if you do not treat them as serfs but even call them 'protected kin' – your servants and labourers who have no money to buy their citizenship – they remain serfs – albeit with ever-changing lords and masters!"

Albrecht felt no desire to argue. In the town, people were free from the personal tyranny of a landowner, whom they could not escape in the countryside. As the governing authority, the Council looked after the 'protected kin', and the Council could not fly into a rage like a landowner. The Council was chosen by God to promote the good and punish the wicked. And the fact that there were rich and poor was God's will, not their decision.

What did a country noblewoman know of life in a free imperial city? He preferred to bury his nose in the crook of her arm and breathe deeply in the scent of her skin.

Melissa, who sensed this and was just about to ask him why he wasn't answering her, instead gently placed his hand back on her breast and closed her eyes. They didn't need to speak aloud to both know in their hearts that they wanted to be physically together.

Melissa did not count herself amongst those nuns who, at the nobles' festivities, would eventually seize one of the young, strapping servants and take him to bed for their own pleasure. The few times she had let herself go; she had already forgotten them. Now she felt like a young girl who had finally received a present and was now more than curious to unwrap it.

Some time ago, in the convent's former library, she had chanced upon and read a few volumes in which the nuns had written of the delights of love. Melissa's first husband had been a soldier and had behaved on the path of love rather as if on a battlefield. And what the nuns had written about – well, she now wanted to experience it for herself.

She kissed Albrecht and pushed him a hand's breadth away from her so that she could slip out from beneath him and stand up.

Without a word, she loosened her hair ribbon, allowing her hair, which had been tied up high, to cascade over her shoulders, and took Albrecht by the hand. Caught in the conflict of her feelings—the fear of not being enough for him, the curiosity about his body, the pleasure of his touch, the anticipation of her own nakedness—she pushed all those feelings aside and led him to her bed. Without a word, interrupted only by kisses, they unbuttoned their clothes and simply let them slide onto the wooden floor.

Suddenly, Albrecht hesitated: “It’s too soon.”

As if she hadn’t heard him, Melissa pulled the copper kettle with the hot stones from under the duvet, slid it under the bed and drew Albrecht into the warm haven beneath the duvet. “Nothing is too soon. Everything has its time, when it happens.”

She had to restrain herself from clinging to him as he entered her – as impetuously as she’d wished for their first time together. It was as though life within her had fully reawakened, with all her senses and feelings, as a light interplay of their bodies, carried by lust and affection for the opposite sex.

Albrecht hesitated; at first, he was surprised by the way she wrapped her arms around him so lustfully – he wasn’t used to that from the maids – and then he forgot everything around him, as if, after decades, he had finally found the Golden Fleece, which had hitherto remained a mystery to him. Closeness had always been nothing more than a word to him, an idea. Now he was experiencing what that presumably meant and had no words for it when he realised it.

The chimes of midnight woke Melissa. She startled when she felt a warm body close beside her and, overcome by a sudden fear of the intruder, was about to jump out of bed when her memory also returned. She turned contentedly towards the unfamiliar male body, then drew back slightly, to a distance she needed from his closeness. She wanted this closeness, but on her own terms, her decision – not just his desire.

Albrecht had been out and about in the village that morning and had sent Hinrich, the council servant, to Hamburg. He was to report that he too would arrive in four days' time and that his two rooms should be duly prepared for him and Melissa. He had allayed the councillor's fears of ambushes by ensuring that Hinrich could ride alongside a carriage. Now he had come through the door, stood hesitantly in the middle of the room, and Melissa, who was sitting in an armchair by the window working on some embroidery, waited to hear what was on his mind. At last, he looked at her and asked: "Have you seen the pastor?"

"He'll be at the church, up to his usual hocus-pocus."

"Excuse me, what sort of hocus-pocus will he be up to?"

Melissa's eyelids twitched in surprise, then she suddenly burst out laughing and quickly put her hand over her mouth, because she didn't want Albrecht to think she was laughing at him. "Forgive me for laughing, but how are you supposed to know, when you don't live in the countryside and don't know what the farmers get up to amongst themselves."

As Albrecht didn't comment – and why should he, since, firstly, she was right and, secondly, she hadn't yet explained the bit about the hocus-pocus – she continued: "At the dramatic climax of Catholic services, the priest holds up the wafer he has blessed and says: 'Hoc est corpus meum'.

As the peasants did not know Latin, they did not understand that he was saying: 'This is my body'. After someone had translated the words for them and explained that, at that very moment, the wafer had been transformed into the flesh of the founder of the religion and now resembled a wafer only in smell, taste and appearance, one of them is said to have grumbled: 'Well, my potatoes remain potatoes, no matter what anyone says, and if I want to eat meat, I'll just have that and won't need to transform any bread. Because if that were possible, the priest could just as easily turn my cornfield into a herd of cattle.' In short, they did not believe the priest and regarded the whole thing as a hoax. That was a long time ago, yet that's how things have remained here, even as religious denomination changed. The farmers have stayed the same. And so, back then, the 'Hoc est corpus meum' turned into hocus-pocus."

Albrecht was astonished: "Is that what you call peasant cunning?"

"Why not? A farmer wants to see proof of what's being claimed and isn't easily taken in. Except, of course, for the simple-minded farmers, but they're said to exist in the city too. But why did you actually want to know where the vicar is?"

Albrecht had listened to her explanations, first with surprise, then with a smile, and now the curve of his lips deepened into a grin: "I wanted to ask him if he could marry us."

Melissa set aside the white cloth with her embroidery and was by Albrecht's side in three quick steps; one might even have thought she was throwing herself at him, as she embraced and kissed him. "So, you're actually serious about us?"

Albrecht nodded. Even though he hadn't known until now what sort of woman he desired and wanted to be with, he felt certain that he was now holding in his arms the very woman he had never sought.

He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket for the small parcel he'd bought in Stockholm, unwrapped it and slipped the gold ring, with its band encircled by crystals, onto her left ring finger. Melissa embraced him without a word.

As he was able to look over her shoulders at that moment, he saw the shadow of her embroidery on the white cloth beside the armchair in the slanting sunlight. It was clearly an 'MM' that Melissa had just embroidered. He pushed his future wife back an arm's length and looked into her eyes as if scrutinising her: "Are you saying all your effort has been in vain?"

Melissa, who hadn't noticed his gaze over her shoulder, felt a slight blush rise to her cheeks. It sounded as though Albrecht merely wanted to reward her seductive arts. And, if that were the case, the word 'effort' seemed more than inappropriate to her. It had been no effort at all, but a pleasure, a desire that she felt she had sensed in him too.

Albrecht grinned when he noticed her bashful blush. He let her go, walked over to the armchair and, without a word, held her white handkerchief up to the sunlight. The dark silhouette of 'MM' stood out sharply against the light-coloured fabric. "That's the effort I meant – which shows, after all, that we both want the same thing: Melissa Moellendorff."

She snorted softly, narrowing her eyes imperceptibly as if trying to gauge where and how she could most easily wound an opponent, then put on a slightly pained expression. "That won't work."

Albrecht shook his head as if he hadn't heard properly, lowered the handkerchief bearing the monogram, and stared at her in disbelief. His lips twitched, as if he couldn't bring himself to say the words that were on the tip of his tongue.

Melissa couldn't help but laugh; she went over to him and nudged him into the armchair. "If you're going to speak so vaguely – I can do that too!" She sat down on his lap and threw her arms round his neck. "Of course, I want to marry you – or were you thinking something else just now?"

Albrecht was on the point of saying that with women you could never be sure what they actually wanted, and remarked, as if in passing: "What you've just said: you can't embroider all the monograms on your own but need one or more women to help you."

Melissa snuggled up against his shoulder and murmured: "No, I didn't say that. What I meant was that the local vicar won't marry us. We'll have to get married in Hamburg."

If Melissa hadn't been resting against his shoulder, Albrecht would certainly have jumped to his feet. Instead, he simply gazed up at the wooden beams of the ceiling. "And why do you think he might refuse our request?"

"The Church hopes that I'll remain a widow, and that before I die lonely and alone—relying until then on the Church's charitable care—I'll bequeath my estate to Mother Church. As the vicar has said more than once: 'Your family will grieve, but the angels will rejoice.' Perhaps you could persuade the vicar, with a donation to the Church, to place me in your care."

But then Albrecht suddenly sat up so straight that Melissa nearly slipped out of her armchair. "Not a chance. I have no intention of buying you from anyone like a piece of livestock or a serf! The days when the church had a say in such matters are, thank God, over."

"You're mistaken if you think you can force him. Unless, that is, I ask my uncle, the Duke of Holstein-Gottorf, to instruct him to do so."

"No, then we'll get married in the city." As he spoke, Albrecht seemed to be looking back into the past. "We knew exactly what we were doing twenty-five years ago when the Hamburg Council stopped appointing a new Lutheran superintendent and the councillors themselves took over supervision of the church."

Albrecht was so certain of his own power and that of the Council at home that it never even occurred to him to give Melissa's suggestion the slightest consideration. How could he possibly have known that the very members of this Hamburg Council might cause him more difficulties than an insignificant country pastor who had to follow the instructions of his sovereign and bishop?

The church bell rang, and Melissa, who had been looking out of the window, saw some of the nuns from the convent walking over to the convent house. She stood up, took Albrecht's hand and pulled him along with her. "Come on, I'd like to introduce you to the nuns!"

On the way, she explained her plan to him: "Once we've agreed, I'll make it official. Then you'll be able to stay the night without any worries. After church – which is always later here than at the crack of dawn – all the women gather in the former convent, which is why we're also called 'conventuals', so that the prioress can discuss general matters with us."

They walked briskly through the cloister, and in the former refectory those gathered looked up in surprise towards the door as Melissa von Tralau entered the room accompanied by a man. All conversation ceased immediately. An expectant silence spread through the convent. The Prioress, Katharina von Buchwald, waited to see what this meant.

Melissa, hand in hand with Albrecht, crossed the room, stood beside the Prioress, paused for a moment whilst the women scrutinised the man at her side intently, and then began her announcement: “Dear sisters. As our former Prioress, Abel Gadendorff, also announced her engagement to Provost Detlev Brockdorff here in this very room, I wish to follow her example and inform you that I became engaged to Senator Moellendorff today.”

The reactions of the nuns could not have been more varied. Whilst one of them whispered to two others, “I told you so – he’d already spent the night with her,” several looked rather grim, dismayed that Melissa had succumbed to the temptation of carnal desire. Others applauded the fact that she had finally managed to swap her black silk dress for more colourful fabrics, whilst the three singing mistresses—commonly known as the ‘Sangemesters’—were so taken aback that they could think of nothing better than to break into a fervent rendition of Psalm 46: “A mighty fortress is our God, a good defence and weapon. He helps us free from all distress that has now befallen us.”

The Prioress waited until the ‘Sangemester’s’ had finished their song. She continued to adhere to the unwritten rule of ignoring any male companions present with her nuns, and spoke only to her fellow nun: “You know that you must therefore leave the convent?”

So as not to offend the prioress’s dignity, Melissa put on a solemn expression and gave a curtsy. “Yes, I am aware of that and shall remain for only a few more days, if you permit.”

The prioress nodded in agreement. With that, formality had been observed, everything remained in order, and the betrothed were able to spend two more days together.

After Melissa had given her instructions regarding all the clothes and linen, and, most importantly, her chess set, she looked at her books. She picked one up and leafed through the pages. Then she looked up thoughtfully. “For a hundred years, our culture has been a game with strange rules: there are only valid questions left, but no longer any valid answers.”

Albrecht, who had been dozing in his armchair, turned to her. “For a hundred years?”

“Yes, ever since Dr Martin Luther put a few nails in his mouth and a hammer in his hand and nailed the sheet with his theses to the church door. With just a few blows of his hammer, he destroyed an entire cultural universe, and we’ve been living with this uncertainty ever since.”

“No! If by ‘valid’ you mean ‘definitive’ – lasting until the end of all days, existing for all eternity – then the rule is wrong: if there were definitive answers, there would be no more valid questions. They would, after all, have been answered. Without a possible answer, there are no questions: the possibility of an answer determines the question. It does not arise suddenly out of nowhere, but because a person notices something for which they would like an answer.”

“So, you mean our longing for a definitive answer that explains everything would spell the end of culture?”

“Yes. Everything would freeze in the ritual of certainty, turn to stone, just as the Church was before Mr Luther threw its own melody of certainty in the face of the Roman Curia. Living culture, like life itself, is like a great enigma made up of many

questions. And as we know from the history of the last hundred years, the questions have remained because, so far, all the answers – even if they were regarded as true for a certain time – have repeatedly proved to be wrong. As someone once said: 'Our knowledge is merely the most present form of error.'"

"The way you say 'most immediate', it sounds as if it were the 'most repulsive'."

"So what? Would that be wrong?"

Melissa looked at the senator. There was so much melancholy in his voice that she grew concerned for him: "Albrecht! Could it be that your years on the Council as a judge – how many have it been now –?"

"Twenty-four," he muttered, then looked up. "And the years as a prosecutor." Albrecht thought back. "When I was nineteen, the Council appointed me as a prosecutor, the prosecutor before the Council as the High Court, and I had to prepare the cases. At twenty-five, I was then appointed as a councillor and, at the same time, a judge."

"...and all the filth and dregs you've witnessed in the process have got under your skin by now?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm just imagining what it must be like for you, as a judge, day in, day out, dealing with scoundrels, murderers, swindlers, quarrelsome people arguing over trifles, thieves..." Melissa had been counting on her fingers and now paused at her fifth finger, as if she didn't want to switch to her other hand – for then she would have had to switch hands, lest the first five fingers of what she'd already counted be lost. Then she started again with the first finger, as if she were laying a second layer over the first: "Cutthroats, idlers, highwaymen, adulterers…", she couldn't think of any more at that moment, and she fell silent.

"Thank you, that's enough." Albrecht could easily have continued the list, but even these few examples made him realise that his future wife was right in saying that his daily company was not exactly the most cheerful. Now he also realised just how much court schedules had changed. When he was still a young public prosecutor, Wednesday had been the only court day for the lower court, but over the years it had expanded to cover more and more days of the week.

Melissa looked at him with concern again when he suddenly burst out laughing: "I was just thinking that it really is strange. The more laws we've made to give people guidelines on what's right and what's wrong, the more lawsuits, charges and trials there have been – as if it were the very existence of all these good laws that makes people liable to prosecution in the first place!"

"That's the rule of the game: the more laws there are, the more people break and violate them. As long as everyone sought their own path through the countryside to get ahead, you couldn't stray from the path. It's only since there have been precisely defined paths that it's become a criminal offence to seek your own way."

"But where would we end up if every individual were to make up their own mind about what is right or wrong? Only the statutes..."

Melissa took three quick steps towards her future husband and kissed him.

"I can't tell you that either. I just wanted to make it clear to you that the intention behind establishing good standards means that many people will no longer do any good if they are measured against this yardstick. There were less evil and fewer criminal offences before this standard of goodness existed. That cannot be avoided."

Albrecht looked at her and wondered whether he should really be marrying a clever woman, or whether it might not be wiser—or at least more peaceful—to be with someone less clever.

Melissa had certainly noticed his inner dilemma; she sat down on the back of the armchair in which Albrecht had slumped slightly and blew gently into his hair: "Have I startled you?"

"That's exactly what I was thinking. But it's probably something else. Firstly, I'm no longer used to such debates, because apparently nobody dares to contradict me anymore, and secondly, certainly not a woman."

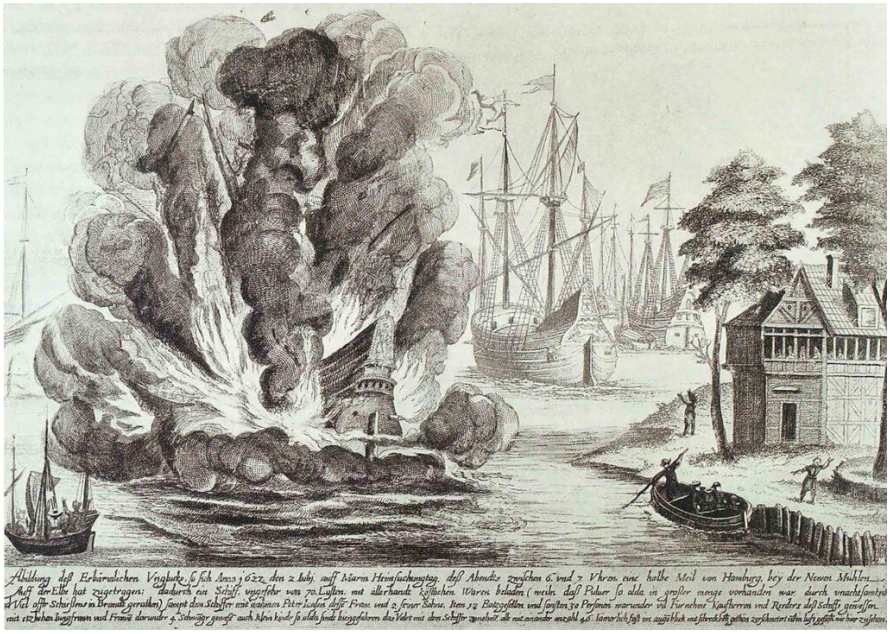
Melissa had to suppress an ironic smile: "Do you think you could get used to it?"

"It's such a delight to argue with you! And if we were to stay here, in the tranquillity of the abbey, I could become a district judge, and sometimes there'd be a trial…"

"No, that won't do!" She'd said it more sharply than she'd realised. Anything might be possible, but not staying here in the deadly boring countryside, or even at the abbey. "You have to belong to a family of the Holstein knighthood to be allowed to live here." She'd almost said: to be forced to live here.

"I see," Albrecht agreed, disappointed, whilst at the same time wondering what Hamburg's citizenship laws would say about Melissa's membership of the Holstein knighthood. Would it be a problem? Or would he be skilful enough to shape the legal situation the way he wanted? Time would tell.

RETURN TO HAMBURG



Explosion of a ship laden with gunpowder near Neumühlen on 2 July 1622
Hamburg Historical Museums Foundation (SHMH)

The abbey's delivery van was due to travel to Hamburg in the next few days anyway, to collect the purchases for the coming Christmas celebrations.

The Prioress and the Provost were obliged to provide the convent sisters with special provisions for the high feast days: wine, fish, almonds, rice and spices such as saffron, pepper and nutmeg. Apart from the fish, which was purchased in Kiel, it had become increasingly customary to buy the other items in Hamburg rather than in Lübeck, as had previously been the case. As the cart had been empty on the outward journey, there was plenty of room for the few chests and containers that Melissa wished to take with her to begin with. The furniture and Trine, the maid, remained in Preetz for the time being, until further notice. Trine received her half-yearly wage of six Lübeck marks and ten marks as household allowance as an advance. With this, she could buy two tonnes of barley or seven pigs.

Wrapped up warm, Melissa sat cheerfully beside the organist – whose duties also included the shopping – on the high coachbox, at eye level with Albrecht, who was riding his horse alongside the cart. The organist's two farmhands had sprawled out on the loading area between the chests.

The heavy cart took a wider route than the one Albrecht had taken on horseback and followed the same route he had travelled a year earlier, also by cart.

Once they had left the village, after half a mile the forest gave way to open countryside. Instinctively, Albrecht reined in his horse and gazed in wonder across the expanse. Then he set off at a brisk trot, and once again, having caught up with the heavy cart, he asked in consternation: "Melissa, where has your forest gone? The trees?"

Melissa frowned in surprise: *"You're asking me* that?" Was Albrecht really so out of touch with everyday life that he didn't know? "Ask the shipwrights in Hamburg or Lübeck what they build your ships from. It is our forest and our timber that keep your goods afloat on the water. Our forest has become your ships." She took a deep breath: "And ask your fireplaces in the town, and ask winter – he's a voracious fellow, devouring our forest and its timber so that it may warm *you* in the town – when *you* burn it."

"Don't you want to be warm in winter too?"

"Of course I do; but did *I* ask where the forest has gone?"

She was right. Albrecht fell into deep thought and resolved to raise the issue at the Hamburg Council. If the felling of the forests continued at this rate, before long the wind in Holstein would whistle only over bare, deforested land.

For the next few hours, he rode in silence, sometimes behind, sometimes alongside the heavy cart, and had involuntarily begun to look at and count the tall stone crosses lining the roadside. Several times he dismounted to decipher the inscriptions. The more he read the eulogies for the travellers killed at the sites of the stone crosses, the more uneasy he felt. They had no military escort, and he was the only one carrying a weapon. Had he been alone, he would not have given it a second thought. Even last year, in the safety of the carriage, these many crosses had not struck him in the way they now leapt out at him – often towering above a man's height. Again and again he glanced over at his bride, who was chatting animatedly with the organist on the coachbox and, in between, singing hymns with him to pass the time.

Shortly before Bramfeld, where they intended to spend the night, he saw a group of people who, as they drew nearer,

pressed themselves against the side of the road. Whilst the organist let the carriage rumble indifferently past them, Albrecht reined in his horse. The group consisted solely of women and children. Their eyes bulged from their emaciated faces, and they silently held out their hands towards him.

Slowly, he rode along the line. The group seemed to be led by a girl of about fourteen, who was the only one not holding out her hands to him in supplication. Clutching a long stick with both fists, the girl appeared quite prepared to turn it against the rider as well.

Albrecht reined in his horse and looked questioningly at the girl. Her only response was to grip her club even tighter, her knuckles turning white beneath the red, swollen skin of her fists.

He leaned towards her: “Where are you going?”

She merely shrugged her shoulders without a word and stared at him searchingly, trying to gauge his intentions.

“Where are you coming from?”

She merely shook her head and seemed determined to remain silent. Albrecht straightened up again and was just about to urge his horse into a trot when an elderly woman standing beside the girl grabbed his boot and blurted out hastily: “From Bohemia, sir. Away from the war, away from the soldiers. Tilly, the Battle of White Mountain. Our husbands and fathers are dead. They wanted to force us to become Catholic.”

Albrecht had heard of the battle and looked at the woman. “So, you’ve been on the road for two years already?”

“Nobody wants us,” the girl barked in a hoarse voice. She set the stick down on the ground and stared at him: “But they do want me, and my sisters too. “

She hesitates.

"Young women are in demand everywhere. But we won't leave our mothers and brothers behind. If you want to help us, give us a few coins and then ride on with God, who may continue to protect you."

There was not the slightest hint of supplication in her voice, and Albrecht understood why she was leading the group. He pulled a purse from his saddlebag and handed it to the girl: "That will last a few weeks, so you can buy food and pay for accommodation."

The girl took the purse and stared at Albrecht as though he were expecting something in return. The woman beside her was about to bow, but the girl held her back with a sharp movement of her arm and barked in her hoarse voice: "God will thank you! Now ride on!"

He nodded, urged his horse into a trot and soon caught up with the heavy cart again. "The war is already sending its harbingers into the country! First come the refugees, then the enemy soldiers."

"Did you give them money?"

"Yes. Where else are they supposed to get it? The towns turn them away because they can't even feed all the poor people within their walls, and they get nothing from the peasants either, because they're almost just as destitute."

"You may be right about the towns, but I wouldn't be so sure about the farmers. Many of them are practically hiding behind a pretence of poverty to protect themselves from the demands of the landlords and the tax collectors."

"Are you sure?"

"There's a bit of both. Landlords who squeeze even the last chicken out of them and leave them to starve, so that these poor folk have to bake bread from tree bark, and peasants who hide their money in the hay or drive their cattle into the forest when St Martin's Day approaches and the tithe is due. The

noble Preetz Abbey owns extensive estates, and both the provost and the bailiff could give you numerous examples of these supposedly wretched people. The poverty they put on display is in fact their capital, which they must emphasise in order to secure our charity."

"You will know better; I can only speak for one town." Be that as it may, the flat countryside unnerved him. In the shelter of the inn where they found lodgings the following night, he felt safer and was finally overjoyed when, the next day, they at last caught sight of the soaring church towers of Hamburg on the horizon.

The closer they got, the more clearly the rampart of the new city fortifications loomed up as a tall, dark wall. Hundreds of labourers were shovelling earth from the wide moat in front of the rampart and hauling it on carts up the ramps to the crest of the rampart, where others spread it out and tamped it down. The resemblance to an anthill, with its countless ants scurrying about, was striking. Melissa could scarcely tear her eyes away from the sight, until at last the iron-rimmed wheels of the carriage clattered across the drawbridge in front of the city gate.

The Hamburg gate guards remained undeterred, and the box van from Preetz, together with its coachman and servants, had to pay the toll. Councillor Moellendorff, and, as he put it, his 'wife' – a remark the gate guards commented on with an imperceptible wink – did not have to pay the toll. Melissa had certainly noticed the guard's wink and remarked, once they had passed through the gate: "You obviously have law and order pretty much under control here. Although the councillors, it seems to me, have special privileges when it comes to their wives."

As Albrecht did not reply, she turned her attention to observing the city and its streets. It was her first time in Hamburg, and she was amazed by the ample space between the small houses with large gardens behind the north-western city gate – the Neustadt, as Albrecht now explained to her: "Just as with the clothes of a child who is still growing, we have also extended the city walls further, already taking into account the growth of the coming decades. A few years ago, this whole area of the Neustadt was still outside the city walls, and we, too, had our summer house here outside the city."

After they had crossed the dammed-up river Alster at the Reesendamm, the streets were sometimes wide, sometimes narrow and narrower still, just as Melissa remembered from Lübeck. The carriage's iron-shod wheels and the horses' hooves clattered on the cobblestones, and all the streets of the Old Town seemed to be paved. Albrecht rode ahead to show the way to the organist driving his carriage, and Melissa couldn't take her eyes off the sights around her – looking left and right to see what clothes the women here in the town were wearing, and who was out and about on the streets – whilst the heavy carriage had to pull up close to a house several times to make way for an oncoming cart.

Once again, the cart had to stop. "Watch out! Bucket!" shouted a man standing next to a wide cart with high side walls. Then he broke into a sing-song: "Dung and muck / take it up / carried here / into the cart", and finally rang a large hand bell vigorously, so that the sound was unmistakably echoed off all the house walls. Immediately, all the doors opened, and farmhands and maids dragged buckets and tubs to the cart, whose crier and his assistant transferred their contents into their cart with great vigour.

The slurry splashed up so much that Melissa covered her nose and looked in astonishment at Albrecht, who laughed out loud: 'Those are the men from the Hamburg Bailiff's office. In the past, convicts used to drive these carts through the city, but they were too careless. So, the council took matters into its own hands and warned every citizen that anyone who continued to throw rubbish onto the street would have it thrown back through their window. It's worked.'

"And where is it taken?"

"To the old city rampart, which the citizens call the 'Dreckwall' for that very reason."

The Dreckvogt's men moved on with their cart, and the Preetz van set off again.

At last, Albrecht came to a stop in front of a tall town house and dismounted. Melissa spotted the sign bearing the family coat of arms of the Golden Ship, which Albrecht had already told her about.

Five children burst out of the door of the house, nearly knocking the senator over. Behind them, a tall, bearded man followed at a leisurely pace, and Albrecht thought his Uncle Karl was standing in the doorway just as he had thirty years ago. Not only did he bear a striking resemblance to his father in appearance – the same large hat, the beard – but also in his manner: the same unabashed warmth as he recognised him, walked towards him and gave him a hearty embrace: "Now I'm finally back home to carry on with you what you so successfully achieved with my father for so many years."

"A warm welcome, Eberhard!" Albrecht turned to one side and looked after the boisterous crowd of children: "Are those your…?"

"Yes, all five of them. I've come back here with the whole lot. Three are by my dear wife Swantje and two by my maid, who've both come along too."

'This is going to be a laugh,' the Senator thought to himself. "Calvinist Amsterdam apparently has more liberal customs than are customary here in Lutheran Hamburg?"

"God forbid. You have no idea of the zeal with which the Reformed preachers, in competition with the Catholic priests, strive to curb the immorality of the people. Bathhouses have not existed in Amsterdam for years. But I have always remained a righteous Lutheran there too. As Doctor Luther once said: 'If the wife won't, then let the maid come.'

Albrecht resolved to read through Martin Luther's writings once more to see whether Eberhard had simply made up his own interpretation of them. He turned towards the van, helped Melissa down, and introduced her to his cousin: "Melissa von Tralau, my future wife."

Eberhard took off his hat, nodded approvingly and greeted her with a kiss on the hand: "Welcome, cousin." Then he turned to Albrecht. "Our house is gradually becoming a bit too cramped for everyone. But let's talk about that later; I'm on my way to sort out which school my children will be attending." He swept his hat back onto his head, called out "Ahoy!" and hurried off to catch up with his five little rascals.

Meanwhile, the entire household staff had gathered in the large dining room on the ground floor, eager and excited to see the woman at the Senator's side, about whom the council servant Hinrich had been reporting in vivid detail for several days now. Melissa could almost physically feel the questioning, friendly, critical glances as she entered the room. All four maids had tied on fresh aprons, their hair was neat, and their faces were flushed from scrubbing.

The three farmhands and the council servant Hinrich had also put on their best clothes, and their freshly polished boots gleamed.

"Melissa, may I introduce our servants to you: Antje, Marie, Gesine and Kirsten." All the maids curtsied as their names were called. "Then there's Winfried, Albrecht, Thorsten, and Hinrich — you already know him, of course." The farmhands had each pointed to a servant, but Melissa's attention lingered on the maid Marie, who was not only the most striking of the maids, but whose face had also flushed a remarkable shade of red. So, Marie had, until now, been her future husband's bed mate whenever he required it. She silently praised his good taste and resolved to put a stop to that in future.

Now Hinrich stepped forward. "Senator, the mayor requests that you come to the town hall immediately upon your arrival."

Albrecht turned to his fiancée and took her in his arms. "I'm sorry, Melissa, duty calls. Let the servants unload your things, take them upstairs and see which of the maids you'd like to choose as your chambermaid."

Melissa had already made up her mind and nodded. "I'll manage just fine. You just go to the Town Hall."

In his report, Albrecht had made it abundantly clear how urgent it was to shed light on the death of the Swedish Count and, in particular, to the recovery of the Swedish seal.

The mayor regarded the treaties bearing the various seals, which lay on the green cloth of the table in the council chamber, with great scepticism. “Are you certain that the Swedish envoy wasn’t playing both sides? Perhaps he concluded the same treaty not only with us, but also with Lübeck at the same time?”

“Absolutely certain: no.” He recounted in greater detail the conversation he’d had with the Swedish Chancellor, who had expressly stated that Sweden had no interest in concluding any new trade agreement with Lübeck. “No, that’s out of the question. Besides, Dottingsfron has never been to Lübeck.”

The bailiff, whom the mayor had also invited to join them, remained sceptical. “Do you think we can trust the word of a Swede?”

Albrecht replied more loudly than was his wont: “Yes. I do not look at a person’s origins – I do not care about them – but at their character, and in this case, it is honest and good.”

“Let’s leave it at that,” the mayor soothed him. “We have more pressing matters to discuss. Councillor Wetken has died.”

“When?”

“Three weeks ago.”

“So shortly after I left Stockholm, once our treaty had been secured again and the Lübeck Treaty had arrived there. Do you see a connection?”

“No. He’d had guests that evening—all respectable citizens—and when he was found dead in his bed the next morning, he had a look of astonishment on his face, as if he’d had a good hand and was puzzled why he hadn’t won the game.”

Albrecht knew of the bachelor Wetken's passion for gambling and looked around the council chamber. He didn't seem to find what he was looking for.

"You're wondering why none of the seats in the council chamber are upholstered in black fabric?"

"Yes. That has always been the custom when a councillor has died."

"Only until a new councillor has been elected."

Surprised, Albrecht looked at the mayor and asked, dismayed: "Does that mean the council has already appointed a successor to the late Councillor Wetken whilst I was away?"

"I discussed the matter at length with the Swedish Councillor and also with Sebastian van Bergen as to whether we, as mayors bound by our word, could postpone the motion until your return. But in the end, we could not resist the fierce pressure from the townspeople. After all, it was also in your best interests that as little as possible be said about Wetken's sudden death and that no unnecessary rumours or speculation should spread throughout the town. As long as his seat on the council remained vacant, it was a constant topic of conversation. Moreover, he was the last of his line, with no family, and so there was no one to look after him. After we had buried him in St Petri, in the family vault..."

Albrecht pushed his annoyance aside and raised his hand to cut short the mayor's stream of words. "Who is the new councillor?"

"Merchant Flemming."

Albrecht seemed speechless at first, then he regained his composure and struggled to bring his anger under control. "Flemming? The spokesperson of the Bürgerschaft? Have you all lost your minds? You don't bring the enemy into your own ranks!"

"Moellendorff! I am well aware of your views on the new generation of merchant lords, who think of nothing but their commercial profits, but you'll be surprised: Flemming is suddenly more concerned with the authority of the Council than the old council families ever were. At last week's council meeting, Saul became Paul."

Albrecht remained sceptical. To him, Flemming was one of the new merchants who, as the saying went, would 'stop at nothing'. He couldn't help but pause: could Flemming be linked to Wetken's death? He would certainly have been capable of it, and Flemming had certainly benefited from Wetken's death. He resolved to wait and see what sort of 'Paul' this was. He didn't want to discuss the matter any further either; perhaps he was already seeing ghosts everywhere and a murder victim in every dead person. He turned to the bailiff: "But now to you. Have you and your men been able to find out anything during my absence?"

"Very little, Senator, very little indeed. They seem to have been swallowed up by the town."

"Nothing in the surrounding villages and hamlets either?"

The bailiff shook his head regretfully. Then he said: "I would certainly have preferred to bring better news, but unfortunately I cannot pull any of the perpetrators out of thin air."

"And even if you could. That would hardly stand up in court. And the little you mentioned?"

"The Swedish envoy was last seen at the 'Zum Storchen' inn on the edge of the harbour. It looks as though he happened to be there with a few men in a conversation because they were drinking their beer at the same table. After a while, the Swedish envoy was approached and left the pub with the stranger. After that, all trace of him was lost until he was found dead."

Mayor Vogeler was absent-mindedly chewing his lip when there was a loud knock at the door of the small room next to the council chamber. “Yes,” called the mayor, annoyed by the interruption, and council clerk Hinrich entered the room, out of breath from running so quickly. “Senator, I couldn’t find merchant Eberhard; he’s somewhere in the town, so I’ve come to you…”

“All right, Hinrich. What’s so urgent that you’ve come to *see me*?”

“Your sailing barge, the MAREIKE, has sunk!”

“Here in the harbour?”

“Yes, right by the quay wall, just as it was being loaded, whilst the crane was lifting the barrels over.”

With a quick, “Excuse me, Mr Mayor, I must go and see what’s going on,” Albrecht grabbed his coat and was already on his way to the harbour.

At the quay wall, a large crowd of onlookers were gazing at the MAREIKE, of which only the bow and the tops of the masts were still protruding from the water. Dozens of barrels were bobbing around it on the water, and a man in his sloop was trying hard to prevent one of the drifting barrels from being carried further out to sea.

As Albrecht made his way through the crowd from one side, he heard a loud shout from the other: “Get out of the way, you rabble. We don’t need gawkers here, but people who’ll lend a hand!” It was the voice of Eberhard Moellendorff, who had by now also heard the news and was pushing the onlookers aside, snorting with rage. Two of them, who were standing too close to the quay wall, immediately found themselves in the cold waters of the Elbe, whilst those gawping near the edge of the wall hurriedly braced themselves against the crowd pressing in behind them – some people who wanted to see what had just

splashed down and who, in doing so, had nearly sent those standing in front of them tumbling down into the cold waters of the Elbe as well.

Breathing heavily, the two Moellendorffs finally stood side by side at the quay wall. They surveyed the damage, and Eberhard grumbled: “Bloody hell, that’s what I call a good start! Was the barge so rotten that it couldn’t carry the barrels any more?”

“No. The MAREIKE was fully overhauled as recently as last spring. She’s even seaworthy.”

“So, someone gave it a helping hand,” Eberhard stated grimly. “May the devil take him!” He ran his fingers through his beard and asked, “Where was the journey supposed to go?”

“Up the Elbe to Havelberg.”

Eberhard looked at his cousin in surprise: “Since when have the Moellendorffs been involved in inland trade? I didn’t hear a thing about that in Amsterdam.”

“After all, your role there was different. I’ll tell you about it later. Let’s sort things out here first. Have a word with those two barge captains over there. Those two, in the blue shirts.” He pointed to two men standing a few paces away. “They need to fetch their boats and help haul the barrels ashore. I’ll speak to the crane operators and tell them the barrels need to be hoisted back up onto the quay wall.”

Both matters were sorted out in no time, and the onlookers soon lost interest in watching as the crane, with the rope attached and the two hooks gripping the protruding lugs on the sides of the barrels, pulled them out of the water one by one.

Meanwhile, Eberhard and Albrecht Moellendorff had been examining the MAREIKE and had discussed it together: “If the bow is still sticking out of the water...”,

“…then the water must have entered at the stern…”,

"...otherwise the barge would have filled up completely...",

"...and we'd only be able to see the tops of the masts."

They waited until all the barrels had been salvaged.

In the meantime, the barge's captain had also emerged from the tavern with his sailors and the oarsmen, where they had been fortifying themselves for the forthcoming voyage. He rubbed his eyes as he surveyed the mishap.

Eberhard seemed to want to confront him, but Albrecht held him back by the sleeve. "It's customary for the captain and crew to leave the loading of the barges to the experienced men at the crane and, instead of standing around, to sit down in the pub in the meantime." He turned towards the captain and called out to him: "Captain Fredersen?"

Until then, the captain had had eyes only for the sunken ship, but now he hurried over to the Moellendorffs. He pulled his cap off his head and, instead of a greeting, growled: "Bloody hell! What a mess! What now?"

"We'll have the MAREIKE slowly lifted by the crane at the stern, so that the water can drain out of the hull whilst it's being raised."

"As you wish, sir!"

"Have two of your men stand by so they can plug the leak once it's risen high enough."

With a "Aye, sir," the captain went to his men to brief them on what was to happen next. Albrecht spoke to the men from the crane, who coordinated with the barge captains on how to attach the ropes to the stern of the barge and then began to slowly lift it.

"Do you think the crane can handle the weight?" "Certainly; it doesn't have to lift the whole ship at once. And its pulling power is more than enough to hoist the colossally heavy sandstone slabs from Saxony off the ship."

The higher the MAREIKE slowly emerged from the water, the more the water level inside the barge dropped, remaining level with the surrounding water of the Elbe. The Moellendorffs watched patiently as the stern of their barge rose further and further out of the water, and then they both saw it at the same time: above the waterline, three large holes had been drilled into the hull at the stern.

Albrecht called out, “Fredersen,” and when the captain turned to him, he pointed to the stern: “Plug the holes and bail the water out of the hull!” The captain grudgingly swallowed his reply. He didn’t need to be told that.

Eberhard chewed thoughtfully on his lips. Then he nodded. “A devilishly good plan, drilling the holes above the waterline. That way, the scoundrels didn’t have to dive into the cold water and could then slip away unnoticed. The barge would only sink once it was loaded to the point where the hull was pushed deeper into the water and then slowly filled with water.”

“Hmm,” added Albrecht, “at first nobody notices a thing, and then the barge suddenly starts to list aft. It’s a good thing we transferred the grain into barrels because of the cold, wet weather. If we’d left it in the sacks, the whole load would have gone off.”

“Quite a lot of effort for grain, really,” grumbled Eberhard, who had just been working out the extra costs for the barrels. “Is the buyer paying enough extra to make it worth our while?”

“Well, yes,” Albrecht had to agree, nudging an imaginary stone off the quay wall into the water with the tip of his foot, “It’s not just grain in the barrels. But you can’t tell from looking at them what’s inside. That’s why we use the barrels.”

"I see. So, you've assumed up until now that nobody would notice. That's why there were no guards on the ships – to avoid causing a stir. That's going to change immediately. From now on, all our ships will be guarded day and night! Whoever arranged this apparently knows too much about our business and has a great deal against it."

Albrecht's thoughts went even further: why had it been one of our ships in particular? Had someone found out about his trip to Sweden? Had Hinrich been boasting about it without realising it, so that it had since become common knowledge? Such information and rumours spread faster through the city's inns and taverns than a fire could leap from house to house. Did it really have anything to do with the trade with Sweden? But other trading houses belonging to the council families were also involved in that.

His gaze wandered to the two barges belonging to the trading houses Twestreng and Rodenborg, which were moored alongside the quay wall behind the MAREIKE and were due to be loaded next. He walked over to the two vessels, descended the steps by the quay wall, and, knowing where to look, quickly found the drill holes in both ships. He beckoned the councillor's servant over and instructed him to run to Twestreng and Rodenborg and ask them to come to the harbour.

Nothing makes a merchant move faster than when his ships are damaged, and so the Moellendorffs did not have to wait long before those they had summoned were standing beside them.

Frowning, both men watched the sailors of the MAREIKE as they bailed water from the hull of their ship. Eberhard gave his

account, and Albrecht led them to their ships to show them the damage. As if he couldn't believe what he was seeing, Rodenborg thrust his thick index finger through the drill holes in his barge and then looked at his finger in amazement, as though it had just drilled the holes into the wood.

Twestreng remained laconic. "The Wedde will take care of it."

Rodenborg shook his head. "That won't be enough. We'll have to discuss it in the council tomorrow."

The holes were plugged, the water was bailed out of the barge and, with the help of the carpenters, they discussed how the drill holes should be properly sealed. Then the shipowners said their goodbyes to one another, and the two Moellendorffs walked back in silence to the 'Zum Goldenen Schiff' inn.

"White cow, black cow, spotted cow, golden cow, silly cow," rang out the shouts of the seven children now in the house from the first floor.

"Come on," said Albrecht, covering one of his ears. He pushed Eberhard into the office. "It's quieter in here," he said, glancing up at the first floor in exasperation.

He stood rooted to the spot on the threshold of the office door and asked, dumbfounded, "What on earth is that?", and immediately a loud, rasping voice bellowed back at him: "Yes, what on earth is that?"

Eberhard had deliberately let his cousin go ahead of him. His surprise had worked: in a misshapen cage made of wooden poles, standing on a stool, sat a large, colourfully feathered creature, rocking from one leg to the other, tilting its head to one side, gazing towards the door and croaking again like a drunken sailor: "Yes! What on earth is that?"

Smiling, Eberhard walked over to the desk, picked up a scroll and handed it to Albrecht. Albrecht could scarcely tear his gaze away from the colourful feathered creature; he unrolled the paper and read: 'Dear Mr Karl. I have now arrived safely back in my homeland. My savings were not only enough for a house, five wives and fifty oxen and cows, but there will still be enough for the years to come. I thank you for the good years I spent in your service. If you wish to retire, take a ship to my warm homeland, for that was the one thing I could never get used to: the cold weather in Hamburg. As a token of just how colourful things are where I come from, here is a colourful parrot as a gift. His name is Koba." Albrecht looked up, gazed at Eberhard and muttered: "His name is Koba!"

The echo came straight away: "Yes! His name is Koba!" Albrecht flinched and read the signature: "Yours forever, Kobi." Albrecht was careful not to say a single word out loud, so as not to trigger the croaking echo that seemed to repeat everything and always began with a "Yes". He nodded towards the corridor. Eberhard followed him and closed the door behind him. Albrecht closed his eyes and simply said: "Oh, for goodness' sake! Your father Karl would have been delighted with that creature."

"Why him, of all people? When did Kobi leave?"

"A good two years ago. It was in September, and as autumn drew near, he said he couldn't bear to spend the winter here endure another winter here. Twenty-nine years in Karl's service were enough, he'd said. He was now a wealthy older man who wanted to enjoy himself with his savings. Your father didn't just let him go – for he'd granted him that right from the start – he also gave him a tidy sum of money on top. So, what are we to do with this colourful loudmouth? Do you want to keep him in the office?"

"Could we put him with the children? They'd have some fun with the bird for a while, and he might well calm down if he has to spend the whole day echoing the children's shouts."

No sooner said than done: the stool, the cage and Koba the parrot were carried up to the first floor, where a fresh round of wild screeching and squawking immediately began. Eberhard seemed accustomed to this commotion, whilst Albrecht was glad that he was busy with his work at the magistrates' court and the town hall.

In the quiet office, the two Moellendorffs could now talk to each other in peace. Eberhard wanted to have an answer at last. "What about our domestic trade and the barrels filled with all sorts of things, including grain?"

"It is still a fledgling branch of our firm's business, shared with nine other trading houses in this city. Your late father was the one who initiated it: trade with the Swedes."

Albrecht fetched the map on which Eberhard's father, Karl, had once explained the situation to him, and now explained it in turn to the new head of the Moellendorff firm. The latter finally asked, "And the projected profits?"

"Very well calculated, and the Swedish treasury is regarded as a reliable payer."

"And what exactly are we actually shipping in these barrels, apart from the cheap grain?" It was all too clear that, as a long-distance trader in Amsterdam, Eberhard had not previously dealt in grain. His focus had been on the goods that were bought in China, India and South America for a few shillings and sold in Europe for silver and gold.

"Everything the Swedes want from us." Eberhard leaned back and fixed Albrecht with his gaze:

"Either you tell me the whole story now, or I'll go back to Amsterdam, where I am, in fact, the merchant you apparently

still don't take me for. Do you think I'm still too young for this task at thirty springs?"

"No, I'm sorry, Eberhard. After your father's death, I had to sort everything out on my own. Even though your younger brother Erik was a help to me, I'm apparently not used to letting anyone else in on the whole affair."

"I'll take your word for it." Eberhard began to smile. "I already have a pretty good idea what's in the barrels."

"Well, if you think you know, then tell me."

"Well then: lead, copper, gunpowder, fuses, muskets and, of course, lots and lots of grain."

Albrecht had turned slightly pale as he listened to the list: "How did you work that out?"

"That's the crux of the list regarding the goods on which the Dutch States General have imposed an export ban," he grinned broadly now, "and by that the States General mean, in particular, the goods exported from Hamburg to Spain."

"And you mean...".

"Of course. The States General have been at war with Spain for a year now and have no interest in anything leaving this city that might boost the Spaniards' fighting power. And since the Swedish king is also at war again, what does he need? The same as the Spanish troops: weapons, supplies and provisions."

Albrecht stared at him, wondering whether anyone could piece that together so easily.

"Oh, you dear dreamer! That's the beauty of war for us merchants: when it comes to fabrics, spices and the rest, tastes are so varied that you can sometimes get it completely wrong. The warlords fighting one another, on the other hand, all need the same things. That's how the god Mercury has arranged it. For neutral Hamburg, it's a blessed and manageable market. You

just need to have the buyers for the goods, and it seems Father Karl had the right instinct for that."

"You're right. But how did you work that out? Is it that obvious?"

Eberhard shook his head. "No, you do need to get hold of the right information and be able to put two and two together. Let me explain it to you. On 2 July this year, here in your area – excuse me, I still see it from my distant perspective – so here on the Elbe near Neumühlen, a large barge exploded. It was, as they said, 'loaded with all manner of delicious goods'. It's said to have been mainly Amidam. Have you heard that a harmless starch product could explode so violently that the skipper, his wife and their two sons, twelve deckhands and thirty passengers were blown to bits along with the ship? Half the ship must have been a powder charge, and when someone on board fiddled about with something, the whole barge was blown to smithereens."

"And then?"

"Why do you think the Dutch have paid so much money for those patrol vessels moored off the mouth of the Elbe, which inspect every Hamburg ship? Just because they want to take a closer look at the grain carried by Hamburg merchants? And why did they draw up this list of everything that's not allowed to be transported to Spain? Just for a laugh, or precisely because they've already found such things on some of our ships during their inspections?"

"And what else?"

"Before I left Amsterdam, there was talk that twenty ships – loaded with war material – were waiting in and off Hamburg for the order to set sail."

"Well, then: there are about forty ships lying at the ready, and the Kraweel you mentioned was indeed loaded with gunpowder and on its way to Cádiz."

"By a thousand sacks!" Eberhard slammed his fist on the table. "I must give my father Karl every credit for opening up the other end of the Elbe for us, where no Dutchmen are lying in wait for us!"

"Now you know why the Moellendorffs, along with the other long-distance traders from the council families, have discovered trade up the Elbe for themselves."

"So much the better. Money doesn't stink, and I'd much rather have a secure Swedish krona than those unreliable Spanish gold ducats."

Albrecht walked round the table and shook Eberhard's hand. "Forgive me if I've ever doubted you. You're a worthy successor to your father and cut from the same cloth as him. You're finally and warmly welcome home. After today's attack on our ship, we're in urgent need of someone like you here."

They sat together for a while longer. Albrecht spoke openly and at length about the treaties, Dottingsfron's death, his journey to Stockholm and the missing state seal.

Eberhard listened calmly to everything and, in conclusion, had one question: "Why all the secrecy?"

"We are not quite where we want to be yet. Although the Imperial Chamber Court confirmed our city's imperial freedom in its ruling four years ago, we are not yet able to enforce this legal status, granted to us by the Empire, politically against King Christian. Last year, in the Treaty of Steinburg, we had to commit ourselves once more – and hopefully for the last time – to remaining in subservient devotion to the House of Holstein. Christian even laid the foundation stone for the Dammtor in his graciousness!"

Albrecht smiled and made a slight bow. "In doing so, however, he has, in his grace, overlooked the fact that in three years' time he will no longer be able to set foot in his 'beloved city', as he likes to put it!"

He grew serious again. “We do, of course, have a powerful ally for our cause in the Emperor himself, but the Emperor is far away and the Danes are damn close. And until our new city fortifications are complete, we remain vulnerable. Moreover, we have no military means at our disposal, so we must use our neutrality to our advantage. That may not be particularly heroic, but it is far more conducive to the city’s well-being. It is therefore also advisable not to let the whole matter become public knowledge. We should not give the Dane any valid reason to take action against us.”

“I see. But if the Dane, just like me, and one, then he’ll know about it.”

“But only unofficially. That won’t give him any grounds for action. And our well-known trade with the Spaniards is of no interest to him.”

“And what if he intervenes against our trade with Sweden anyway? Could he perhaps – unofficially, of course – be behind the assassination of the Swedish envoy Dottingsfron, and is he the one who ordered the drill holes in the MAREIKE and the other two ships?”

“I don’t know. Anything is possible. Right,” Albrecht pushed himself up from the armchair, “don’t be angry with me. I’m tired, and you’re now up to speed. We’ll discuss everything else over the next few days. I’m going to retire for the night.” He hesitated, then added: “Just two more questions. There aren’t many forests in the States General, are there?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“So, what did you use to heat the office in Amsterdam?”

“With coal, of course!”

“Tell me more about that.”

“Very well. The coal is imported from England and burnt in the houses in sealed iron containers.”

“Why are these iron containers sealed?”

"Well, that was more than the second question! But, since you're interested: during combustion, toxic gases and black soot are produced, which are channelled outside through a pipe."

Albrecht had become uncertain: "So we'd be better off sticking to wood-burning?"

"Definitely. At the start of autumn, the Amsterdam city council drastically reduced the import of coal because the city gets so filthy with soot in winter that, when the clouds are thick, you can barely and the snow was sometimes speckled with black."

"Thank you, and good night!"

"Good night." Eberhard watched his cousin leave. Although Albrecht was twenty years older than himself, he had already come to appreciate him in those few hours.

In the flickering candlelight, he gazed at the large oil painting on the wall of the office. The trio of grandfather, father and grandson. Grandfather Laurentz, his hair turned grey with dignity, a proud merchant in his town councillor's livery. Father Karl, self-assured in his English cloth, and the grandson Albrecht, not in velvet and silk like Laurentz, but in a plain black coat.

It wasn't quite time for that yet, but perhaps one day he should have another painting commissioned, depicting only himself and Albrecht.

Melissa was still sitting by the fireplace reading when Albrecht entered her room. She closed the book and came over to him and embraced him. “Come, sit down with me by the fire.”

Albrecht sank wearily into the armchair and gazed at the burning logs: the trees and forests of Holstein, now burning here in the city.

“I’ve already heard reports that the MAREIKE has sunk.” And when Albrecht looked at her in surprise, she added: “Is the financial loss you’ve suffered very great?”

“It can all be repaired. But it seems the news is spreading faster than we’d like.”

“The walls have ears, and the doors are like tongues that whisper out everything that happens. It’s likely it’ll be in the *Weekly Newspaper* the day after tomorrow as well.”

“You already know your way around Hamburg quite well, don’t you!”

“Marie helped me put my things away. She’s already told me all sorts of things, including that this newspaper exists in Hamburg. I’m quite curious to see what’s in it.”

Albrecht shrugged. He didn’t think much of the idea that people in the city knew more than they needed to for their daily lives. Everything else was gossip that they couldn’t verify, but which they believed all the same and talked about as if they’d been there themselves.

“Did you choose Marie as a maid?”

“Yes. I thought you wouldn’t mind if I had a woman around me whom you like too.” She didn’t feel the need to mention her real reason: that she would then have them both under her control. “But now on to something else.” Melissa had stood up and was just striking a pose: “Arma virumque cano trojae...” She paused, tilted her head slightly to one side and looked questioningly at her future husband.

He smiled. She couldn't tell whether he was pleased or whether he was amused by her. "Do you think I should recite it at the wedding banquet?"

"What? The Latin verses of the ancient Roman Horace, the song of the Battle of Troy – at a table of Hamburg councillors? Only the lawyers would understand you. So, what do you hope to gain from it?"

Melissa had straightened her head again and took a deep breath, resting her hands on her hips. "I want to make it clear to them that I'm not some stupid country bumpkin or a snobbish airhead!"

"Are there really that many of them amongst the nobility?"

"Since most of the people I've met so far have met so far were of noble birth, I know more high-and-mighty airheads and gracious oafs than I do commoners."

"Don't lose heart, my dear; that will soon change."

CITIZENSHIP

Georg Brun und Frans Hogenberg:
Historical sight of the town of Hamburg, 1590

Merchant and Councillor Rodenborg met on their way from the ships being drilled in the harbour to their office and told Councillor Flemming about the attack.

Flemming was outraged. He could not have known that his friends from Magdeburg, members of the corresponding assembly, had acted on their own initiative.

The Magdeburgers had been in dispute with Hamburg for years over the staple rights of the towns on the Elbe and were strongly opposed to the rule that all ships sailing up the Elbe had to call at Hamburg first to offer their goods for sale there. As a result, they felt they were always left with only the 'shabby leftovers' that the Hamburg merchants did not want for themselves. When the ships of the Hamburg merchants trading with Sweden were now to sail past the city, their patience had run out. They were determined to prevent this.

Flemming, unaware of what was to come, had invited his circle of friends – merchants, brokers and shipowners – that very afternoon to discuss the matter with them.

The next day, Twestreng reported on the attack on the three ships at the council meeting. He concluded resignedly: 'If the merchants and shipowners do not guard their ships more effectively, even the Wedde can do nothing. We cannot assign a police officer to every ship.'

Mayor Vogeler thanked him and was in a better mood than Councillor Twestreng. What Twestreng, as head of the Wedde, had lamented was soon to change.

"A delegation of the town's merchants, including brokers and shipowners, has approached me and asked that we provide better protection for our ships."

"How do they envisage that?"

"We learn from our mistakes. They want us to follow the ex-

ample of the English and the Dutch and establish an admiralty."

"What's the point of that?"

Mayor Vogeler looked expectantly at Councillor Flemming, who knew the details. Flemming rose from his seat, swept his cloak dramatically over his shoulder and set out the proposal: "We are concerned both with the military armament and surveillance of the ships and with the establishment of a maritime court. Both measures will enable us to better protect our ships and, by extension, the city's interests."

"Hear, hear," murmured some of the councillors.

Albrecht refrained from replying. As councillors and authorities, they were not merchants whose interests lay solely with their ships. Their ship was a city of stone with forty thousand inhabitants, and they had to ensure the protection of all its residents with a fatherly hand.

The representative of the treasury officials, who sat outside the council in an advisory and supervisory capacity, immediately stood up and interjected: "Who is to pay for this?"

Flemming smiled. He had already expected that question from the penny-pincher. As if they hadn't already given it any thought. "The ships setting sail are to pay a levy, an admiralty duty, so that you won't have to spend a single mark from the city coffers on it."

The treasurer was satisfied and sat down. Mayor Vogeler looked round the room again: "We should set up a committee. It will draw up the statutes and submit them to the council. If no one objects, I will appoint the members later."

None of the councillors had any objections.

Albrecht was glad that the debate had been brief and to the point, and he left the town hall immediately. The wedding preparations were more important to him now. His cousin

Eberhard was to come to an agreement with Flemming and the mayor that he would be appointed to this committee.

The pastor had waived the requirement for the four-week notice period. The council and the mayor – as the supreme supervisory authority over the churches – had no objections either.

After all, it could be assumed that Albrecht and Melissa were not related and that neither had promised marriage to anyone else. However, he was unwilling to grant Melissa's wish to have the organist from Preetz play the grand organ at St Nicholas's.

She wore a blue silk dress, the neckline of which was trimmed with Brabant lace, and the little bodice beneath the neckline sparkled with several precious stones.

On the advice of her future husband, she had visited the Wandrahm with her sister-in-law Swantje and bought metres of fabric there from the cloth merchants, brothers Hans and Paul Berenberg: silk, cloth, linen. She had recounted with great delight how friendly the two men had been to her: 'Usually, if you meet a merchant on the street in Hamburg and greet him, he pulls a face as if he were expecting a two per cent commission for returning the greeting!' She was genuinely indignant, and it clearly never occurred to her that Hamburg merchants expected a woman of standing to behave in a certain way: to lower her eyes when met, rather than offering a direct 'Good day', as the maids and chambermaids in Hamburg would blurt out in an uncouth, cheerful manner. Yet these two cloth merchants from the Netherlands are a true paragon of politeness and friendliness."

Albrecht had looked at the bales of cloth and thought to himself: "Is that any wonder?'"

"And do you know, seventeen years ago they also signed the contract between the Council and the Dutch in Hamburg, and their names are also on the collection list of the Dutch Poor Relief Fund, through which they support compatriots and fellow sufferers who have fallen on hard times!"

Albrecht, who knew all this – for he had sent Melissa to the Berenberg brothers not only because of the quality of her goods – was delighted by her passion for discovery. Would she soon know more about Hamburg and its inhabitants than he did himself? And the contract with the Dutch had been a landmark decision by the Council, which had had to push it through against the wishes of the pastors and church wardens, who did not want to tolerate foreigners living in the city permanently. They were particularly suspicious of all other Reformed denominations and were more inclined to tolerate a Catholic than a Calvinist. Despite the twenty-four years he had now been a member of the Council, he still hadn't understood what the Lutherans in the city were afraid of.

Over the past few days, there had been several light-hearted arguments between him and Melissa, which mainly revolved around just how low the neckline of her dress could be and still be considered modest. Whilst he could understand that Melissa, in keeping with fashion, would like to show herself off with a low neckline, when she remarked that she wanted to 'show the people what she was made of', he had insisted that, as the wife whose husband held a high office in the council, she had to dress more modestly than if she were merely a merchant's wife. In the end, they had reached an agreement: she could not dismiss the argument that it would be cold not only on the street but also in the church, and so they sat peacefully side by side in the church.

The vicar had prepared well; he had been preaching for a full hour and now finally looked at the bride and groom before him: “Since we do not believe that harmony can reign only in a marriage where the husband is deaf and the wife is blind, always bear in mind that your first duty is to live together peacefully, patiently and thoughtfully, and to treat one another well at all times.” He closed his eyes and repeated his exhortation in Latin: “Pacifice, patienter, caritative vivant et se bene invicem tractent!”

Albrecht and Melissa had heard of the pastor’s quirk of weaving his Roman education into his sermons and not always adhering to the rule of preaching in German. Years ago, he had been trained as a Catholic priest, and even after his conversion to the Lutheran faith, he could not forget the beauty of the Latin sermon’s words.

“Follow my words, and married life promises you a sweet, pleasant, joyful, heavenly and angelic existence.” And once again, the echoes of the Roman past of centuries of Catholicism resounded: “Et haec est vita dulcis, iocunda et delectabilis, caelestis et angelica.”

“And should one of you become malicious, quick-tempered, impatient, venomous as a snake, inflamed with rage like a dragon and bitter as a devil, then the other must bear with him patiently. Even if the wife ought to show greater patience towards her husband—after all, God has endowed her with a softer voice and a smaller frame—the husband must not be a tyrant to his wife, for he will atone for this eternally in hell.”

Now the vicar sat up straighter, and it was clear that he was now addressing the congregation rather than the bride and groom: “There are some wretched characters who treat their

wives appallingly; for this they face damnation, for a woman is neither a snake nor a frog. Outside the home, these men cut a pitiful figure, but within the home they behave like lions. Such a man is a cruel devil, a venomous snake, not a husband, but an unjust tormentor. The wife will earn eternal reward for her tolerance of this violence, but the husband will suffer eternal torment!"

He allowed some time to pass, to lend his words the necessary emphasis, and then turned once more to the bride and groom: "Always remember: God dwells in peace; only the devil dwells in discord. Each of the spouses must relinquish their free will. Each must place themselves in the other's power: the man must do as the woman wishes, and likewise the woman must do as the man wishes. Thus, for the sake of marriage, they must part with the free will they once possessed when they went dancing or playing or engaged in other pleasures."

He was so engrossed in his exhortations that he repeatedly raised his arm into the air and even forgot his Latin interjections. "Eve was given to Adam neither as a mistress nor as a maid, but as a companion. Thus God fashioned man from the dust of the earth, but woman from a part of the man. Had he intended her to be a mistress, he would have taken a part of his head; had he intended her to be a servant, he would have taken a part of Adam's foot. But as it is, he took a part of his side, close to his heart, so that she might be like him. Consequently, there should be a friendship between husband and wife in marriage, and what has been joined together before God should be to his glory. Thus you should live together in reason and kindness. Avoid excessive passion and shun quarrelling, lest either one or the other hinder your shared prayer. For always bear in mind that your duties towards one another are always your own duties towards God."

He then signalled to the couple to rise and step forward. “Do you, Albrecht Moellendorff, take Melissa von Tralau to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“Yes. I do.”

“And do you, Melissa von Tralau, take Albrecht Moellendorff to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“Yes. It is my wish.”

“Then I hereby declare you, in the sight of God, to be husband and wife.”

The organist loved wedding ceremonies and was now playing the many keys of his instrument with such fervour that the boys at the bellows were struggling to maintain the air pressure. The low organ pipes made the congregation’s bellies vibrate, whilst the high pipes filled the air with angelic sounds. Slowly, the bride and groom walked down the centre aisle out of the church, more absorbed in their own thoughts than in the joyful faces of the congregation.

A wedding banquet had been laid out at the ‘Zum Goldenen Schiff’ inn. The large table was not big enough to seat all the invited councillors with their wives and all the family members, so a second table had been added.

After everyone had raised a toast to the couple’s happiness, Eberhard leaned over towards Albrecht and Melissa: ‘Well, how does it feel to have entered the blessed state of marriage?’

Albrecht, for whom this was his first marriage, looked at his wife: “Very good!”

Melissa looked first at him, then at Eberhard and Swantje, and laughed: “It’s just as well the vicar didn’t go into too much detail about the rights granted by the Church to the husband and to the wife in the event of a spouse’s immoral conduct!”

She tilted her head back and took a deep breath, lowering her voice to prepare for the pathos of the sermon that followed: “A wife who leads a dissolute life must be brought back onto the right path by her husband in three ways: through instruction, rebuke and corporal punishment! Only if the previous method proves unsuccessful should the next stage be applied. A wife must correct her husband, should he lead a dissolute life, in four ways: through admonition, scolding, appealing to the church authorities, and, if all else fails, through prayers to God!”

Her speech was met with loud applause, and she looked around uncertainly, wondering whether the vigorous clapping was in praise of her talent as a speaker or whether perhaps some of those present were expressing their agreement with these remarks. She then decided in her favour and added: “Presumably the pastor refrained from doing so because he rightly assumed that no woman of standing would allow herself to be physically chastised by her husband.”

Albrecht looked sceptical and mentally listed the cases that had been heard in the lower court over the course of the past in the past year alone had been heard before the magistrates’ court, in which women had filed for divorce because their husbands constantly beat them. Having reached ten cases—one of which involved the wife of a respected merchant—he ended his silent tally and turned his attention back to the babble of voices at the wedding table. He thought with great pleasure of the sable blanket he had had spread over their bed as part of a wedding gift of which his wife was yet unaware.

“Ribbons? What sort of ribbons are you talking about?” Albrecht had just caught that word and now wanted to know more.

“Not the bond of love!” Swantje laughed at him across the table and repeated what she’d just been telling the others:

"This morning I was at the Berenberg cloth merchants, and they told me about a new fashion that's all the rage in town: ribbons!"

"Why new? The maids have always worn colourful ribbons on their clothes." The dress code had banned the foster family from wearing expensive fabrics years ago – fabrics they couldn't afford anyway.

"No, Albrecht, it's different. The servants and maids of the wealthy trading houses have recently started wearing waistcoats and aprons in contrasting colours, so that you can tell straight away who their master is. And accordingly, their masters wear ribbons of the same colour on their clothes to show their affiliation with them."

"With colourful ribbons that, according to the dress code, only the servants are allowed to wear?"

Swantje nodded eagerly.

The mayor, Hieronymus Vogeler, known by his sycophants as 'the German Cicero', could not muster his usual eloquence. He shuffled the paper back and forth on the green-upholstered table in the council chamber and cleared his throat several times, as if the next item on the agenda were making it difficult for him to find the right words. He considered handing over the chairmanship of the meeting to Mayor Sebastian van Bergen, but then decided to skip that point for the time being and moved on to the next motion: "The ordinary sailors complain that the pesos at eight reales each are beyond their means; these are paid by the captains and helmsmen into the treasury in the form of eight real coins to ransom them from slavery should they be captured by pirates off the coast of North Africa.

They request that a second fund be set up, with lower contributions, as they would, after all, not cost as much in ransom as the captains and helmsmen."

One of the councillors spoke up: "No, no second fund. That will make things too confusing. Shouldn't we first try holding slave-relief collections in the churches to top up the ransom fund for the ordinary seamen?"

"Is anyone against this?" The mayor looked round the room, and when he saw only approving faces, he brought the matter to a close: "I shall discuss this with the church wardens."

He nodded to the council clerk, who noted it down on his list and placed the sheet on the pile of items that had been ticked off.

Whilst glancing round, the mayor had noticed the questioning look on Albrecht's face; he was wondering why the mayor had skipped over the agenda item that was so important to him. The mayor stared back down at the paper in front of him and then looked up resolutely. "Senator Moellendorff is applying for Hamburg citizenship on behalf of his wife, Melissa Moellendorff, née Countess of Rantzow, widowed Baroness von Tralau."

He had tried to present it as objectively as possible, as if it were a perfectly ordinary application, the sort the council had to decide on around a hundred times a year. Yet it was not the fact that Senator Moellendorff was making this application – just as any citizen did when they married and applied for citizenship for their wife – that had caused the mayor to clear his throat; rather, it was the list of titles this wife had held prior to her marriage that made the application problematic.

Immediately, an agitated murmur rippled through the circle of those present. Not about Moellendorff's marriage—which had not gone unnoticed; some of the councillors had even been present at the church service—but about his application.

After all, he knew the legal situation in the town better than anyone else, and there were plenty of citizens who had not submitted applications if their wives had been of the Reformed faith or even Catholic, because they knew in advance that the council would not grant such an application.

Finally, one of the councillors raised his voice and asked, addressing the room: "What is Moellendorff's aim in submitting this application?"

Mayor Vogeler looked over at Albrecht and signalled with a nod for him to answer himself.

Senator Moellendorff sized up the questioner sitting opposite him. He had known that this motion would not pass the Council without questions, yet he was surprised that it was Councillor Flemming in particular who had asked this question, given that he himself had married a Dutch woman of the Reformed faith only a few months earlier and had not applied for citizenship on her behalf. Albrecht resolved not to show any consideration for the situation or the feelings of the merchant Flemming.

"Without citizenship, my wife would remain a protected relative who, for as long as I myself live, would be dependent on my advocacy to look after her interests. After my death, she would have no right to remain in Hamburg and could even be expelled from the city on a trivial pretext. Accordingly, I wish to enable her to make her own decisions independently of others, including myself."

Councillor Flemming, who had fully understood the dig aimed at him and for whom it would never have occurred to grant such rights to his own wife, parried the argument immediately. "The right you are seeking for your wife cannot be separated from her noble status. And as you yourself know best, nobles cannot acquire citizenship of our city."

Albrecht had been staring intently at Councillor Flemming for some time, shaking his head inwardly. Flemming was indeed wearing purple ribbons on his clothes. Like a decorated ox in his herd. This populist posturing annoyed him so much that he replied to Flemming more sharply than he had intended. “My wife’s name is simply Melissa Moellendorff and nothing else!”

The young councillor Kieckering stood up and tucked his thumbs into two red loops on his jacket. “Does a smoked pork rib become an unsmoked rib again when I take it out of the smokehouse? No, it remains a smoked pork rib for the rest of its existence. It cannot be undone!”

“Surely you’re not comparing my wife to a pork rib?” Moellendorff’s voice had the distinctly angry undertone of a gathering storm, the first rumblings of which could be heard in the distance, causing the young merchant Kieckering—who had only taken his seat on the council a year ago as the successor to his late father—to flinch nervously. Senator Albrecht Moellendorff was not just any one of the twenty-four councillors; rather, by virtue of his long membership and services to the city, he possessed a personal authority that was scarcely inferior to that of the mayors, and which a young councillor would either do his utmost not to cross or deliberately challenge in order to grow from the experience. The merchant, still inexperienced on the council, wanted neither of these outcomes and stammered: “No, by no means, but, even if our Lord God did fashion women from one of our ribs.” He fell silent, realising himself that his stammering was only making matters worse.

Merchant Flemming stepped in to assist the young councillor. “With his foolish example, Kieckering merely wanted to ask whether a noblewoman, if she marries a commoner, relinquishes her nobility, or whether she remains a noblewoman.

To put it another way: does the right of marriage take precedence over the right of birth, or vice versa?"

"That's not really a question," another merchant interjected amongst the councillors. "If a commoner's wife marries a nobleman, she herself becomes a noblewoman. So, the right of marriage takes precedence over the right of birth."

"Nonsense," came a voice from the other side of the room. "When a man marries a noblewoman, he does not necessarily become a nobleman himself, but only if the illustrious clan deems it appropriate to bestow some cheap title upon him. The woman is physically mingled with the man's stronger noble blood through penetration and her intended pregnancy husband's stronger noble sap, whereas the reverse is not the case."

Whilst most of the councillors pondered, bewildered, what merit there was in this objection—whether there were stronger and weaker bodily fluids, and how they mingled—Albrecht rose and addressed the mayor: "I move that the merchants amongst the councillors abstain from the discussion of this matter and that only the lawyers comment on it."

Immediately, Councillor Flemming rose from his seat again and growled: "I must remind the honourable Moellendorff that he should bear in mind what he himself helped to draft twenty years ago and which was also proclaimed in his name: no one has the right to criticise us, the councillors, as authorities by the grace of God, even if we are allegedly godless or tyrannical."

Some of the councillors looked up at the large golden chandeliers on the ceiling of the council chamber, as if awaiting divine assistance; others had not yet come to terms with the first question and were completely overwhelmed by Flemming's objection.

Mayor Vogler had briefly consulted with the Doctor of Both Laws and Mayor van Bergen, and when Bartholomeus Beckmann and Joachim Claen—also elected mayors, whose terms were on hold this year—nodded in agreement, he declared into the ensuing silence: "Let the lawyers on the Council decide on Moellendorff's motion."

Councillor Flemming, who was still standing, leaned down towards merchant Kieckering, whispered a few words to him, whereupon the young councillor also stood up and both marched towards the door. Several of the other merchants amongst the councillors joined in this apparent protest and also left the council chamber. Flemming, in particular, felt deeply offended in the honour and authority of his new position as a councillor.

Albrecht had to suppress his rising anger and resist the urge to call after those who were leaving in a huff: "The merchants want to discuss the laws once again with the verbosity of their incompetence!" He controlled himself, however, and took the floor once the council attendants had closed the door to the council chamber again.

"The rationale behind this unwritten law—that a nobleman cannot attain full citizenship of our town—lies not in his nobility, but in the fact that he either already owns land outside the town or may inherit such land at any time. This, however, creates a conflict of interest, as it is unclear whether he will prioritise the interests of this town or those of his landholdings. Consequently, it has become established practice that anyone who owns land outside the city cannot become a councillor. Since every hereditary citizen of the city has, in principle, the right to be appointed as a member of the council – and if he were to fail to do so, he would lose his citizenship – these two interests are mutually exclusive."

Albrecht had looked at Mayor Vogeler, who was following the discussion with keen interest.

Albrecht knew from confidential conversations with him that the Emperor in Vienna was considering bestowing a title of nobility upon him in recognition of his merits. This would grant him certain privileges, including the right to seal documents with red wax – a privilege that many counts and entire republics did not possess. Albrecht intended to do him a favour. "We should establish the principle that only land ownership is decisive; in other words, personal letters of nobility that someone receives or has received as an honour do not conflict with citizenship rights."

"We should seek a legal opinion on this," interjected one of the lawyers. The mayor immediately stepped in: "We shall not be seeking an opinion from anyone, anywhere. After all, we are not only a free imperial city, but there are also enough lawyers amongst you to decide this matter yourselves." Two of the lawyers looked glum. They would have been only too happy to hand the decision over to an external authority – to the universities in Greifswald or, better still, in Prague, which was even further away – rather than having to take a stance themselves.

"May I also remind you that the members of the cathedral chapter will always remain outsiders in this city, and a citizen of Hamburg can never become a canon, because only nobles who derive their benefices from landholdings outside the city are appointed to this office!"

Casual murmurs from the other lawyers proved him right, so that Albrecht could now turn his attention to protecting his wife's landholdings: "Since we have not, to date, and will likely not in future – God forbid – appoint any women to the Council, it is irrelevant whether a woman owns property outside the city if she wishes to acquire citizenship. I therefore repeat the motion to grant Melissa Moellendorff citizenship."

He hesitated, then thought to make a concession to Councillor Flemming, as he too did not believe that Melissa should be granted the right to stand for election to the council. “The limited citizenship is sufficient, as she neither intends to use the public scales nor to go hunting in the Hamburg forest villages.”

He wasn’t, but that seemed irrelevant to him now. He sat down; the mayor looked round at the remaining members of the council to see if anyone wished to raise any objections—which no one did—and then confirmed: “Melissa Moellendorff is hereby granted the limited citizenship of this town, subject to payment of the prescribed fee. That concludes today’s meeting.”

It remained to be seen whether the minority of councillors who had walked out would accept this resolution, or whether they would simply join forces with the Convention of Hereditary Citizens, to whom he still had to submit this decision for approval.

It had grown late. On the short walk home, Albrecht pondered what the future might hold. Lost in thought, he stopped in the deserted Hopfenmarkt in front of St Nicholas’ Church and gazed up at the church tower. After a while, he shook his head silently: ‘Whenever we are at a loss and reason seems no longer able to show us the way, we look up to the stars or to the heavens in search of answers. Both have one thing in common: the gaze is directed both upwards and inwards, towards powers from which, in our perplexity, we expect or implore help and prophecy. Is this not an expression of our own powerlessness, a sign of our own weakness? Why had the Christian heaven, with God the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary and its hundreds of saints, been unable to supplant the celestial bodies—the supposedly pagan pantheon of Mars, Venus and Saturn? Are horoscopes, then, nothing more than an expression of the power of these gods?

The Greek oracle had been a wiser institution: it gave the enquirer a veiled answer, the meaning of which he had to discover for himself; and since he did so in his own interest, the oracle was consequently merely a source of help and support for doing what one had actually wanted to do all along but had not yet had the courage to decide upon.

He snorted angrily: "What I want, I can do!"

Melissa was waiting for him in the large room on the first floor. She had had an evening meal prepared for him—and was sitting in front of the fireplace, gazing at the chess set, whose pieces cast long shadows across the board in the candlelight.

She was silent and had only looked up briefly when a draught from the door caused the candle flames to flicker.

Albrecht noticed her absent-mindedness and wanted to cheer her up. 'Are you already thinking up clever moves to beat me, or are you thinking about something else?'

"Is there a game of chess with Catholic pieces and rules?"

Albrecht, who was just about to raise his wine glass to drink, paused and asked, frowning: "What do you mean by that?" He took his glass and sat down opposite her at the small table in front of the flickering open fire. Glancing at the chessboard, he tried to work out what was Protestant about it.

Melissa looked up briefly and then tapped the individual pieces. "Look: in the centre are the king and the queen. Next to them, on the right and left, are the two bishops; beside them, the military cavalry; and on either side, the two judges. In front of them is the row of armed pawns. It's all very symbolic. At the centre is secular power, supported by the clergy and protected by the military, with the lawyers as the cornerstones, so to speak."

"Hmm. Yes, I see it that way too."

Melissa sat up straight. “The clergy can only move diagonally, the cavalry’s movements are hard to predict, and the lawyers always move straight ahead. The king, although the most important figure, can only take one step at a time, just like the poor peasants, whilst the queen, as the most powerful figure, can move both diagonally and straight,” she laughed, “she just mustn’t resort to underhand tactics.”

“Isn’t that a reflection of life? The king, around whose life everything revolves, is very immobile, whilst the woman at his side holds the greatest power? Even in the fact that she determines the arrangement: Regina regit colorem. She determines the colour of the square on which she stands.”

“Oh dear, the poor king—so powerful yet allowed only such tiny little steps!”

Albrecht didn’t want to argue any more today, even if it was just for fun. “And why should it be any different in a Catholic game of chess?”

Melissa thought aloud: “Since the Pope is no longer allowed to have a wife, he cannot stand in the centre. And a powerful cardinal at his side would not be compatible with the liturgy. From a Catholic perspective, the King and the Pope would have to stand side by side in the centre, flanked by the Queen and a cardinal. The military, the judges and the pawns could stay where they already are.”

“And who should take the powerful queen’s current square? The king or the Pope?”

“Oh dear, that’s tricky. Since the saying goes ‘cui regio, sui religio’, the King determines which religion his people follow. So, he would then have to stand in the Queen’s position. Hmm. But then the Pope would become the most important figure instead of the King. No, the King wouldn’t accept that.” She closed her eyes to think

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"No, it's perfectly fine just as it's depicted. Both the King and the Queen have a clergyman at their side, and so the Church, with its sometimes peculiar ways, can bring both under different influences if necessary." She clapped her hands: "No, there's no need for a Catholic chess game; it's perfectly fine just as it is!"

Albrecht was tired. "What does my mighty queen say — shall we go to bed?"

"If my King can keep up with me with his little shuffling steps… I'll be in bed first!" With that, she was already out the door. Albrecht blew out the candles, placed the fire guard in front of the fireplace and followed her into the four-poster bed.

THE WAREHOUSE

Heinz-Joachim Draeger
"Die Torstraße"

Weeks had passed, and ever since a blanket of snow had settled over the town and an icy wind had been sweeping round the houses, it seemed that not only the houses but also the people lay beneath this blanket.

It was only at Christmas that the streets came to life. Time and again, someone would knock on the door of the 'Golden Ship' inn, and people would offer their festive greetings: chimney sweeps, street sweepers, tower trumpeters, head sextons, grain measurers, porters, butchers' apprentices, drummers and pipers of the city guard, lamplighters, lamp cleaners and lamp extinguishers, hospital attendants, city gatekeepers, bell ringers, bricklayers and carpenters, gravediggers, chair hiremen... They all offered their congratulations and held out their hands for a tip. Albrecht had warned Melissa beforehand that it would be like this all day and grumbled: "Begging is forbidden in the city, but collecting tips is still allowed."

Life went on inside the houses. Birthdays and anniversaries were celebrated, and everything was exactly as Melissa had imagined a carefree city life to be. She had found her first friends in Swantje and other women from the council families.

Meanwhile, the Hamburg ships lay in harbour or were wintering in warmer climes, and anyone who hadn't stocked up on winter provisions in time had to find a way to stave off their hunger. But just as in good times people used to stuff themselves until they felt sick, the poorer folk now had to tighten their belts. Just as the ebb and flow of the tide alternate, there were times of gluttony as well as times of famine, and as long as all the other poor people were also suffering, one was prepared to put up with it.

During the winter, it had become increasingly clear to Albrecht that the time until the end of the year was slipping away, and the Swedish Chancellor's seal was still missing.

Eberhard had also asked him several times whether he had any lead yet on recovering the seal to fulfil the Swedish Chancellor's condition. The closer the end of winter drew and the first deliveries from the long, profitable order list for the Swedish army were being prepared, the more the end of this lucrative business became foreseeable if they did not find the seal in time. Everything pointed to the murderers achieving their actual goal: putting an end to Hamburg's trade with Sweden.

After some hesitation, Albrecht had resolved to try a course of action that ran completely counter to his entire outlook on life up to that point. At midday, he retrieved the Hamburg copy of the treaty with Sweden from the council archives, searched the court records for a specific hearing from the previous year, and that evening asked the astonished Hinrich for his coat and hat. Dressed in these shabby clothes, he set off for the eastern part of the Old Town. He pulled his hat down low over his face as he passed the Town Hall, and by the time the church bells struck six, he had reached his destination, Niederstraße.

In contrast to the quiet Nikolaiviertel, there were plenty of people walking through the streets here. The bellowing of drunks echoed from the numerous pubs, children were carrying beer mugs into the houses, and more than once he had to shake off the hand of a woman who had grabbed his shoulder in a forward manner. Finally, he stopped in front of a house, walked through the gateway to the rear buildings and knocked on the door of the fifth house.

He knocked a second time, impatiently, when the door was flung open and a slender man in black stood in the doorway. "What do you want at this late hour?"

The senator looked up, allowing the man to recognise his face. He immediately muttered, "You?" Then he stepped aside and gestured for the senator to come in.

Albrecht tossed his coat and hat onto a bench in the parlour. "Are we alone?"

"Yes, Your Honour."

"Good, so you know who I am."

An uncontrollable fit of laughter burst from the man. "Do you think I've forgotten who had me put in the pillory for three days at the Frohnhaus near St Petri? On charges of unproven witchcraft!"

"I need your help."

"*My* help? Or are you now trying to find evidence that you failed to find back then!"

"I could have subjected you to torture back then as well! So, you got off lightly with just the pillory."

"You're right about that. It did make me well known in the town, too. I can hardly go running round the streets with a drum, offering my services. How can I be of service to *you*?"

Albrecht took the contract out of his waistcoat and laid it on the table. He unfolded the sheet and straightened the two seals. Then he pointed to the Swedish seal: "I need to know where the seal is from which this impression was taken."

"I see. So, you want to know where the absent mother of a child is."

"You could put it that way."

"If you think I can give you a specific location, you're overestimating my abilities. But I can tell you which direction you need to look in."

"That would be a great help."

"Then sit down on the bench and wait."

Albrecht followed the instruction, and the man went over to a wall cupboard, from which he took out a string with a pointed cone attached to one end.

He slid the contract into the centre of the table, held the string over it so that the cone was positioned exactly above the impression of the Swedish seal, muttered a few words, and then, with an imperceptible movement of his fingers, set the pendulum swinging in a circular motion. With each rotation, the circle became more oval, then it clearly became a long ellipse and finally almost exactly a straight line pointing towards one wall of the room. As the pendulum's movements grew shorter and shorter, the man pulled the string taut and turned to Albrecht: "Search directly to the north!" He looked at the wall. "With a slight deviation to the west."

Albrecht was puzzled: "How do you know which way is north?"

The man grinned – what a situation, explaining his magic circle to a Hamburg magistrate – pointed towards the walls and spun round on the spot: "North, east, south, west!"

Now Albrecht could make out fine lines running round the walls of the room, alongside the letters denoting the cardinal directions.

"Are you sure?"

"It's as certain as death and taxes."

"Is that something you'd say as a student of the dark arts?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake! The good Church has stolen so many of our rituals that it's beyond belief. What are the Church's formulas and prayers, if not our spells? To conceal this theft – the shared origin of our rites – it has claimed God for itself and sent us to the devil!" He grinned again. "The only question is, who feels more at home with whom now?"

"All right, but why do you say 'north'?"

"*I* didn't say 'north'. The pendulum told us. Did you expect something else?"

"Yes and no. If I'd known, I wouldn't have come to you. I would have expected 'north-east', though."

"If you like, I'd be happy to try again, if that'll convince you more."

"Please."

Once more, the man set the pendulum swinging, and Albrecht, who was now standing closer to him, watched closely to see if he was moving his fingers to guide the pendulum in a particular direction. The man's hand remained still as the pendulum slowed down and then once again pointed clearly north, with a slight deviation towards the west.

The man looked at the senator and smiled: "Yes, sometimes all I can say to those seeking advice is something that seems like a mystery to them at first. But rest assured, everything will become clear."

Albrecht folded the contract and tucked it away under his waistcoat again. "Thank you for your reassurance." He'd almost said 'trust in God', but that didn't seem appropriate with this man.

"What do you get in return for your information?"

"Consider it a favour and forget that you were ever here."

The man led the way to the door; Albrecht threw his coat, pulled his hat back down over his face and left the house. On the street, no one spoke to him. He was so lost in thought that it was as though an aura of untouchability had settled around him.

At the 'Zum Goldenen Schiff' inn, he went into the office, took the map of the Baltic Sea from the stand and unrolled it on the table. Northwards from Hamburg? His gaze followed the northern axis: Kiel, Odense, Oslo. Three places with which he had no connection. Then he considered the north-easterly direction: Lübeck, Copenhagen and Stockholm. A logical line: Lübeck, where the seal had been used; now it was in Copenhagen and belonged in Stockholm. But the pendulum had clearly indicated the other direction.

Why? It was therefore no longer in Lübeck. If the Dane now had the seal, why would he keep it in Copenhagen and not in Odense, where no one would look for it? But the magician had spoken of a slight deviation to the west, and Odense lay, as seen from Hamburg to the north with a slight deviation to the east. Yet everything pointed to a hiding place in Denmark. Albrecht was at a loss.

He rolled up the map and then went upstairs to ask his wife for advice.

Melissa was sceptical. “You do know that the Holstein nobility has an ambivalent relationship with its king in Copenhagen. But you’re right, they have enough connections to the Danish court. I could write to my uncle asking him to invite us to the spring festival in Schleswig. You could then put in a word with the officers there, and I can do the same amongst the ladies; sometimes they know more about the whispered secrets than their husbands do.’ Melissa smiled and then grew serious again. ‘Don’t you think that your move to Niederstrasse is rather difficult to reconcile with your role as judge? What would you do if this man were to stand before you as a defendant again one day?”

“I know, my wise wife. It’s a good opportunity to let the mayors know that I do not wish to be re-elected as judge. He will understand that, after so many years, I wish to pass on the office of First Praetor to a younger man.”

On 13 February, the city's streets came alive once more. The city gates and the town hall were closed, the town hall bell was rung, and the citizens were summoned to hear the reading of the town proclamations.

Once the approximately two thousand citizens had gathered in the square by the Old Crane in front of the town hall, the acting mayor, Vogeler, stepped out onto the town hall porch with the protonotary and addressed the citizens: "Good friends! In accordance with ancient customs, established practice and tradition, the town charters are to be read out today. So, pay close attention and act accordingly."

The Protonotary then stepped forward and read out the agreements between the Council and the citizens, to which everyone nodded in turn, thereby confirming their validity once again. Finally, he announced that Councillor Wetken had passed away and that the merchant Flemming had been appointed to the Council, and that Councillor Johannes Münden had been appointed Chief Justice. Once again, everyone nodded. Just as they did every year. Although they had already learnt of this from the newspaper, it was now official and confirmed by the citizens.

A few days later, on St Peter's Day, the boatmen and sailors set sail for Amsterdam to find well-paid, but also dangerous work on Dutch whaling ships. Their wives stood on the shore with their children, waving a 'Farewell!' to them whilst they were still in sight, full of hope that they would see them again in the autumn and not receive the news that their ship had sunk with all hands.

Erik, the younger merchant at the Moellendorff trading house, also set off for Amsterdam. Eberhard had introduced him to the practices of long-distance trade over the winter, and he had departed equipped with powers of attorney and authorisation to sign contracts. His wife and the twins, Hannes and Matthias, were to remain in Hamburg until the summer.

Melissa had found her feet in the city more quickly than Albrecht had expected. Standing with Swantje in the doorway of the office, she surprised the two heads of the Moellendorff household one morning with the question: "Will you join us on the tower of St Nicholas' Church?"

"What do you want up there?"

"Perhaps to get some fresh air? No, that's nonsense. We've arranged to meet the fortress architect Jan van Valckenbourg, who wants to explain the city's fortifications to us, and he said you get the best view from up there."

"Well, I suppose I'll come along then," said Eberhard, stretching, for whom such a view, accompanied by an expert explanation, was also something new. "Come on then, it won't do you any harm either."

Albrecht had no excuse to hand, as he was now merely a councillor, so there were many days like this one when he simply had the day off. He therefore had no choice but to come along.

Out on the street, a daring-looking man pressed a leaflet into his hand, on which he could read, even without his spectacles, which he needed to study the files, and was able to make out the headline: "We bear the nobility on our shoulders – but we need only shrug our shoulders to cast it down!"

He watched the man go in astonishment, as a ballad singer raised his voice above the hubbub of the people on the street: "What does Hofmann take himself for, / That he thinks he's better than me? / Back when Adam toiled and Eve spun, / Who was the nobleman then?"

Eberhard had stopped to listen to the ballad singer and now hurried after him. “Since when have these people been in the city?”

“For a week,” grumbled Albrecht. “But the council has no power to do anything about it, say the gentlemen of the Wedde. If these people are merely harassing the nobility, it can only be to our advantage, and we cannot take action against them with the immigration police.”

“But? I can hear the reservation in your voice.”

“Opinions have already been voiced in the citizens’ assemblies that they don’t approve of the whole direction in which our council is governing the city. However, a spark of rebellion can quickly jump from one place to another and ignite a fire where we previously didn’t think it possible.”

“Where exactly is the problem?”

“The costs of the new city fortifications are practically crushing us. The limestone from Segeberg, the bricks we source from various places – as you must know, including Amsterdam – the timber deliveries… Everything must be paid for. Just recently, the Duke of Mecklenburg received 63,000 marks banco for deliveries to the building yard. The tradesmen are demanding higher wages from their masters, but the guilds are refusing because the council has allegedly burdened them with excessive taxes... There’s quite a bit of strife in the city.”

“If only that were all.”

Albrecht looked at his cousin in consternation. He had already noticed this indifference on the part of a merchant towards the city’s fortunes in Councillor Flemming as well.

“The merchants will have to get their act together too. More grain needs to be brought to Hamburg. The prices of wheat and rye have risen higher than is usually the case in winter. The first rumours are already circulating that too much has been sold abroad and that the merchants are giving too little thought to their poorer fellow citizens.”

"Then let the council simply build up more stocks and regulate the market price. We sell to anyone who pays us for it."

"Come on now, you two," they heard Melissa's voice calling from the porch of St Nicholas' Church, where the two women were already waiting with the master builder.

No sooner had the men exchanged greetings than they were already making their way up the steps. Valckenbourgh had very little time. "When working on a structure like this, you really ought to be in at least three places at once!"

At last they stood, out of breath, on the level of the belfry. Whilst Valckenbourgh, Melissa and Swantje looked down through an opening in the wall, the two men stood at another opening in the masonry and listened.

With his arm outstretched, Valckenbourgh pointed to the jagged line that stood out sharply against the landscape: "If you look at the circle of the new ramparts, we're standing here at St Nicholas' Church right at the centre centre. From here, the radius is around 1,150 metres. It will take another three years until everything is finished. Then we'll have twenty-two bastions. Look, they're those protruding triangles – or, to be more precise, pentagons." He pointed to the side: "Albertus, Casparus, Henricus, Eberhardus,..."

"Do the individual bastions have names?"

"Yes. They're named after the patron saints of the Hamburg councillors. Smaller towns sometimes name the bastions of their fortifications after the planets or classical gods. As the Hamburg Council had only twenty-two members two years ago, they found this solution more fitting."

The two women nudged each other and glanced over at Albrecht, who, however, didn't notice.

Valckenbourgh remained unfazed: "Can you see that rising ridge over there in the west, in the Neustadt?"

Both women nodded.

"That was the weak point of the old fortifications. From that ridge, enemy artillery could fire directly at the city, and so the new bastions have been built right there on the ridge. There you can also see the ravelins in front of them—the outer works between the bastions to the west. They lie on the outer side of the moat and form the first line of defence. Three hundred cannons will be stationed on the rampart, but there will only be six city gates in total. Two in the west, two in the east and two at the harbour. These will also be the only masonry structures, as the rampart, which is eight to ten metres high, will be built solely of earth."

"How many labourers have you hired for this?"

Valckenbourgh was surprised, but then he remembered that the two women had only arrived in Hamburg last autumn.

"Not a single one. Only four years ago was there a contract with Dutch water engineers. But when they proved unable to master the task, they took their leave behind closed doors and vanished from the town without a trace. The citizens of Hamburg have committed themselves to manual labour. Each parish provides a regiment of ten companies, which means we have fifty companies, and every day eight companies – or around a thousand men – are working on the rampart. Anyone who is unwilling or unable to work themselves must either pay a fee of eight shillings or send a replacement."

Once again, the two women exchanged a knowing glance and realised why they had never once seen their husbands with a spade in their hands.

Eberhard had only been half-listening, gazing instead at the town's houses. "From a distance, many things look incredibly cramped, with the houses standing so close together and the ships seeming to be tangled up like a ball of yarn. It's only up close that you see the spaces between them, the actual expanse, the possibilities."

"But also, the limitations and obstacles, which aren't so easy to make out from a distance."

Eberhard looked at his cousin questioningly. "Do you become more and more sceptical as you get older?"

"No. Perhaps just more realistic, in that you see both: the possibilities and the limitations."

"I'm more in favour of seeing the possibilities and not letting the limitations put me off." Eberhard looked down at the town and joked. "It seems someone down there must be freezing their socks off if they're turning the heating up like that."

Albrecht stepped up to the opening in the wall, followed the direction of Eberhard's gaze and tried to spot the one belching the most smoke amongst the many smoking chimneys to spot the one billowing the most smoke. Then he saw it at the edge of the harbour: it was clear to see that the plumes of smoke were growing darker and darker, and then bright flames shot out of the black smoke. He frowned, tried to count the buildings, and suddenly nudged Eberhard in the side. "Come on, the fire's burning right near our warehouse!"

As if to confirm this, the deafening blast of a trumpet rang out above them from the tower guard's floor, and a flag unfurled from the opening in the wall, its flagpole pointing exactly in the direction they had been looking.

With a cry of "Our warehouse's on fire!", the two men stumbled down the steps, constantly in danger of slipping and tumbling down the entire flight of stairs.

Then they hurried across the Hopfenmarkt, along Deichstraße, over the Hohe Brücke across the Nikolaifleet, and could already see from a distance the line of people forming a long bucket brigade, carrying water from the harbour basin and splashing it left and right against the houses next to the scene of the fire.

"Damn it! It's *our* warehouse that's on fire!" Eberhard kept running and shouted to the people in the water chain: "For heaven's sake, put the fire out and pour the water onto the flames!"

An elderly man in a dark blue coat calmly stepped in his way and stopped him. "My good man, we can't save the warehouse. If we're lucky, we might be able to stop the fire from spreading to the neighbouring houses. So, calm down."

He gripped him more firmly as Eberhard tried to break free, and both looked simultaneously at the burning warehouse, from which, following several small explosions, fountains of fire shot skywards.

The squad leader of the city guard growled: "Bloody hell, what on earth have the Moellendorffs been storing in there?" He let go of Eberhard, who turned towards Albrecht, who was slowly approaching, and gestured desperately, repeatedly pointing at the scene of the fire, clutching his head and grimacing wordless questions.

"Eberhard! Calm down! The Council has ordered that the houses surrounding a burning building be hosed down to prevent the fire from spreading."

He turned to the man in the blue coat. "Good day, Squad Leader Fandrich. Do you think it'll work?"

"Hello, Senator. Fortunately, there are enough onlookers to help my men form a line with the buckets," out of the corner of his eye, Albrecht saw two of the onlookers being given a kick to make them join the line and lend a hand, "so we've got a good chance. And the wind's blowing nicely along the side of your warehouse, so it'll burn right the way up."

Eberhard had tears in his eyes; he clenched his hands into fists and then shoved them into the pockets of his coat, so that in his helpless rage he wouldn't lash out indiscriminately at anyone.

Albrecht seemed to be watching the fire with calm interest, so Eberhard hissed at him: “You don’t seem to mind at all that our goods are burning right now!”

“It only looks that way. Am I supposed to stand here in front of everyone, jumping up and down in anger, and add ridicule to the damage?”

“Blimey, you’ve become a right hard-nosed sort as a senator!”

“If you can’t master this outward demeanour, you really shouldn’t you really shouldn’t take on such a post. Nothing is a more ridiculous sight than a councillor pulling faces.”

Eberhard took the criticism of his behaviour in his stride without comment. It was true that Albrecht was a different kettle of fish. And following his remarks about the strife in the town and his criticism of the council, it was truly not befitting of a councillor to lose his composure in front of the onlookers, who were watching them both very closely.

With a crash, the half-timbered supports of the warehouse collapsed, causing the men in the bucket brigade first to recoil from the flying sparks and then to receive the order from the squad leader to extinguish the fire in the pile of rubble and timber that had come crashing down.

Eberhard bit his lip: “First the ship and now the warehouse! If it were summer, I wouldn’t have ruled out the grain catching fire of its own accord. But not in winter!”

Albrecht was lost in thought as he gazed at the smouldering beams and muttered: “It won’t ruin us.”

“Yes, that’s quite right. As we all know, even a man with one leg can still hop about cheerfully!” His voice was laced with all the sarcasm of a merchant who had just suffered a heavy loss.

Undeterred, Albrecht shook his head. “We can rebuild the warehouse. Let’s first find out whether any of our men have come to any harm.”

Eberhard couldn't help but shake his head at such a lack of understanding. It was the men's own fault if they hadn't been careful. What business was it of his?

The squad leader had given the order to stop drawing water. Exhausted, the men in the bucket line let the wooden vessels clatter down onto the cobblestones. Five broke away from the line and came towards the two Moellendorffs. A weight was lifted from Albrecht's heart. So, all their men were unharmed.

Albrecht greeted them: "Thank you, lads, for saving what could still be saved."

The storekeeper looked glum: "Yes, sir, it is indeed a misfortune to see one's own property go up in flames whilst still having to protect the other."

"Yes, that is what the Council ordered for the good of the town. And it is the right thing to do."

"Once everything has cooled down, shall we start clearing up?"

"No. Wait until the gentlemen from Wedde have inspected the scene and spoken to you. For now, just make sure there aren't any embers still smouldering hidden away in the beams."

Eberhard was still seething with anger. "The police don't even need to look into it. If that wasn't arson, then I'll stop being called Moellendorff!"

"I think so too. But I'm not concerned with the matter itself; perhaps they'll find a clue as to who's behind it."

Albrecht had a nasty suspicion that the merchants around Flemming and Kieckering might have taken their revenge on him in this way. Not only had they left the council in silent protest, but they were also among the families who weren't involved in the trade with Sweden.

The winter break was over. Then he had second thoughts, because the attack on the Moellendorffs' ship certainly couldn't be attributed to them. Or perhaps it could? But if it was aimed at him personally, why did it go against the interests of the trading company?

Whilst the farmhands and maids went about their daily chores after supper, they were allowed to—Matthias and Hannes were allowed to talk about school.

"The teacher told us today that every person is a Latin 'individuum'."

Hannes nudged his brother discreetly and whispered loudly to him: "Indivietuum! With just one 't'."

Eberhard didn't know what to make of either word. "What's that supposed to mean? Is there a German equivalent?"

Matthias nodded eagerly. "A human being is an indivisible entity!"

Eberhard was taken aback for just a moment, then he laughed. "Your teacher should have a word with the executioner and ask to be shown the great executioner's sword with which our executioner cuts people into two or, if necessary, into several pieces."

The senator had been listening to the conversation with only half an ear, but Eberhard's laughter had now caught his attention. "That's not what it means. It's meant to say that every being is distinct from another, and therefore every being is unique."

"Oh, rubbish! Every person has two arms, two legs and a head, apart from those freaks with two heads – they really are unique."

"Not like that, Eberhard. You sailed for five years off Amsterdam, so you know that every wind is different."

"Of course. There's a mild and steady south-westerly that the ship and crew love, then a hissing, wayward north-easterly that makes the ship dance so much that everyone feels sick, then a strong trade wind that fills the sails round and makes everyone cheer, then a lazy breeze that moves nothing, and everything just hangs about and drags its feet, then another storm that makes even the bravest sailor seek refuge in prayer, then there's also..."

"Very well. It seems you could go on elaborating on your description for hours. Would you now say that every wind is the same?"

"No. No two winds are alike. There are gentle, steady ones that blow at right angles to the waves, sometimes more and sometimes less crowning the waves with a white cap of spray; others seem more to smooth the sea. Then there are warm ones, cooler ones, and others where you sense that a storm is brewing behind their steady flow, and you'd rather have the main sails reefed as a precaution before the storm hits you unexpectedly..."

Albrecht had leaned back whilst Eberhard accompanied his descriptions with gestures of his hands and arms, his cheeks flushing red with sheer enthusiasm, and now suddenly fell silent when he saw the ironic twinkle at the corners of the Senator's mouth.

"I see, I see!"

"What do you mean, 'I see, I see'? Are you suggesting that I know nothing of the winds on the high seas, that I cannot tell them apart, that I have loved some, cursed others and longed for yet others, not to mention..."

Albrecht had raised his hand before Eberhard could get carried away in his fervour and anger, for there was nothing he could bear less – even though, or perhaps precisely because, he was a merchant – than anyone casting doubt on his seafaring knowledge, and especially not a landlubber like the Senator, even if he was his cousin.

"Stop before unjust anger gets the better of you. You are right in every respect. But now simply replace the word 'wind' with the word 'human being', and you will know what the teacher meant by 'uniqueness'."

Eberhard thought for a moment, whilst the twins, who had been sitting quietly by, waited curiously to see which of the two men would win the argument.

"Well, yes. I know the wind, and the women too." Eberhard seemed to have been thinking back a long way. "They're all unique, no two alike. But people? When I think of all the scoundrels I've come across in the past, they all seemed pretty much the same to me. They wanted nothing but your life or your wallet. Not a single one differed from the others in that respect."

Hannes and Matthias couldn't decide which of the two would be proved right and slid off the bench. They preferred to have a bit more of a chat with the parrot.

Albrecht, Melissa and Eberhard had remained sitting quietly at the table until Albrecht broke the silence: "Decisions need to be made."

He looked at Eberhard. "Do you want to use our plot in Neustadt for yourself?"

"The old garden shed? No."

"Well then, if you don't mind, I'll build a house of our own there for Melissa and me." He held his wife's hand. "We'll have

children too, and there won't be any more room for them here at the Golden Ship. It's already become too cramped for all of us."

Day by day, Albrecht had become increasingly aware of how one-sided Eberhard was, how uneducated, interested only in turnover, percentages and profits. That seemed to satisfy his merchant's soul. But how did these merchants differ from pirates? Was it simply that they carried out their raids on land?

Eberhard recognised full well the pretext Albrecht had sought, yet it suited him just fine. There was no longer room for both of them under one roof, however large the house might be.

"Very well, then let's do the maths: the warehouse, your house… We'll have to dip into our reserves."

"That's right. That's what they're there for."

Eberhard, who was on the point of saying that they were the contingency reserves for the trading business, preferred to keep quiet about it. "And what next?"

"I'll make sure a city guard takes up a post outside the House of the Golden Ship."

"Why?"

"I can't rule out the possibility that these shadowy forces will soon turn against us personally. Against you, your wife, Melissa, or me."

ALTONA FREEDOM

Emblematum Sacrorum,
Beautiful Figures of Spiritual Teaching and Comfort,
Joh. Saubert, 1640.

The next morning, Albrecht drank only a mug of wine for breakfast and worked until morning session at nine o'clock in the Lower Court. Although he was no longer Chief Justice, he had reserved the right to prepare the Council's sessions himself in his capacity as President of the High Court.

After the meal, he looked at his wife and his sister-in-law. "It's a bit chilly today, but there's hardly a breeze and the sun is shining. Couldn't you go for a stroll around town and have a look at some houses?"

Swantje nodded, and Melissa agreed too. She was happy as long as the planning for the house made progress soon.

She pulled a woven cloak over her long dress and linked arms with Swantje.

It appears all the other residents of Hamburg, too, finally wanted to enjoy the warmth of the rising sun once more and were wandering the streets, having fled their houses, stalls, sheds and cellars to finally be outdoors again.

Melissa pointed to a row of houses and said: "No, no half-timbering; it's to be built of solid stone and also bear witness to posterity that Albrecht and I once lived here."

"How do you intend to achieve that?"

"I'm imagining a large monogram above the doorway: an intertwined A and M, with a large M beneath it. If anyone asks what it means, they'll explain it to them even after we're gone – that it refers to both of us."

They stepped aside to let a vegetable cart pass, which was hurriedly taking its wares to the Hop Market, and then strolled along the Neue Burg towards the Town Hall.

"You see, that's roughly how I picture it."

"With all those figures on the façade? Well, if that's the case, then no imperial figures, please."

Melissa looked at the Town Hall: "No, not the façade—I meant the portal. On the two kerbstones, slender, light columns that seem detached from their earthly heaviness, the side panels adorned with colourful ornaments, and crowning it all, a magnificent gable finial. On the left stands Lady Justice for Albrecht, on the right a symbolic deity of my choosing, and on the gable stone above the centre of the passageway, the monogram. The building is to have two storeys."

"The Moellendorff ladies," came a voice from the side, and the younger cloth merchant, Berenberg, greeted them: "I've already had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. And now you're strolling around town, admiring our magnificent town hall?"

"Yes and no. We want to build a house ourselves and are getting an idea of what's possible."

"If you don't mind the journey, do pop over to Altona as well. There, on 'Große Freiheit', a man from Friesland has built himself a house that's just been completed and which you might like. His architect is still there and might perhaps be able to design your house too."

"Thank you for that tip, Merchant Berenberg. You Dutch obviously stick together well, even beyond the city limits."

"Not just beyond the city walls, but across national borders too. Wasn't that one of the reasons why the Hamburg Council wanted to keep us here in the city?"

"You're quite right. It wasn't meant as a reproach, but rather to express my respect for how well you stick together."

"Thank you and have a good day." Berenberg tipped his hat and continued down the street.

On the rest of their way through the city, they'd seen only a few houses that had given them any inspiration. In the old town, the narrow lanes were still predominantly lined with half-timbered houses.

In the new town, Melissa and Albrecht would be among the first to build a stone house there. At the Neuer Markt, situated in the heart of the New Town, Albrecht had shown her the plot of land with the garden shed a few days earlier. Now they passed the barracks of the city wall guards below the new city wall and left Hamburg through the south-western city gate, which, like the other gate in the New Town, was intended solely for pedestrians and those on horseback.

On the footpath that ran along the Elbe on the ridge of the Geest towards Neumühlen, they soon reached their destination: freedom. The village of Altona lay just a stone's throw from Hamburg. The street was lined with craftsmen's stalls and workshops, their windows open, so that one could not only see from the sign above the door but also hear from the various sounds of hammering and banging which trade was practised there. Several two-storey stone buildings towered above the low half-timbered houses with their gables; right in the middle stood a strikingly white house, which must have been the new building the cloth merchant Berenberg had spoken of.

He'd been right to recommend this place to them. The house had everything Melissa could possibly imagine for her own home: three rows of large windows, a porch with slender columns, and three figures of female allegories on the gable.

"It's rather lovely, isn't it?" A man had come to stand beside her and seemed to share her admiration.

"Oh, yes! Do you happen to know the owner?"

"I know him well." The man tipped his black hat and gave a slight bow. "It's me. If I may introduce myself: Pieter de Voss."

Both women gave a slight nod and said at the same time: "Moellendorff."

"It's an honour!"

Melissa took a liking to the man, and from his plain black clothes and tall hat, Swantje recognised him straight away: "Are you a Mennonite?"

"Yes, that's right!" His voice dropped to a whisper and was full of irony: "I belong to those dreadful heretics, at the mere mention of whom the collars of the senior pastors in Hamburg slip down in indignation!" Then he raised his voice again: "Here in Altona, the Count of Schaumburg has guaranteed us freedom of religion and trade, for which we are happy to pay him protection money. And since last year, our Count Joducus Hermann has also allowed us to hold our services in public."

"I've heard the Mennonites aren't very well liked in Hamburg?"

"Oh, you know, we'd have managed somehow with the clergy. We're used to being harassed. But since in Hamburg one must be baptised as a Lutheran to become a member of a tradesmen's guild or a merchants' association, we haven't been able to turn our hard work into success. Look over there," he pointed to a neat half-timbered house, "that's where the widow Rinsken Quins has been earning a comfortable living for twenty years now, trading in knives, combs and weighing pans. A complaint by the Lutheran ironmongers drove her out of Hamburg, where she had previously made a living by the Trostbrücke."

Melissa had been looking at the house: "But the change of location seems to have done Rinsken Quins a world of good."

"You're quite right." Pieter de Voss pointed to the three female allegories on the gable of his house. "Look, here we, as a small congregation, can live out our Christian virtues in peace: Spes, Hope; Caritas, Love; and Fides, Faith. But it is not only us—or at least some of us—who, in all modesty, have been granted a good income; the village itself has also prospered. When many of us arrived here around 1590, this was," he traced a large semicircle with his arm, "just an insignificant fishing village without a harbour. The boats could only find shelter from storms at the mouth of the stream down there on the Elbe. Hence the name of this little place: 'All ten au', as the locals say: 'Above the stream'."

He had put his hat back on in the meantime and was in good spirits. "As far back as 1603, the village of Altona was already granted town status, and there are now one thousand five hundred people of all religions and trades living here. We'll be granted city rights in the foreseeable future as well."

Melissa was impressed by such confidence. "And you think 'All ten au' can hold its own alongside Hamburg?"

Pieter de Voss raised his hand to his eyes and peered through his splayed fingers. "Quite the opposite. It was only after we were granted privileges here and our brother in faith, François II Noë, planned this area of freedom for residence and trade that the Hamburg Council was forced to decide to put a spoke in the Lutherans' wheel and agreement with the Dutch Nation. 'A mighty fortress is our city' only works if the city gates are open to outsiders, their industry and their capital in the form of money and connections."

He tugged at his white collar. “We haven’t complained about Hamburg so far, but there, to give just one example, eight years ago an indignant complaint was raised that quite a few people had built houses here in the Freiheit, and even Mennonites! As if we were all supposed to live like the Hökers!’ The indignation was written all over his face. ‘Forgive me if I’ve nearly lost my temper, but intolerance, envy and vanity make my blood boil.’

Melissa and Swantje felt no inclination whatsoever to defend Hamburg. Nor, however, did they wish to side with the Mennonite so readily. Pieter de Voss, who correctly interpreted this dilemma, bowed: “May I nevertheless invite you into my home?”

Melissa nodded eagerly; she had grown cold from standing for so long, and as they stepped into the entrance hall and Pieter de Voss instructed the maid to bring three glasses of hot chocolate, she had the vague sensation of feeling at home.

Without a trace of vanity, the host led her through the bright rooms, which were furnished with a few carefully chosen pieces of furniture.

The hot chocolate was served in the drawing room, and they chatted some more. “You hinted that you and your husband want to build a house yourselves?”

Melissa nodded. “Yes, the time has come. Since the Moellendorffs’ new head of the household has brought his five children with him, there’s only enough space for one branch of the family now.”

De Voss licked his dry lips, took another sip of his hot chocolate, and then resolved to ask a tentative question. “Would you be willing, whilst your house is being built, to live with your husband in temporary accommodation and have more space and peace and quiet for yourselves?”

"Certainly. But where? A Hamburg senator cannot live with his wife as a lodger in a private home."

De Voss smiled mischievously. "I was thinking here in this house. It wouldn't be in Hamburg, and the first floor is still unoccupied, as my sister and her husband won't be moving in until next year." He looked into his cup and seemed to be speaking more to himself. "If I were allowed to welcome you as my guests, it would be a great honour."

Melissa didn't need long to think about it. "That's a wonderful invitation, Mr de Voss. If you'll allow it, I'd love to pop round with my husband. A house like yours – I'd really like that, wouldn't I?"

Albrecht had thought long and hard about it that evening. It would set a precedent if, as a councillor, he were not to live within the city. Had he still held the office of magistrate, it would have been out of the question. But now, given how enthusiastic the two women's descriptions had been, and as it was clearly Melissa's express wish, he relented and drove across to the Free City with her.

The guileless nature of the Mennonite Pieter de Voss convinced him of the sincerity of the offer, and he agreed. By the very next morning, the most important items had been loaded and transported to Altona.

Councillor Flemming listened to Senator Moellendorff's proposal to establish a town guard for the house 'Zum Goldenen Schiff', with feigned boredom.

As if lost in thought, he fiddled with the purple ribbons on his jacket and waited. At last, an opportunity presented itself for him to vent his spleen and repay the senator in kind for the slight, without having to reveal the true reason. Moellendorff had just provided him with a perfect pretext.

The mayor did not even need to look around for long to see if any of the councillors wished to comment on Moellendorff's proposal, as Flemming had already stood up. "If Councillor Moellendorff," and here Flemming deliberately emphasised the title 'Councillor', "wishes to have a soldier from the city guard posted as a sentry for the House of the Golden Ship, then he must give up the council servant personally granted to him. We have stipulated in the statutes that every councillor is entitled to only one servant at the city's expense. Given the city's strained financial situation, due to the construction of the city fortifications, he should then pay for his servant out of his own pocket."

Although the cost argument was ridiculous, the town treasurer present nodded in agreement. The argument regarding the statutes was more difficult to counter.

Senator Moellendorff paid no heed to the murmurs of agreement from the other merchants on the council. Flemming and his ilk, as he called them, had been shrewd enough to sidestep the actual issue and confront him directly. But that would presumably be their next move at one of the forthcoming council meetings: to have the question placed on the agenda as to whether he would have to relinquish his seat on the council if he no longer resided in the city, even if only temporarily.

The mayor looked anxiously round at his fellow councillors, amongst whom the divide between merchants and lawyers had become glaringly obvious. He waited to see whether Moellendorff intended to reply to Councillor Flemming. Albrecht was still wavering between seeking a confrontation with Flemming and his ilk, or whether he should not object to the motion and thereby allow it to pass. When he saw the mayor's worried look, he decided to avoid the open rift. "If the council so decides, I'll be happy to pay my servant myself."

Flemming, who had already been sitting ready to deliver a sharp retort, leaned back, relaxed. If Moellendorff gave in on this issue, he would have effectively put his seat on the council at risk.

The lawyers Flemming had spoken to had warned him: if the council itself were to remove one of the councillors—who were elected for life—or force him to resign, it would set a bad precedent. The rebellious citizenry might well get the same idea and seek to remove one of the councillors. Flemming was unimpressed by this. What was rightfully theirs as the authorities was by no means a common right of the citizens.

Flemming's authoritarian merchant's mind remained impervious to the notion that one always had to pay a price – even for every victory.

The Wedde's servants had already spent two whole days in the ashes and amongst the charred beams of the burnt-out storehouse for two whole days before the Wedde lords finally questioned the storekeeper and his men.

'Don't go to the authorities unless they've summoned you,' the storekeeper had said to himself, and spent the two days during which he would otherwise have just stood there idly, in his little garden instead. Now, when a servant of the Wedde family brought him a summons to report to the police station, he thrust his spade into the ground, put on a different pair of trousers and set off.

Before Councillor Twestreng could question him, he was already grumbling: "Of course I've already given it some thought."

Twestreng leaned back, glad that for once a person summoned to appear wasn't looking around nervously and refusing

to say anything. To an impartial observer, however, he seemed uninterested. “And what might those be?”

“It didn’t just start on its own, did it?”

“And if not?”

“Then someone must have given it a helping hand. It certainly wasn’t any of us who are always working there.”

“Who, then?”

The storekeeper could put up with a lot, but there was one thing he couldn’t stand: arrogant patricians. He puffed out his cheeks and grumbled, “He didn’t give his name.”

Now Councillor Twestreng sat up with interest and leaned towards the storekeeper. “But you have someone in mind?”

“Suspect, Councillor, that would be going too far. But amongst the day labourers we’d hired, as usual, on Köminsel for the day, I noticed, as he was changing into his work clothes, that he was wearing a waistcoat decorated with coloured trim. You don’t see that very often.”

Councillor Twestreng narrowed his eyes slightly. Only the servants and labourers of the trading houses wore such waistcoats. “Do you perhaps also remember the colour of those trims?”

“I believe so. It was the colour violet.” Twestreng closed his eyes and thought for a moment. Only two trading houses was worn by only two trading houses. “Was it a light violet or a dark one?”

“Dark.” That was unambiguous and could only mean one trading house: that of Councillor and merchant Flemming. “And you’re certain of this?”

“Yes, Councillor. But whether it was his own, or whether he’d borrowed it, or perhaps sewn it himself, I don’t know.”

“But you still remember what the man looked like?”

“I certainly do.”

“Then be back here tomorrow at ten o’clock.”

Councillor Twestreng consulted with the other gentlemen of Wedde. They could not, and did not wish to, appoint a councillor to the Wedde building. Besides, it was not Flemming himself who was of interest to them as a matter for the police, but one of his servants. Finally, they agreed to send Flemming a letter asking him to be at his office the following morning. They wished to pay him a visit, and he was to have his servants at the ready.

The storekeeper arrived at ten o'clock sharp, and the gentlemen of the Wedde set off with him to see Flemming. Two of the Wedde's servants led the way in their blue jackets bearing the town coat of arms sewn onto them, so that people in the street stopped and whispered about what the man during the councillors might have done wrong.

The gate to Flemming's house stood open. Twestreng signalled to one of the servants to knock anyway, to announce their arrival.

After the second knock, a man appeared at the gate; his jacket identified him as a servant of Flemming, although the rest of his appearance suggested otherwise. He had apparently tucked his shirt into his trousers in a hurry; his dishevelled hair hung messily over his face, and his glassy-eyed stare suggested he was drunk.

"Is Councillor Flemming at home?" The servant grinned. Nah." Twestreng instinctively took a step back to command more respect. The servant was leaning against the doorframe, still grinning awkwardly, and began to whistle softly to himself. "Blimey! You're drunk!"

The servant pulled away from the doorframe, tried to stand up straight, and smiled broadly. "We've been having a bit of a party."

"And Councillor Flemming?"

The servant spread his arms as if he wanted to fly and began to sing: “Gone, gone, gone, the master’s gone!” As he did so, he began to spin round and then disappeared behind the door.

Irritated by this unseemly behaviour, the gentlemen of the Wedde exchanged glances. Then all four nodded simultaneously and were inside the house in a few strides. The two servants were sent upstairs to look for Flemming and bring the staff down.

The office looked as though a storm had swept through it. The cupboards were open, and papers lay on the floor and scattered across the table, as though someone had rummaged through everything in a great hurry, searching only for specific documents.

Footsteps, squeals and laughter could be heard on the stairs. The two of Wedde’s servants were herding three footmen and three maids down the steps.

The drunken man they’d already seen at the front gate was among them. The other servants Flemming’s servants didn’t look any better. The maids’ bodices were gaping open; one tried in vain to tuck her spilling bosom back under the fabric, whilst the servants’ trousers hung loosely around their hips, as if they’d all merely hastily pulled their clothes on.

Twestreng merely frowned briefly. “Take the lot of them out into the courtyard.” There he pointed to the water buckets, and the two of Wedde’s farmhands splashed the water at Flemming’s servants. The giggling and laughter fell silent. Gradually they seemed to recognise the uniforms and huddled together, seeking protection.

“Where is your master?”

One of the servants grimaced, scratched his head and stepped out of the group. He rubbed his wet upper arms with his hands and stammered: “He left yesterday afternoon. On board the DE GROTE STERN.”

"When will he be back?"

The servants' uncertain smiles, questioning glances and shrugs were answer enough to show they did not know.

Twestreng turned to the storekeeper: "Do you recognise the day labourer you spoke of yesterday among these men?"

"No, he's not here."

Now Councillor Twestreng turned once more to Flemming's servants, who looked fearful. "Is your master travelling alone?"

A general shake of the head.

"Well, speak up, for heaven's sake!"

"His wife, a servant and a maid."

"What does this servant look like? Describe him to me."

"Helmrich is as skinny as a beanpole, as tall as me and has hair just as fair."

The storekeeper clapped his hands. "That was the man's man: Helmrich. And he's lanky with blond hair, too."

Twestreng snorted in annoyance. "Then the bird has flown the coop before we could catch him." He looked at the trembling servants. "And what will happen to you lot?"

"We've been paid three months' wages and have since been dismissed from service."

"Then get out of here now and put on some dry clothes."

The three men and women were in such a hurry to get back into the house that they nearly tripped over one another and fell. The Wedde gentlemen watched them go, shaking their heads, and then went back into the office.

"If that isn't an escape, I wonder why there was such a hasty departure and the dismissal of the servants?"

"We'll find out where the ship is headed and should ask the bank what has happened to Flemming's account."

Hinrich accepted the Council's decision that Senator Moellendorff should pay his servant personally caught him unprepared. He had friends amongst the council servants who worked at the town hall and who had told him about it. As he himself wished to remain a council servant, he could not be the future personal servant.

So, although he was glad when Albrecht told him of the Council's decision that he would now resume his duties at the Town Hall, he still seemed to have something on his mind.

"Well, go on then, if you have another request," the senator tried to encourage him.

Hinrich plucked up all his courage and whispered: "I'd like your permission to marry Antje."

"I see," said the surprised senator, "now that you will no longer be living at the House of the Golden Ship, you wish to make your relationship with the maid official." At the same time, he recalled the face of the Swedish officer in Stockholm, who had taken it for granted that the Imperial Chancellor knew everything that was happening in Sweden. And yet he himself didn't even know what was going on in his own household.

"Well, yes," stammered the councillor's servant, "it would then give me a reason to visit her. And since, as a maid, she's not allowed to stay overnight anywhere else, I thought…"

"You were quite right," smiled the Senator, "but unfortunately, you've come to the wrong place. You must ask Eberhard Moellendorff, the master of the 'Zum Golden Schiff' inn, for permission. Whether he'll employ a married maid, however, I don't know."

"And what if you put in a good word for us?"

"I'd be happy to try. However, as you know, my cousin and I haven't spoken much to each other of late."

"Yes, I know, sir." The loyal Hinrich's confidence seemed to crumble. Then an idea occurred to him. "You do need a new servant now, don't you?"

It was more of a statement than a question, and the senator nodded. "I could recommend someone to you."

"Oh, I see. You mean that if you help me, I'd be more inclined to help you?"

"Well, yes." Hinrich shrugged sheepishly.

"Tell me a bit about the man you have in mind."

"Back when I returned from our trip to Stockholm and had had enough of travelling, I met a messenger working for the merchant Jarre. I poured out my troubles to him, and he cheerfully said he'd love to be on the road, was a good rider, and a better-paid position would suit him just fine. And if I were ever to give up my post with you, he would…"

"Where is this man from?"

"From Lübeck, and he has a good reputation! You can ask the merchant Jarre."

"I shall form my own opinion. Can you tell him to come to me this evening to introduce himself in person?"

To the Senator, it seemed more than a coincidence, rather a stroke of divine providence, that now, just as he was about to travel to Lübeck, he might be able to employ a servant who came from the city and knew it well. However, it did not occur to him that even the Devil had once been a fallen archangel.

After dinner, the man introduced himself. He made a neat impression and displayed a mixture of reserve and curiosity that the Senator found quite pleasing. He gave his name as Johansson.

"Where did you get that large scar on your cheek?"

"I was a soldier and a mercenary for a while, because that carefree life seemed fun to me back in my younger days. During a fight, the tip of a sabre cut my skin and it healed badly."

Albrecht found the answer plausible, and it could do no harm for a servant to know a thing or two about fighting. “And why have you come to Hamburg?”

“The future lies in Hamburg. My father went from Sweden to Lübeck, and so I simply moved on as well. I wanted to sign on to a ship, but…”, he raised both hands as if to apologise, “then a woman got in the way, and so I stayed here.”

The senator could understand that only too well.

“Are you in a committed relationship with her?”

“Yes, I suppose you could say that. She’s a gardener and sells her own and other people’s flowers at the market.”

“Where do you live?”

“We’ve rented a room on Steinstraße.”

“In one of the Gängeviertel? It doesn’t exactly have the best reputation.” That was quite an understatement, but the senator didn’t want to offend the man.

“That’s why the rents are so cheap there, and why should we – in a better neighbourhood – throw our money out of the window?”

The Senator liked this thrifty attitude. A good householder who put something aside for a rainy day. “If you’re agreeable, Johansson, I’ll speak to Mr Jarre tomorrow so that you can start work with me this week.”

“How much will you pay me, sir?”

Albrecht was becoming increasingly convinced that he had found a good servant.

Melissa had left the two men to talk alone and now watched Johansson leave the house, frowning.

“Do you intend to employ this man as your personal servant?”

“I think so, but I’ll speak to Merchant Jarre first, who currently employs him.”

“And his scar doesn’t bother you?”

"Quite the opposite. He is a valiant and brave man. When I think of good old Hinrich, then a servant who can wield a sabre and isn't daunted by a storm is very well suited. I'll have to go on a journey."

"But first, the two of us!" Melissa held out a letter to her husband; a coat of arms was embossed on its thick paper. "It's an invitation from my uncle to the spring festival in Schleswig."

At first, the mayor and the members of the council refused to believe what the councillors of Wedde were telling them. Mayor Vogeler closed his eyes and muttered: "Councillor Flemming had the Moellendorffs' granary set alight? Why?"

Twestreng, speaking on behalf of the four gentlemen from Wedde, shrugged. "We won't be able to ask him anymore. DE GROTE STERN is on its way to Lisbon. Flemming has closed his account at the Hamburg Bank and, when asked what he was planning to do, replied that he wanted to relocate his trading house to Portugal. He said the profits there were significantly higher than here in Hamburg."

Albrecht Moellendorff shook his head in disbelief. "Flemming doesn't have sufficient knowledge of long-distance trade. So, what does he want to do abroad?"

"There's only one explanation: he wants to evade our control."

"And you think he acted on his own initiative?"

"In the papers he left behind at the office, there is no indication whatsoever that he had consulted with anyone else."

The mayor was still dismayed and muttered: "What sort of times are these, when members of the council are setting fire to their own houses!"

"It was simply a mistake to elect a member of the citizenry to the council and not to select from the old families whose members have proven that they uphold honest principles."

"Don't lump the other residents in with Flemming!"

"If Flemming has fled, then his house will pass to the town."

"Why to the town? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to transfer it to the Moellendorffs? As compensation for the burnt-down granary?"

The mayor turned to Moellendorff. "Would you even want it?"

"No. I will neither live in that scoundrel's house nor do I wish to gain any benefit from it. Sell it for the benefit of the orphanage, so that a charitable use of the proceeds may purify the spirit of the house and a new owner may use it for themselves with a pure heart."

"Well then, it will fall to the town, and we shall decide later who is to benefit from it. But why did Flemming do that?"

The councillors' bewilderment was plain to see, and the mayor brought the meeting to a close.

As if by chance, the members of the Swedish Council remained in the council chamber.

"If Flemming is behind this attack, why isn't he also the instigator of the murder of the Swedish envoy and the one who had the holes drilled into the corpses?"

"Aren't you attributing a little too much to him?"

"Why not? After all, his schemes have only just been exposed because his servant was foolish enough to wear his waistcoat when he sneaked into the attic posing as a day labourer."

"That could well mean, if it is the case that Flemming took the Swedish seal with him to Lisbon and we'll never get it back."

"We could try to get in touch with him and buy it back from him."

"You're not seriously thinking of doing business with that scoundrel as well, are you?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"And even if we did, there wouldn't be enough time anyway."

Albrecht listened to the heated discussion with only half an ear. He was dismayed and relieved at the same time. Even though he hadn't thought Flemming capable of such cowardice, he had been the instigator of these cowardly attacks, and they had now come to an end.

The seal? He'd been told to look in the north, and Lisbon was definitely in the south. He didn't believe Flemming had the seal with him. However, he was careful not to tell the other councillors about his visit to Niederstraße.

SCHLESWIG

'Gottorf Castle in a Vast Landscape'.
Painting by Louis Gurlitt, 1864.

On the way to Schleswig in the four-horse carriage, people in ragged clothes had repeatedly leapt to the side, warned by the escort of four soldiers riding ahead, so as not to be run over by the heavy carriage. One of the frail figures struck the wood of the passing carriage so hard with his crutch that Melissa flinched in fright.

Albrecht seemed unimpressed by this and was lost in thought. A new century. Fifteen centuries after the Sermon on the Mount, which stated: 'Love your neighbour.' The past century had already been murderous. Was this century to be even more terrible? More and more signs were pointing in that direction. Judging by what he had heard so far about the soldiers' rampage, the coming war would eclipse everything that had gone before in terms of murder and mayhem. And when he saw the many ragged people by the roadside, it became clear that this war was creeping further north, year after year.

He felt abandoned by the Church. In its hostility towards all that was foreign, with its attacks on everything that did not meet with its approval – it hated its neighbours – unless people bowed their knees before its altar and no other. The Lutherans had become more Roman than the Catholics. Had Luther not unequivocally declared that no standards for worldly conduct could be derived from the Gospel? And yet, the pastors constantly interfered in worldly matters, against the advice of the town council.

Albrecht snorted in exasperation: 'The freedom of a Christian!' Yes, that was a long time ago.

Melissa noticed his gloom and placed her hand on his clenched fist. "Are you thinking about justice and love again?"

"Yes. It's a right mess with the Church!"

Melissa knew of his resentment towards the pastors in Hamburg and tried to cheer him up. "Come on, let's sing some hymns."

Before her husband could object, she struck up a song and began: "O God, look down from heaven...". Marie joined in, and the two women sang together: "And have mercy on us, for how few are the saints who are yours; we poor souls are forsaken."

It was all too clear that the song did nothing to lift Albrecht's spirits. But Melissa wanted him to be in a better mood. "Is there anything more beautiful than these marvellous songs? When the sound of your voice leaves your body, rises up and joins with the other voices, becoming one..."

"I can't sing!"

"Then I'll tell you about Schleswig and Gottorf Castle. I used to go there often even as a young girl. First came the days of childish games, then the days of flirtations between boys and girls. Four hundred people always lived in the castle, so there were plenty of peers to do things with." Melissa had experienced a great deal there, and the more she told him, the brighter Albrecht's mood became.

Marie, too, who was sitting opposite them in the carriage, listened intently and laughed along with the two of them. In her opinion, the new servant, Johansson, had been foolish enough to want to sit up front on the coachbox next to the coachman.

Unlike the unfortified town of Schleswig, Gottorf Castle lay set apart from it the Schlei; it was more of a fortress with high walls and a bastion at each of the four corners.

The carriage rolled over the drawbridge, and in the castle courtyard the coachman brought the snorting horses to a halt.

A servant immediately came running out, recognised Melissa and greeted her: "Welcome, Baroness von Tralau."

Melissa smiled. "Thank you, but that's in the past. I'm now called Melissa Moellendorff and I'm a citizen of the Free Imperial City of Hamburg."

"Then welcome, Mrs and…", he glanced at Albrecht and then plucked up the courage, "Mr Moellendorff."

"Frederik! You've got it half wrong again," called a voice from one of the windows on the first floor. "Senator Moellendorff!"

"Uncle Friedrich!" Melissa waved up, took her husband by the hand and hurried to greet her uncle.

The servant Frederik felt it was unfair that he hadn't been properly informed. What sort of impression did it make if he couldn't greet the new arrivals with the respect they were due? He decided that, if he didn't know for certain, it was better to remain silent or simply say a plain "Welcome". However, he had been certain about Baroness von Tralau – no, Mrs Moellendorff. Shaking his head, he went over to the coachman, gave him instructions on where to park the carriage and stable the horses, directed the four soldiers in the escort to their quarters, and led Johansson and Marie to the servants' quarters.

Albrecht had let Melissa run ahead up the stairs and watched with delight as uncle and niece embraced and kissed each other warmly.

With Melissa in his arms, the Duke came to meet him. "So, you are the lucky man who has won our Melissa's heart!"

"That is correct, Your Highness."

The Duke held out his hand to him, scrutinising him as he did so. "You're not very talkative, are you?"

Albrecht smiled. "You've known her longer than I have. Should I praise her even more, or should I contradict you?"

"I'd certainly take exception to that. One does not contradict me."

"Not even if you're wrong?"

The Duke fell silent, taken aback; he seemed to ponder for a moment whether he might be mistaken, and then laughed.

"I can see you two are a perfect match. I must say, I approve: a well-chosen word at just the right moment. Am I right in thinking that you also play chess?"

Albrecht didn't need to reply, as Melissa nodded vigorously. "I would never have married anyone who didn't play chess or who wouldn't learn it from me."

"Very well, you townswoman," the Duke withdrew his arm from his niece's shoulder, "you know your way around here; show your husband round a bit and then come to the King's Hall."

Melissa had already opened the next door on her tour. "And this is the chancellery of the Duke's." Albrecht hadn't been able to remember the names of all the rooms and now entered the chancellery's offices with curiosity. Eight writing desks stood in two rows one behind the other, and along the walls were cupboards, one with glass doors.

"Of course, nobody's working today," said Melissa, "but normally it's quite a hive of activity here: people submitting applications, needing copies, sorting out legal matters – basically everything a chancery is responsible for."

"Oh, really," remarked Albrecht ironically. There was really no need to explain that to him, as he both oversaw the court registry and dealt with the council Chancery. "And in the cupboards?"

"Nothing but files and documents." Melissa had walked over to the glass cabinet. "And here is the collection of seals belonging to former dukes."

Albrecht examined the heavy seals thoughtfully; at first glance they all looked the same, but on closer inspection they differed from one another due to additions made by the respective duke.

"Good heavens," they suddenly heard the Duke's loud, annoyed voice in the corridor. "Why isn't the door to the chancellery locked?" Duke Friedrich came through the door, apparently about to launch into a tirade, but then decided to smile. "Ah, it's you!" He sent one of the servants in his retinue away to fetch the key from his chancellery secretary, then stepped up beside Albrecht and Melissa.

"Are you interested in our seals?"

Albrecht nodded. "Yes, that too. But it's more that I keep staring at every seal I come across, hoping that a particular one might be among them."

"Have you lost a seal? That would indeed be a problem. A seal of the city of Hamburg?"

Albrecht paused briefly to consider whether he should tell the Duke of Gottorf more about it. But as he knew the Duke was on good terms with the Swedes, there was really no reason not to tell him.

"It is a Swedish state seal. It was stolen from a Swedish envoy in Hamburg."

"And now the Swedes want you to find it and return it to them?"

"Yes. Our trade agreements are contingent on them having it back in their possession. It is also a gift from the King to his Imperial Chancellor."

The Duke narrowed his eyes. "Is it foldable? With a complicated mechanism?"

Albrecht's pensive expression vanished at once. "You know it? When did you see it? And where? And who was holding it?"

"Now, now!" The Duke smiled and studied the Hamburg councillor very closely, as if trying to assess something. "I saw it once… in Stockholm."

"Oh, I see," muttered Albrecht, disappointed.

Meanwhile, the chancellery secretary had appeared with the key, muttered obsequiously something "about the party, it'll never happen again" and, after a telling-off from the Duke, locked the door to the chancellery.

"Don't lose heart, Senator," said Albrecht of Gottorf, trying to cheer him up, but the latter shrugged and muttered: "That's easy for you to say."

"Now come with me to the ballroom and tell me something about your growing city defences."

"Are you so concerned for our safety?"

"Yours? I was thinking more of my own. If I have another row with our Danish overlord soon and he gets too close for comfort with his troops, I might well need the protection of such high fortifications."

"Then keep a low profile for another two or three years. That's how long it'll take before we, too, can shake off the Dane."

It was as if Albrecht wanted to forget all his worries. He put off questioning the officers at the Danish court—which was why he had come to Gottorf—until the following day and danced with his wife until the early hours of the morning.

Only then was he prepared to let one of the liveried servants escort her to her room.

To her surprise, a soldier was standing outside the door of the guest room, as if standing guard. Albrecht joked: "If you were actually sleeping in there, then I could understand why your uncle wants to protect you, my darling!"

The soldier stood impassively by the door whilst the servant led them into the room. He placed the candlestick on a table and wished them "Good night".

Melissa let herself fall wearily onto the bed; Albrecht took off his jacket and was just about to pull his sweaty shirt over his head when he paused. On the table lay a tied-up parcel. Puzzled, Albrecht untied the string, and when he saw what came into view, he sat up in surprise: the Swedish seal.

Lost in thought, he opened the seal's mechanism, just as he'd seen Count Dottingsfron do, and examined the engraved bronze shape. He weighed the seal in his hands, trying to clear his head to sort out his thoughts. As he did so, he muttered: "It's a pity that such a metal object can't tell a story. Who had held it in their hands, and where had it been?" He turned the seal in his hand, examined it, and stared at it intently. Suddenly he shouted imperiously: "Speak to me!"

Nothing happened; only Melissa had sat up with a start, stood up and stepped beside his chair. She had already dozed off a little and was now rubbing her eyes.

"The Swedish seal?" Albrecht nodded.

"So that explains the soldier. I would have been very surprised, too, if my uncle had wanted me to be guarded."

Albrecht turned the seal over again, held it up to his nose, sniffed it and took a deeper whiff. There was a strange smell clinging to the seal. Did the Duke know who had owned this seal? It could only have been one of the murderers of the Swedish envoy. He would ask the Duke later.

He stood up, feeling relieved, as if a heavy physical burden had been lifted from his shoulders, and took his wife in his arms.

In fact, nothing else mattered to him now. A soldier stood guard at the door, holding the seal in his hands, thus fulfilling the Swedish Chancellor's most important condition: that the long-term trade relationship was secured.

Melissa was out and about in the castle with her friends, and the Duke had set off early for a hunt with his entourage. Albrecht waited. He could feel the weight of the heavy seal in his trouser pocket; he ordered another glass of wine and sat down in the spring sunshine. The soldier, who had been accompanying him all morning, stood beside him.

"Look to the north, with a slight deviation to the west," the magician had told him in Hamburg on Niederstrasse. After getting up, Albrecht had asked for a suitable map to be fetched from the castle's map room and had checked the direction. Schleswig lay exactly north of Hamburg – with a slight deviation to the west.

On the one hand, this knowledge was pure sorcery, for how could this man – or, as he himself had put it, his pendulum – know so precisely? On the other hand, it was the truth. Could the truth be sorcery? Was there a universe of all truths and knowledge, and did this pendulum have access to it? He resolved to read more about it and to ask the magician.

The sound of approaching horse hooves caught his attention, and shortly afterwards the man from Gottorf galloped into the castle courtyard with his entourage.

Albrecht rose to his feet, and the Duke, who had now noticed him, beckoned for him to join them. Whilst the stable lads came running over to lead the horses away, Albrecht had caught up with the hunting party, and the Duke held out his hand to him in good humour. "You seem to me to be in a better mood today than you were yesterday!"

"Since it was presumably you who had the parcel left in my room, you will know the reason for my light-heartedness."

"Come with me to the sauna; we'll be on our own there."

The man from Gottorf mused: "Sometimes I wonder whether I go out hunting simply so that I can enjoy the steam bath afterwards? Be that as it may, it's always a relaxing way to round off the day."

He stripped off his clothes so naturally in front of the bathhouse that Albrecht had no choice but to follow his example, after a moment's hesitation, and find himself naked as well.

Two valets wrapped the Duke in a large towel and rubbed his sweaty skin dry. With a: "Let's get on with the fun," he let Albrecht go ahead into the sweat room.

"Just sit down on the wooden bench; I'll put some more steam on." He scooped water from a tub with a ladle and poured it over an iron plate, beneath which the glowing coals shone bright red. Immediately, clouds of steam rose, and the Duke sat down beside Albrecht.

"It's true that I had the Swedish seal brought to your room."

"Is that why soldiers have been accompanying me ever since?"

"Of course. You know full well what value this little bronze object holds. Something like that must be well guarded. Now tell me how you came to lose it, and I shall then tell you where I got it from."

Albrecht spoke of the treaties between Hamburg and Sweden, of the death of the Swedish envoy Dottingsfron, his journey to Stockholm, and the conditions and suspicions of the Swedish Chancellor.

The man from Gottorf nodded several times, asked for clarification a few times, got up in between to pour himself another cup of tea, and finally nodded. "It all adds up. I was offered this seal in Lübeck when I was there before Christmas. I was completely taken by surprise myself, for I had in fact seen this unique seal at Oxenstierna's in Stockholm and wondered how it could have ended up in Lübeck. But an ironclad rule of such

shady dealings is that you don't ask questions if you want the goods on offer. If you do, the seller will vanish faster than you can count to three."

"Do you have any idea who it might have been, and why it was offered to you in particular?"

"Who? Perhaps someone from Lübeck, or someone who knew I was staying in Lübeck. And why? Ask me something easier. Perhaps because they wanted to get rid of the seal and, rather than simply throwing it away or burying it, wanted to get a tidy little sum of money for it. My good connections to Sweden are all too well known, and so the seller could reasonably expect that I'd be interested."

"And he was right."

"Yes, certainly. Even though I didn't know why Oxenstierna no longer had the seal and what was involved – it offered me a good opportunity to have done the Swede a favour one day, should I return it to him."

"So now we're in your debt."

"Don't make such a fuss about it. Perhaps one day I might be able to ask you for a favour."

The man from Gottorf furrowed his brow and picked up the thread of the conversation again. "Perhaps the seal was no longer needed, as activities had, in the usual spiral, taken a different direction in the meantime?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"The first victim was a human being; the second and third are likely to be objects – possessions of actual or moral value – and then it will be a human being again."

Albrecht had turned pale and recounted the attack on their ship and the fire at the warehouse.

"Then I can only advise you to protect your family. The spiral will tighten, and it may well be that one of your family will be targeted."

"I'd already had the same thoughts, and a guard is protecting the Moellendorffs' house and its occupants. How long will that last?"

"Until the perpetrators or the instigators are found and captured."

"Are you so sure?"

"That's my experience."

Beads of sweat glistened on both men's skin, and the Duke stretched.

"Even though the seal is now in your possession, we both have a vested interest in ensuring it returns to Stockholm."

"Quite right."

"Then let's form a joint escort, with soldiers from your men and mine. We'll both give them letters of introduction so that Oxenstierna knows who to thank, and you'll be off the hook."

"Why a whole escort? Surely you can travel directly from Schleswig to Stockholm by ship."

"No. A Danish patrol vessel is stationed off the river mouth, inspecting all boats leaving or arriving at our harbour. The Danes have become suspicious. It's better for the escort to travel via Lübeck, where the Danes aren't so vigilant, and board a larger ship there."

The man from Gottorf stood up again. "Now let us have something to eat and prepare for the escort's journey."

Albrecht was doused with cold water outside the steam chamber, just like the Duke, then rubbed dry, and felt as good as new. Everything that needed doing came so easily to him, as if the steam had also brought about an inner cleansing.

The young officer of the Wall Soldiers, who had also commanded the escort to Schleswig, was ushered in.

Had Albrecht not known his military rank, it would never have occurred to him to suspect that this man was a soldier. His civilian attire suggested a young, elegant merchant on a grand tour. “Lieutenant?”

“Von Kampe, Senator.” “Lieutenant von Kampe. Did the Duke’s chancellery give you my letter?”

The young officer took three steps forward, pulled a narrow, folded piece of paper from his jacket and handed it to Albrecht, who examined it briefly.

Very well. So, you know what mission you are to carry out on behalf of the city of Hamburg.” Albrecht walked over to the desk and picked up a small wooden box. He lifted the lid and held out the Swedish seal to the officer: “Take it with you. It is the personal property of the Chancellor of the Realm of Sweden and is of a value I cannot put a figure on. So, conceal it well amongst your travelling belongings. Have you already met the two officers of the Duke of Holstein-Gottorf who will be accompanying you?”

“Yes, Senator, they are waiting downstairs. Along with six other soldiers. Shall I...”

“No, that’s all right,” Albrecht interjected immediately as the lieutenant stepped up to a window and was about to whistle on two fingers. “You know what will happen if you carry out this task to our satisfaction?”

“Yes, Senator. The Council will promote me to captain.”

Although the Senator had not been able to discuss this promised promotion with anyone, he was certain that the mayors of Hamburg would honour his promise. And if not, the Swedish merchants would cover the captain’s salary. “Well then, have a safe journey!”

Lieutenant von Kampe took his leave by saluting. He was already absolutely certain of his promotion and would be able to marry his beloved and, if they were thrifty, acquire minor Hamburg citizenship for himself and his wife in a year or two.

Albrecht stepped to the window, saw and heard the horses' hooves clattering on the cobblestones of the courtyard, and felt relieved.

With these young officers, the seal was in the best of hands. They would certainly deliver it safely to Stockholm.

He paced about the room, paused at one of the windows and stared out. Then he walked round and round the table again and again.

Melissa had meanwhile returned from her tour of the castle and was watching her husband pacing about. His restlessness was obvious, so she asked him directly: "Do you want to return to Hamburg as soon as possible?"

"Yes. The good news should be delivered as soon as possible. And I must ride to Lübeck as soon as I can. There is still something to be sorted out there. The chain of misfortunes began with the death of the Swedish envoy and the theft of the seal and the treaties. Then the forgeries bearing the Swedish and Lübeck seals turned up in Stockholm. Oxenstierna reckoned anyway that the people of Lübeck were behind the whole affair. Perhaps I can sort something out there."

"Then let's set off tomorrow. We can always come back here, and then I'll show you more of the places from my youth."

LÜBECK

The Holstengate with its Renaissance porch,
which was demolished in 1853.
(Lübeck Museum of Art and Cultural History.)

Johansson and one of the two Wall soldiers from his entourage had ridden a little way ahead, so that the matter of the toll could be settled before the senator reached the gate in the new city fortifications and was unduly delayed. Albrecht rode slowly towards the city, which he had never visited before.

His gaze fell upon the Holsten Gate behind a large, ornate house that had been built in front of it on the outskirts of the city and which obscured the gate up to the spires.

With Johansson in the lead and the soldiers beside him, they rode through the archways of the building, and now he suddenly saw the Holsten Gate before him.

'A strange sort of old city fortification,' he thought to himself. 'If the enemy had breached the bastions of the fortifications, they would be met by this magnificent building even before crossing the river, whilst on the inside, against their own citizens, they remained ready to defend themselves with the old city gate?'

As if the horse could sense its rider's feelings, it began to snort, flaring its nostrils and raising its head, so that Albrecht patted the mare reassuringly on the pastern. He certainly didn't want her to start neighing now and loudly proclaim his own inner disbelief.

In Hamburg, no one had yet thought of building decorative houses in front of the old city gates. Was it to do with the rebels here who, just under ninety years ago in Lübeck, had dared to depose the mayor and elect Wullenwever in his place? Wullenwever, a man from Hamburg who had gone to Lübeck and there first gained power and then met a miserable death whilst on the run. Was that why the Holstengate had been preserved in this way?

Not as a deterrent against enemies – the new fortifications served that purpose – but as an invocation of peace within the city? What purpose did this gate still serve, other than to prevent the citizens from?

He pushed these thoughts aside, and after they had crossed the bridge, he observed the hustle and bustle on the streets. Carts passed so close to one another that pedestrians had to squeeze into the doorways if they did not want to feel the heavy wheels of the carts on their feet. In one square, the carts were so tightly packed that it was almost impossible to get through.

He booked her accommodation at the Hamburg Inn and then walked to the town hall, past the double iron chain stretched across the road, which now allowed only horsemen and pedestrians to pass. He had already heard that the council insisted on declaring the town hall a protected zone during council meetings, hence the iron chains. The long shadow cast by Wullenwever and his followers still seemed to overshadow the authority of the Council and the mayors.

One of the uniformed council attendants standing at the entrance to the town hall had approached them, asked what they wished, and then led the senator and Johansson into the large audience chamber. At the back, in the left-hand half of the room, the members of the Lübeck Council sat lined up side by side in the open square formed by their oak benches and were currently deliberating a matter as the High Court.

Albrecht gazed at the carved coffers of the high room's wooden ceiling, the large portrait of the reigning Emperor on the wall—with which the Lübeck Council presumably wished to display its imperial freedom and emphasise that only the Emperor stood above the Council as the supreme court. Finally, he made his way to the rear right-hand half of the room, where the Lübeck Council's silver was displayed on a long table and in open cabinets.

A council attendant followed his every move suspiciously, as though he might try to steal one of the magnificent goblets, plates or centrepieces, so that Moellendorf preferred to withdraw from the area once more, mingle with the onlookers and stand beside his servant Johansson, who had been waiting for him there. By chance, he found himself standing next to two men who were whispering to each other so loudly that, despite his best intentions, he could not help but overhear them.

"The civic colleges have flatly rejected the draft tax bill put forward by the Council! Let the Council sort out for itself where it's going to get the funds to reinforce the fortifications!"

"Was the tax so high that the guilds refused to pay it?"

"Just imagine, the houses and plots of land in the town were to be valued, and every citizen would have had to disclose what jewellery, shares in ships, annuities and pawnbroker's deposits, as well as movable property, they owned! On this property, one would then have had to pay an outrageous half a hundredth of a pfennig into the town treasury for every hundred marks of assets!"

"One simply had to reject that!"

"No wonder. After all, the very same council has only just limited working hours, so that the box-makers must start work at four in the morning and finish as early as seven in the evening. Likewise, the amber-workers are now only allowed to work from five in the morning until eight in the evening! The bricklayers, comb-makers and box-makers are only allowed to employ three or four men, and the hat-makers may only employ two apprentices and one journeyman! How on earth is a master craftsman supposed to earn enough to still hand over a generous share to the high and mighty gentlemen of the council – for the common good, as they claim?"

Albrecht shook his head inwardly and walked a few steps further. How well he knew this sort of resistance from the guilds of the '48ers' and '144ers' in the four old Hamburg parishes, where the wealthy also constantly insisted on how poor they were and that they—as master craftsmen and small traders—were, after all, the ones who provided the 'protected kin' with work and thus an income, and, in recognition of this contribution to the community, did not wish to pay any taxes at all, and that the Hamburg Council should kindly direct its demands for tax payments to the 'protected kin' instead. Presumably, the Lübeck Council would only be able to secure funding by raising loans from the major merchants and the rural nobility and large landowners in the surrounding area, for the very people who refused to pay their taxes naturally wanted their work for the Council and the city to be paid for out of the city treasury.

A murmur rippled through the room. The councillors had risen and were leaving the audience chamber. A moment later, a council servant approached Moellendorff, curtsied and announced: 'The Mayor will now receive you.'

They followed the attendant down a narrow corridor; the servant Johansson was told to wait, and Albrecht entered the mayor's office. The mayor had taken off his judicial cap and was just in the process of removing his wide, starched, white ruff. He scratched his neck, as these ruffs were rubbed rather roughly, and then picked up the letter from the Hamburg Council from the table, which Albrecht had submitted as a letter of recommendation.

A particularly simple form of address had been chosen: 'To the Most Noble, Most Honourable, Most Learned and Most Wise Gentlemen, the Mayors of the Imperial Free City of Lübeck'. On the one hand, they were aware of the Lübeck Council's sensitivity regarding honours; on the other hand, in

Hamburg they were gradually coming to regard themselves as equals and did not wish to distinguish themselves through excessive subservience or inappropriate flattery.

The mayor was satisfied with this. He placed the paper back on the table and looked at the councillor with interest: "I have already heard of you, Senator Moellendorff. It is a pleasure to meet you in person at last. What is the matter, and how may I be of service?"

"A matter concerning both our cities which, if at all possible, should not be made public." Albrecht placed the leather folder on the table and took out the forged treaty between Lübeck and Sweden. "Are you familiar with this document?"

The mayor skimmed through the text and examined the two seals at the bottom of the document.

"No, I am not familiar with this treaty, although it bears the Lübeck seal and I ought to know about it." He pondered for a moment, then spoke more to himself than to the mayor: "Only merchant Engelhaar has not decided to send his ships to Portugal and Spain, as the other Lübeck merchants are now doing. He is loyal – or perhaps stubborn – and obsessed with trade within the Baltic, or should I say: narrow-minded?"

"Then he could and should have signed it himself. So did the Lübeck seal end up on this contract, then?"

"Why is that important to you, or as you put it, to both our cities?"

"Because this contract is a forgery. The original bears the Hamburg seal. The Swedish seal was stolen from King Gustav II Adolf's envoy in Hamburg, and I had hoped you would provide an explanation as to the origin of the Lübeck seal."

The mayor turned to one side, walked over to a cupboard and opened the doors. He took a box from a shelf, placed it on the table and lifted the lid. Three seals lay on red velvet in the recesses provided for them. “Look, all three of our seals are here. So, this cannot possibly be an official seal of the town.”

Disappointed, Albrecht looked at the three seals, failing to notice how the mayor was scrutinising them closely. He had noticed that the middle one was not positioned as he usually placed it in the casket: The seals bore an engraved city coat of arms in the upper part of the handle, and he always took great care to ensure that all three coats of arms faced upwards. The middle seal was turned on its side. Someone must therefore have taken it out without his knowledge and, as yet unnoticed, put it back again. That, however, was an internal matter for the Lübeck Council, and he did not necessarily need to rub it in the face of the Hamburg councillor. What was more interesting to him was that the Hamburg Council had concluded such a treaty with the Kingdom of Sweden. A form of treaty that went unusually far beyond normal commercial agreements between merchants. “You suspected that we might have instigated this forgery?”

“An unlikely, but vague possibility. Would you have had a different suspicion had you been in our place? I am glad, however, that you were able to establish so clearly that it is not one of your city’s three council seals.”

“You’re welcome. But one more question: where did you get this treaty bearing our city’s seal?”

“The Swedish Chancellor gave it to me when I was in Stockholm.”

“And now you have the problem that the Swedish state seal has disappeared from your city?”

"Well, yes. The Swede wasn't exactly thrilled. But I thank you." Why should he tell the mayor of Lübeck that the seal was now back in Stockholm and had previously been unequivocally in Lübeck?

"That's all then. Is that everything?"

"No, whilst we're meeting, there's a second matter of mutual interest. The raids on the trade routes between Hamburg and Lübeck have been increasing considerably of late and have reached a scale that, in our mutual interest, we should no longer tolerate."

"What do you propose?"

"We should discuss together how we can ensure greater safety for travellers. Perhaps through regular military patrols? And we must clarify how we will share the costs between us."

The mayor nodded in agreement: "I shall put the matter before the council, and we shall send you a proposal, if you agree."

Albrecht nodded as well: "That would be in our mutual interest. We'd be grateful if you didn't put it off for too long."

"I must first hear what the council has to say." However, in his view, it was more of a Hamburg matter. The merchants in the city and on the council had, on several occasions in recent years, observed with great concern that Holstein nobles and large landowners – Ahlefeldt, Reventlow and Rantzau, the Bernstorffs and the Brockdorffs, the Pogwisch, Rumohr, Sehestedt and whatever else they were called – preferred to sell their grain to Hamburg rather than to Lübeck. That damned city of Hamburg was well on its way to becoming the largest grain transhipment centre in the whole of Northern Europe. And, as he had been told, a noblewoman from Preetz had married the councillor standing before him.

This fitted in perfectly with the fact that the carts from Preetz no longer came to Lübeck, as they used to, for their many errands in spring and autumn, but instead travelled to Hamburg to stock up.

"As far as I'm concerned, I'll make sure we sort this out over the next three months."

With that, they took their leave. His valet, Johansson, handed him his lined coat in the hallway and they left the town hall. The senator's face was impassive and pensive, so much so that Johansson felt compelled to ask: "You were unable to achieve anything, sir, that would have clarified your questions?"

Albrecht looked at his servant absently. What was he to tell him? That, for some reason, he did not trust the mayor's explanations? It had all gone too smoothly. Why had the mayor not been surprised – indeed, he even seemed indifferent – that someone had stolen the Lübeck city seal?

"Johansson, you know your way about Lübeck, don't you?"

"I certainly do, sir."

"Do you know a merchant called Engelhaar?"

His servant's nervous twitch was clearly obvious, if one cared to look. "The councillor?"

Albrecht was too preoccupied with his questions to have noticed his servant's nervousness. Now he snapped out of his thoughts and came to a halt.

"Are there more than one merchant called Engelhaar?"

"No, just one."

"And he is not only a merchant, but also a councillor of the city of Lübeck?"

"Yes, sir."

Albrecht's suspicions were confirmed. Why hadn't the mayor told him this? If this Engelhaar was also a councillor, he could surely gain access to the city's seals.

"Can you ask around in town to find out anything about this merchant and councillor? Who and what he trades in? Does he travel a lot? And if so, where to?"

"I'd be happy to try."

Albrecht wandered through the town for the rest of the day, observing with great interest the imposing façades of Lübeck's merchants' houses. However, he found little that he could adopt for his own house. He wanted a white house with a portal, and the houses in Lübeck were characterised by the articulated red-brick façades that had become the dominant style across the Hanseatic cities of the Baltic Sea.

A striking number of houses still stood with their gables towering high, so that their roofs abutted one another and would catch fire from one another in the event of a blaze.

Time and again, as he made his way round, he came across one of the two broad rivers. Gradually it dawned on him that this island location between the Trave and the Wakenitz, which had certainly once been an advantage for Lübeck's fortifications and defence, had increasingly turned into a disadvantage. The city had reached its natural limits and could grow no further. This island location, which had offered good protection when the population was small, had now become a prison. And if the citizens were not prepared to pay the meagre taxes required to improve the existing city defences, no argument would surely persuade them to pay even a single mark towards the larger ring of an extended city fortification.

As he wandered through the streets and looked at the houses of the wealthy merchants, the relationship between the two cities became ever more apparent to him.

Lübeck: what a glorious past, queen of cities during the centuries of its mighty Hanseatic era. And Hamburg: we are still nothing at all, but in everything we have done in recent years, we have laid the foundations for a great future, in which our own destiny and the will of Mercury will determine just how significant it will be. He sighed and silently sent a plea towards Hamburg: let us protect our imperial freedom, and may God and Mercury preserve us from the fate of Lübeck!

That evening, Johansson had nothing more to report than that the merchant Engelhaar traded in grain, lived alone, and only left Lübeck to negotiate grain deliveries with the large landowners.

The senator was certain that this merchant, Engelhaar, was more than just a grain trader. He would speak to the merchants in Hamburg who visited Lübeck frequently to see if they could tell him more about this councillor.

The next morning, Albrecht set off early with his servant and the two city guards. He wanted to be in Hamburg before nightfall. They rode carefully selected horses capable of covering that distance in a single day.

Overnight, it had suddenly turned bitterly cold again, as if winter were determined to show that it was not yet ready to surrender the battle for the seasons without a fight. The rags she had wrapped round her fingers kept her hands reasonably warm, whilst the muscles of her body warmed up as she galloped along, carried by the movements of horse and rider. After a few miles, when the horses' bodies began to steam, they continued at a light trot; and when horse and rider had cooled down again, they would gallop for a stretch. At this time of year, one had to keep moving to avoid getting too cold.

The riders therefore looked with some reluctance at a roadblock at the entrance to Oldesloe.

Several trees lay first from the left to the middle of the road and then from the right to the middle, so that heavy carts and carriages could only pass slowly, manoeuvring in an arc between them. Horsemen, too, had to pass through this roadblock, as wide ditches on both sides of the road prevented them from taking a detour.

A squad of soldiers in Royal Danish uniform stood around a blazing fire. Two mounted men were lounging about as the four horsemen approached the roadblock and then blocked the passage with their horses' bodies.

Johansson rode ahead but seemed unable to persuade the soldiers to clear the passage again. Even from a distance, Albrecht could hear the loud laughter of one of the two horsemen; he then turned his horse to one side, looked at them with interest and waited until they were forced to stop in front of him.

There was a mocking tone in his voice as he addressed Albrecht: "May I ask Your Highness to dismount?"

Albrecht resolved to ignore the soldier's impertinent tone and asked calmly, "What do you want?"

The soldier tilted his head back slightly and fixed the senator with his gaze. "You recognise my uniform?"

"Yes. Judging by your uniform, you are a Danish hussar and a sergeant in the King's Guard Regiment."

The hussar did not seem to have expected such a precise answer. "Have we met before, or how do you know that?"

"Two years ago, when the Treaty of Steinburg was signed between Hamburg and Denmark, it was soldiers in the very same uniform who accompanied the Danish King."

The non-commissioned officer seemed to grow uncertain and asked, with conspicuous politeness: “This man here,” he pointed to Johansson, “claims to be your servant, and you, he said, are a senator of the Hanseatic City of Hamburg?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Can you prove your identity?”

“Do you really think I carry a sealed letter with me at all times that identifies me as a Hamburg senator?”

Now the hussar sat up straight in his saddle and signalled to those standing by the fire, who then approached and took up position beside his horse.

“Then may I ask you, Senator,” and once again there was that scornful tone in his voice, “to dismount. We must check your identity.”

When Albrecht did not immediately comply with the request and was about to say, “I expressly protest against this treatment,” the other hussars approached his horse, and he preferred to dismount of his own accord rather than have them pull him down.

The hussar leaned forward in the saddle. “With all due respect, we have orders to search for spies working for the Duke of Friedland, Wallenstein, and for the Swedish King, who are said to be here in Holstein to reconnoitre the terrain.”

“And you mean…”

“No, I don’t mean anything at all.” With his boot, he gave one of the hussars standing below him a nudge on the shoulder. “Go on, search the man!”

Albrecht glanced over at the two Wall soldiers in his escort, who, however, faced with such overwhelming numbers, had no intention of intervening in any way. He even had the feeling that one of them was trying to slip away from the situation unobtrusively by backing away.

Reluctantly, he let one of the hussars rummages through his pockets, then unbutton his jacket, pull it back and begin to search the pockets of his waistcoat. Suddenly, the hussar paused, pulled the left side of the jacket right back, and pointed with a loud "Hossa!" at the Swedish insignia, whose two golden bars glinted in the sun. Albrecht, who suddenly realised the situation he was in, knocked the hussar's arm aside, whereupon the hussar in turn knocked him to the ground with a hard punch.

Immediately, two more hussars prised his arms apart and pinned them to the ground, whilst the first hussar, with great dexterity, unfastened and triumphantly showed it to his non-commissioned officer: "Look at the little bird we've caught!"

"The whole lot of you, off your horses!" shouted the non-commissioned officer, and immediately the other hussars, who had been watching rather bored by the fire until then, came running over. Johansson and one of the two guards sat frozen on their horses and found themselves on the ground in an instant, whilst the second guard, who had already slipped away unnoticed, immediately turned his horse round, galloped off from a standing start and, with a fierce crack of his whip, made the stallion leap over the wide moat. On the other side of the ditch, he nearly slipped with his hind legs but managed to regain his balance and, after two short bounds, found firm ground beneath his hooves once more. The mounted hussar, who had followed the sentry, reined in his horse at the edge of the ditch. He had no desire to risk ending up in the ice-cold water and, with an indifferent shrug of his shoulders, returned to his group.

The non-commissioned officer gazed thoughtfully at the clasp. “Well, well! We’ve got a Hamburg senator here!”

Albrecht tried to sit up straight. “I can explain it to you!”

The sergeant had bent down and was grinning. “You don’t need to explain anything to me. You can tell all your tall tales to the judge in Oldesloe.” Then he straightened up again and ordered: “Tie up those three scoundrels and take them to prison!”

Once his bonds had been cut, he was dealt a hefty kick and tumbled straight into the filthy straw of the cell. Two startled rats squealed as they fled into the neighbouring cell and scurried on as soon as Johansson and the sentry were given their quarters there.

The heavy bolts on the bars slammed shut, and the Hussars’ sergeant sneered: “Unfortunately, the judge is away in the countryside, so you’ll have to be patient for a few more days before you can tell him your fairy tales.”

Albrecht struggled to sit up halfway so he could lean against the wall. Breathing heavily, he felt the grazes and wounds on his head, then, groaning, wiped the blood from his fingers onto his clothes and closed his eyes. He had not wanted to let himself be bound without a fight, and the hussars had beaten him into submission until he finally resigned himself to the inevitable.

Suddenly he burst out laughing so loudly that Johansson pressed himself against the bars, stretched out his arms and tried to touch his master, terrified that he might have gone mad. “Sir?”

Albrecht opened his eyes and saw his servant’s imploring gesture. Slowly, he shook his head wistfully: “You need not be afraid, Johansson, for your master is with you!”

This only served to confirm Johansson's silent fears: "Sir?"

Albrecht touched his servant's hand: "Are you worried because I'm lying here in the muck, laughing?"

"Yes, sir."

"I just happened to be thinking of that accursed clasp belonging to the Swedish Royal Special Envoy."

"You mean there's a curse on it?"

"Nonsense. All that's just priestly drivel," came a deep voice from a dungeon on the other side of the corridor. "Keep talking like that, and the horned, goat-legged one will be our guest, reeking of sulphur!" In the semi-darkness, a veritable monster of a man rose from the straw, shook the dirty straw stalks from his thick cloak and leaned against the bars. "Why have they thrown you into this hole?"

"We're suspected of being Swedish spies. And you?"

"Ha! They say I blasphemed against God!" He twirled his index finger round his nose and spat into the straw. "I lived as a hermit in my hut by the forest. When more and more farmers came to hear my words and pray with *me*, the priests brought charges against me. The judge threw me into this dungeon so that I might come to my senses! Do you know why the priests don't like me talking to God?"

"I'm no church dignitary. So how could I possibly answer that?"

The hermit scratched behind his ear and gazed at the ceiling. "Perhaps they're jealous because our Lord doesn't speak to them, however fervently they pray for enlightenment?" He chuckled. "Perhaps also because they're liars who strive to find God in their thick tomes and argue about it?" He shook his head. "If you have to argue, you have no certainty. If you believe, you have certainty and need no thick tomes. They kneel in their cassocks before idols that sprang from their own minds and which they now follow themselves!"

His voice, which had grown louder, softened again: “It was around St Martin’s Day when my little farmers had to pay the tithe again and came to me to complain. “You got it for free, so you should give it for free! I probably shouldn’t have said that. Their pot-bellied anger is as tight as a noose.”

“And where do you get your knowledge from, if not from books?”

“The Lord gave me eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a tongue to taste and skin to feel. So, I need only look at nature, listen to the little birds, smell the flowers, taste the roast, feel the earth, and God is with me and I am with God. He has let it blossom and flourish; then it grows cold and hunger sweeps through the land, so that we may remember He can do things differently too. And when it does become too bitter, He lets it grow warm and cheerful again, so that we may thank Him. Hallelujah!”

When no one joined in his song of praise, he pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders and burrowed back into the straw.

Albrecht felt the cold from the wall slowly creeping into his skin; he tried to make out in the pale light from the ventilation opening in the masonry whether there was a less filthy spot in the straw, but found none, so he closed his eyes and let himself sink into the straw. He shovelled a layer of the clumped stalks over himself with his hands, to at least give his body the feeling that he was protected from the cold. He began to shiver and muttered: “It’s already killed the Swede – will we survive this? It’s not in our power to decide that.”

When he awoke, the cold had penetrated his body so deeply that he could no longer even shiver. Instinctively, he crossed his arms, hunched his shoulders and began to rub his arms together.

The jingle of a bunch of keys made him prick up his ears: the iron door at the end of the corridor opened, and a man in dark blue clothes approached the cells, carrying a steaming bucket in one hand and several wooden plates in the other.
Albrecht pushed himself up and crawled towards the bars. “Do you have a container so I can relieve myself?”

At first the man seemed taken aback by the question, then he laughed. “Shit in the bucket over there in the corner of your cell, just as the others before you have done. It’ll soon have cooled and frozen, so it won’t stink so much. The cells won’t be cleaned again for another four days. Then you’ll get some fresh straw too. For now, here’s some millet porridge to keep your strength up until the judge arrives to question you.” With that, he set down the steaming bucket, slid a plate through the bars and waited until Albrecht had finally grasped it and lifted it up. Using a ladle, he scooped the porridge from the bucket onto the plate, then reached into his trouser pocket and passed a spoon through the bars. He seemed to feel sorry for his prisoner and muttered: “If you like, you can have a second helping later. Now eat!”

Johansson, the guard and the hermit also received their morning meal. They had to make the same effort as the senator to hold their plates and spoons with their frozen fingers. Silently, they raised the spoons to their mouths and felt the warmth of the porridge in their stomachs.

The prison guard had been waiting; he refilled the plates, then disappeared with his bucket and slammed the iron door shut behind him.

After the meal, Albrecht reluctantly relieved himself as he had been instructed, then curled up in the straw with his arms and legs drawn up to retain the warmth in his body for as long as possible. Johansson and the wall guard, who did not have the privilege of a single cell, lay huddled together in the straw to keep each other warm with their bodies.

The hours passed with dozing, waiting and brooding. Perhaps the judge would return a day early after all? Where had the second guard ridden off to? Was the soldier trying to fetch help? Why on earth was he still wearing that damned badge on his waistcoat?

A fit of coughing from Albrecht broke the silence. Despite the bone-chilling cold, he began to shiver, and beads of sweat formed on his forehead, as if his body were trying to fend off the cold with its last ounce of strength. He whispered grimly: "When the need is greatest, God's help is nearest!"

The following day passed as well. As it began to grow dark once more, they had given up all hope that their fate would yet change.

The iron door slammed against the wall with such a loud bang that the four imprisoned men were startled. Two torchbearers came down the corridor; once more the jingle of the bunch of keys rang out, and the heavy bolt was pushed aside. In the glow of the torches, Albrecht could make out the prison guard and the sergeant of the Hussars, who now bowed before him. 'May I ask Your Excellency to follow us?'

Albrecht seemed to be grinning as if in a daze. He crawled laboriously across the straw, and it was obvious that he could not stand up on his own. Immediately, the guard and the soldier clamped their torches into two holders on the wall and helped the councillor to his feet. They carried him on their shoulders, his arms outstretched, rather than him taking steps of his own accord. They had to lift him up the steps; he no longer had the strength to climb them on his own.

He closed his eyes, and a shiver ran through him as they reached the caretaker's heated parlour by the fireplace and his two companions settled him into an armchair.

Melissa pressed her hands to her mouth in horror, to stop herself from crying out in shock when she saw her husband in his pitiful state. His clothes were filthy, his hair hung in a tangled mess over his face, and with glassy eyes he gazed around the room. He was trembling, and it seemed as though he did not recognise anyone, not even his wife, who was already kneeling beside him, his head resting on her shoulder, as she stammered: 'What on earth have they done to you!'

"Have a tub filled with hot water at once, fetch a surgeon or barber-surgeon, and bring his two companions up here as well." The voice sounded commanding and brooked no contradiction.

"Yes, Your Highness," Albrecht heard several voices reply, followed by the clatter of heavy boots, doors slamming, then silence once more. He opened his eyes with difficulty, first catching sight of his wife's face as she watched joyfully whilst he seemed to be regaining his strength, even though another fit of coughing was tormenting him, and then he saw the back of a man dressed in the finest cloth.

Melissa whispered, "My uncle! I asked him to help us."

Now Albrecht recognised the voice of Frederick III of Holstein-Gottorf.

Meanwhile, the Duke had turned to the sergeant of the hussars. "What prompted you to take this man prisoner here? Did he not tell you that he is a Hamburg councillor, a senator – in other words, a patrician?"

'Yes, Your Highness. But there was nothing—absolutely nothing—to suggest that this man actually was what he claimed to. Our mission was, and remains, to search for Swedish spies, and the brooch belonging to a Swedish envoy was unmistakable; moreover, in his saddlebag we found, inside a folder, a treaty between Lübeck and Sweden.

Had he said he was a Lübeck councillor and shown us this treaty, we would have let him ride on. But why would a Hamburg councillor be carrying such things with him? Would you have had an explanation for that?"

"Did you ask him for an explanation?"

"Forgive me, Your Highness, if I may tell you what a load of lies we're being fed...", but as the Duke waved him off, he continued: "It is the judge's duty to clarify these matters. And if the senator hadn't put up a fight... That, too, confirmed our view that he had something to hide."

"Would you willingly allow yourself to be bound and thrown into prison?"

"No, Your Highness! But I am a soldier and wear a uniform that legitimises on whose behalf I am acting."

"Very well, man, I think you did it without malice. Even if it was the wrong person this time. You may withdraw."

Whilst the sergeant saluted, turned on his heel and walked out, the Duke turned to the two Moellendorffs, picking up the Swedish insignia from the table as he did so, and looked at Albrecht. "Unfortunately, I must agree with the soldier. From his point of view, he acted in accordance with his duty by detaining a man wearing the insignia of a Royal Swedish Special Envoy. And the fact that he did not know that only a man of noble birth may wear such an insignia and must therefore be treated accordingly – I cannot hold that against him."

He stepped up to the armchair and held out his hand to Albrecht. "It is thanks to your wife that I am here and able to settle this matter without causing a great stir. The Hamburg Council wanted to send a detachment of armed men to free you. But King Christian would not have let that pass, and it would hardly have been in your interest to get into trouble with him."

Albrecht nodded in agreement and squeezed his wife's hand. "What will happen now?"

"I shall have you taken to the inn. There you will have a bath and be given fresh clothes. My soldiers will assist you with that." He gave a nod, and two men in uniform who had been waiting by the door helped Albrecht up from the armchair and supported him.

Next to the prison door stood a four-in-hand carriage, the doors of which bore the ducal coat of arms. Slowly, the procession made its way across the street to the inn opposite, where the barber-surgeon was already waiting with his ointments and tinctures.

Once Albrecht had been cleaned and the barber-surgeon had treated him, he was taken to a bed and given something to eat. Interrupted time and again by fits of coughing, he chewed slowly, one mouthful after another, then leaned back contentedly and held his wife's hand.

The Duke, who had been watching him the whole time, now broke the silence. "Other duties now call me away, and as you are well looked after, I can leave now. I shall send you a carriage tomorrow to take you to Hamburg." He paused, looked at the items spread out on the table and reached for the Swedish insignia. "May I ask you for a favour?"

Albrecht frowned. What favour could he possibly do for the Duke?

"If you could give me this badge, I would be most grateful."

Albrecht had no problem with that: "Take it if you wish, if you have a use for it." He groaned softly. "But I must warn you. This brooch has brought no luck to its previous wearers – quite the opposite. It's as if there were a curse upon it."

The Duke pocketed the brooch, stood up and took his leave. "Well, I think that both Dottingsfron and you yourself have failed to consider that this brooch requires better protection than you have afforded it. It is too significant to be defended alone or entrusted solely to the protection of a servant and two brave garrison soldiers." He shook Albrecht's hand in farewell, kissed his niece and ordered his soldiers to follow him.

A short while later, the commands of the officers in the Duke's escort could be heard from the road, along with the snorting of the horses and the loud clatter of hooves as the four-in-hand set off and the escort's horses broke into a trot.

"And the Hamburg Council actually wanted to send troops here to free me?"

Melissa nodded. "The mayors did. Seven councillors were against it, but they were outvoted, until everyone had a change of heart and became afraid of the Danes."

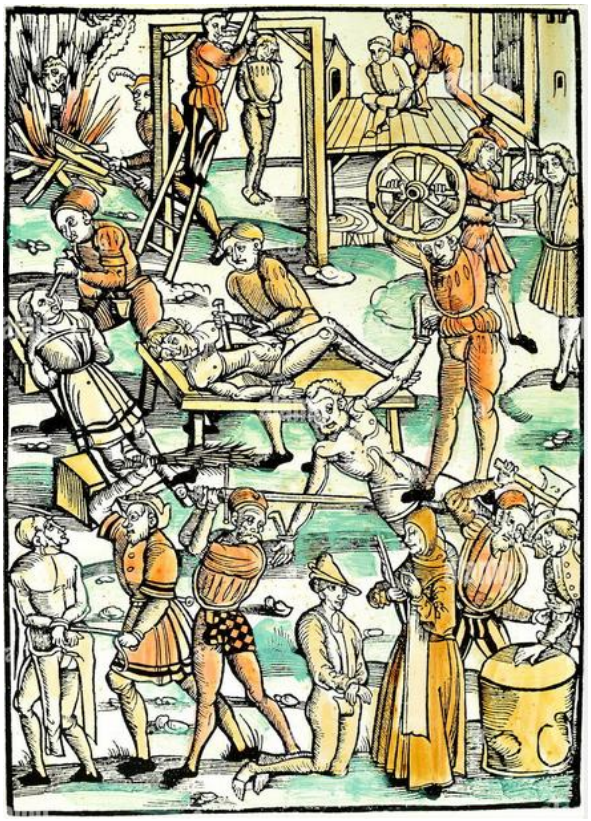
A nervous twitch ran across Albrecht's face. "The Council itself is undermining its own authority. Word will get round of its vacillation between megalomania, petty squabbling and fearful retreat, and the citizens won't give a hoot if the Council tries to assert its God-given authority."

His agitation once again gave way to the rasping of a coughing fit, and Melissa stroked his forehead soothingly.

"I then sent two horsemen off to Schleswig. By different routes, so that at least one would arrive. They were instructed to change their horses at the post stations and fetch the Duke as quickly as possible. They wouldn't let me through to you. Albrecht, please, try to get some sleep now. I'll stay awake a little longer."

His breathing gradually grew calmer, and at that moment Melissa did not long so much to be back in the city at last, to return to where there was peace and where a person felt safe.

THE END



"Justice, the penal system"
Colour woodcut from Ulrich Tengler's *Laienspiegel*,
printed by Johann Schoeffer, Mainz, 1508

Johannson had stepped up beside the Senator's bed and was waiting for an instruction or an explanation as to why he had been summoned.
He himself had come through Oldesloe Prison unscathed, unlike the Senator, who had not yet left his bed since their return to Altona.

"My dear Johansson. I cannot blame you if you should prefer to resign from my service rather than expose yourself to further danger."

Johansson had turned pale. "No, sir! Please allow me to remain in your service!" He would do anything, but he would not leave his post. He was not here of his own volition. "Let me stay by your side. Only death could prevent me from doing so."

Albrecht raised his hand. "Let's not think that far ahead. It's fine by me if you stay."

Johansson bowed, took a deep breath and withdrew. He'd heard the front door slam downstairs and wanted to check that everything was all right.

Ever since he'd stopped living under the same roof as Albrecht, he had Eberhard become. Now that he no longer had Albrecht as an opponent, it seemed he had to consider Albrecht's thoughts himself in order to weigh up the answer to a question.

He had muttered something like: 'The little rascals needed some exercise' and was sitting next to the sofa where Albrecht was laid down during the day.

The little ones sat lined up on a bench like organ pipes, noisily sipping warm milk from large mugs. Hannes and Matthias, the twins who had valiantly defended their right to the biggest slices of cake from the cook against the competition from the five new arrivals, were sitting with the men.

"Well, you two. Has there been anything exciting going on in town again?"

Both nodded and were just waiting for a prompt of "Go on then, tell us," to launch into their story.

"At the Eimbeck House on Dornbusch, they're exhibiting an animal that's huge, yet only eight years old."

"It's got such huge ears," Hannes drew a circle around his ears with both hands, as large as the length of his arms would allow.

"And such a loooong beak," Matthias had placed his hand on his nose, then pulled it away and had to stand up to demonstrate the long beak, "that even the biggest bloke has plenty of room on it!"

"That colossus is being beaten by a tiny man with an iron hook, as if it were a little dog."

"And what he likes best is to grab a barrel of beer with his long nose and then gulp it down in one go."

"And even though it costs four shillings to watch the beast, there's a huge crowd jostling to get a look!"

The two children's amazement and enthusiasm rubbed off on Albrecht. He had once seen an engraving depicting such a colossus. "I'm going to go and see that beast for myself!"

A fit of coughing shook his body, and Eberhard signalled to the children to be quiet. He waited until the fit had passed.

"The real reason for my visit is this." He took a document out of his pocket and handed it to Albrecht. "The company has set up an account for you and your wife at the Hamburg Bank. The amount deposited is five thousand Banco marks. You'll need two thousand marks for your house and the rest for the furnishings. If it isn't enough, no problem – just let me know."

He stood up to spare Albrecht the need to reply.

"Right then, children, let's head back home."

Albrecht was an impatient patient. He still had plenty to do – the magician because of his pendulum, to speak to the Hamburg merchants who traded with Lübeck to see if they knew this merchant Engelhaar, and to attend the council meetings; so it seemed more than absurd to him to be bedridden and confined to the house.

A barber-surgeon had drawn blood from him using hot glass flasks; Johansson had tea made for him, following an old Swedish recipe; and Melissa no longer left the house. She sat by his side, told him stories, watched over him whilst he slept, read to him and played chess with him.

Day by day he grew paler and thinner. When his weakness became so severe that he could no longer be bothered to move the chess pieces, Melissa sent for a doctor.

The surgeon watched as Melissa stepped up to her husband's bedside, fluffed up a pillow, slipped it under his head so that he could sit up more comfortably, and then gently stroked his forehead and cheeks. He spoke more to himself than to anyone else: "So that's one thing he won't be lacking."

Melissa turned to him and asked anxiously, "What is it that he won't be lacking?"

The doctor smiled. "Our great teacher Theophrastus Paracelsus wrote: 'The highest principle of every remedy is love.' And as I have seen, your husband is certainly not lacking in that."

"But it doesn't seem to be enough for him to recover. Do you think I should have him taken to the Hospital of the Holy Spirit?"

"Have you ever been there before?" Melissa shook her head. "No."

"The sisters there do good work for all the sick who cannot afford a doctor. But how shall I put it, spare yourselves and your husband the trouble."

He examined Albrecht, who endured it all in silence, and snorted: "As a surgeon, I'm at my wits' end here. Wrap your

husband in warm cloths and let him sweat it out. Do you know a herbalist?"

Melissa closed her eyes. "Of course! Why didn't I think of that myself? I'll send for her."

The doctor took his leave, and Melissa's spirits lifted once more. Easter was in two weeks' time, and the carriage from Preetz would be travelling back to Hamburg. She sat down at her writing desk and hurriedly wrote a letter to the prioress of the convent in Preetz, asking her to send Nanna, the herbalist, to her in Hamburg.

She called for Johansson. He was instructed to ride to Preetz immediately, deliver the letter and then escort the van.

The exertion seemed to do the Senator a world of good. He slept for half the day, and his complexion began to a bit more colour, and he also felt a better appetite.

Melissa had forgotten to ask Johansson for the recipe for his tea and regretted that she could not have it prepared for him.

The days of waiting dragged on endlessly, and the silence of the house, which she had so cherished, became oppressive. When the sun shone, Melissa opened the windows to hear the voices of people in the street, the cries of the street vendors, the clatter of horses' hooves on the hard cobblestones.

It took a week before she heard a loud clatter from the street; recognising Johansson's voice in the 'Stop!' someone was shouting, she ran down the stairs.

"Nanna!" Melissa embraced the old woman standing next to the van. "It's a good sign that my letter arrived in Preetz before the van had set off."

"One day later, and he'd have been gone. So, what now? If I can, I'd be happy to help."

Nanna stepped up to the sofa, looked intently at the senator, then pulled down one of his eyelids and straightened up again. "He's got poison in his system."

Johansson, who had sat down in an armchair by the door, instinctively gripped the armrests more tightly, as if he were losing his balance.

Melissa looked first at Albrecht, then at Nanna. “What sort of poison are you talking about?”

“Does your husband tend to be melancholic?”

“He is sometimes pensive and despondent about the state of the world. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes, that could be it. His dark thoughts will have turned his bile black, which is now poisoning his blood.”

“Do you have a herb to treat it?”

Nanna rummaged through the large bag she’d brought with her and hadn’t wanted to leave with anyone else. After taking out and examining a few of the sachets, she chose one and muttered:

“Celandine will help him.”

“What should I do?”

“Put one and a half spoonfuls into a litre of boiling water and let it steep for a quarter of an hour. He should drink it three times a day. That will help him.”

Johansson was already standing beside the herbalist. “Give me the sachet. I’ll ask the cook to prepare the infusion just as you’ve said.”

He left the room with the bag, and a weight was lifted from his heart. At last he could stop dripping the drops of lily-of-the-valley juice into the senator’s tea. This celandine would serve him better.

Nanna spoke to Melissa: “Don’t be surprised if he seems to be getting worse in the first few days. The poison is being driven out of his system by the herb and is flooding his body.”

Johansson took the bag to the kitchen. “Five spoonfuls of the herb to half a litre of boiling water and leave it to steep for a good hour.”

Nanna stayed for another two days, until the cart carrying the shopping set off back to Preetz, and assured Melissa. "You see, it's just as I said. The poison in his body is fighting back against the herb and doesn't want to leave his body just yet. He'll be feeling better in a few days."

Melissa felt more confident again. Albrecht had grown paler once more, and his body was repeatedly shaken by convulsions. He was sweating even without warm blankets, and Johansson, who took great care to ensure he drank the tea made from celandine, kept watch by his side throughout the day.

Filled with gratitude, Melissa had long since quietly withdrawn any reservations she'd expressed about this man. During the day, Johansson was like his master's shadow, tending to him and paying close his movements. Every morning he brought flowers that his wife had given him to take to the sick man. This allowed Melissa to rest during the day, knowing her husband was in good hands to look after him at night.

Time and again, the Senator would wake up at night, wanting something to drink, and would ask Melissa to tell him about her youth in Gottorf.

Before Johansson left the house that evening, he went into the kitchen and spoke to the cook. "The more, the better," he muttered, instructing the cook to prepare an even stronger decoction from the celandine.

The seizures became more severe, which Melissa, true to Nanna's prediction, took as a good sign.

The next morning, Johansson had not turned up for duty, and Melissa sent Marie to Steinstrasse to find out what had become of him.

"He wasn't there."

"And his wife?"

"She was sitting in the parlour, weeping. She said her husband could no longer bear the Lord's suffering and had gone away so that it wouldn't tear his heart apart."

Albrecht shook his head wearily. "The Grim Reaper comes and kills us without a declaration of war. Our struggle against him," he seemed to sink into his thoughts, "we will always lose it.

And what use are the herbalists with their healing arts, which merely delay the inevitable end of this struggle and prolong the suffering!" His wife tenderly dabbed the sweat from his forehead. 'People who have returned from the brink of death speak of a light they saw just as they seemed to be dying.' With a sigh, he closed his eyes, and another fit shook his body. Melissa silently took his hand and felt the heat within him, fighting for his life.

Then he grew calmer again and his breathing evened out, so Melissa stood up and paced up and down the room. She pressed her fists against her forehead, as if that might soothe her own restlessness and force her to remain calm. Then she stepped back to the bed and gently dabbed the cold sweat from Albrecht's forehead. She stroked his narrow, pale face with a smile, hoping that he would look at her too, and only then realised that he was no longer breathing.

Melissa laid her head on the bed's duvet and felt a deep connection to her husband.

Overcome by a sudden wave of despair, she closed her eyes. As if one were approaching death oneself, the dead become more important than the living. Is loss an enduring part of our present, and the past our life? And the future? What is the future? Memories remain with us, as a burden and as a source of comfort. No one can take them from us. Not even ourselves, even if we wanted to.

Melissa sat up. wistfully, she ran her hand over the smooth wood of the bed frame. She had always been clever and sensible, and it had been good, just as she had wanted it to be. Now she felt the certainty, which was still unfamiliar to her, that she had loved this man, and still loved him. Yet this love, this pain – she had not wanted that.

She would build this house together with him, even if she were to live in it alone, its intertwined monogram of A and M telling future generations of their love.

Marie, who had been waiting outside the door for a long time so as not to disturb her employers' time together, approached quietly and placed a sympathetic hand on her mistress's shoulder.

Melissa looked up, grateful not to be alone at that moment. "Yes, Marie. He has now left us." She gently stroked her husband's eyelids.

Marie, unsure how she should behave now, unconsciously pressed harder on her mistress's shoulder, causing Melissa to look up. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Yes!" Marie was relieved that she could finally report the news. "A town councillor's messenger has come to see you and asked that you come to the town hall as soon as you possibly can."

Melissa took her husband's hand again. She shook her head wistfully and in bewilderment. "How often have they called *you* away from me. And now that you are dead, they are calling *me* away from you. Yet just as you always regarded it as your duty to obey, I shall now go and see what they want of *me* at the town hall. Marie will keep watch over you."

Outside the door, a light one-horse carriage was waiting for Melissa alongside the council's groom. The coachman invited her to take a seat beside him, and with a crack of the whip the

carriage set off, seeming to fly through the streets so that passers-by leapt out of the way and Melissa had to hold on with both hands to keep from falling out.

She looked in surprise at a squad of Lübeck soldiers standing around in the town hall foyer and had her arrival announced. The mayor came out immediately, took her by the arm and led her into the council chamber. “How is your husband? Has he recovered?”

Melissa stopped in her tracks. Tears suddenly welled up in her eyes. “You can’t possibly know yet. He died whilst you were sending for me.”

The mayor closed his eyes and snorted with deep emotion. Then he suddenly raised his voice and cried: “You’ve come too late. Senator Moellendorff is beyond help! Here comes his widow.” With that, he pulled Melissa along with him; she found herself, to her surprise, facing a group of six men, all of whom tipped their magnificent hats to her, bowed and murmured their condolences.

“Six gentlemen of the Lübeck Council,” grumbled the mayor. He now stepped towards the Lübeck councillors.
“If you would be so kind. Now tell the widow what you had to say to me.”

Hesitantly, the councillors twirled their hats, then one of them stepped forward. “Two days ago, the bailiff of Lübeck’s men arrested a man. He had boasted in a city dive that he had now stolen enough to be able to go straight. He denied it for a few more hours, but then, even before the interrogation began, he admitted that he had been in the service of the Lübeck merchant Engelhaar and had committed several misdeeds in Hamburg on his behalf. Finally, he confessed not only to having reduced the Hamburg councillor Moellendorff to a state of infirmity, but also to having hastened his imminent death with a final dose of his poison.”

The Lübeck councillor raised his hands as if in apology. “We set off immediately, hoping to arrive early enough to save his life with the antidote...”

Melissa had turned even paler beneath her fair complexion. “Is the man’s name Johansson?”

“Yes!” Surprised, the councillor let his hands drop.
“How do you know?”
“He was my husband’s servant and suddenly disappeared five days ago. And we’d thought he could no longer bear his master’s suffering and…”, she closed her eyes, “how could we ever have guessed that he was his murderer!”

Another Lübeck councillor had now stepped forward and was looking at her. “You could no more have known than we could have suspected that our honourable merchant and councillor Engelhaar had instigated these cowardly murders. Yet he has already received his just punishment for them.”

The Mayor of Hamburg interrupted him: “You’re speaking in riddles, man! Explain more clearly what he did wrong and what punishment he received for it.”

The Lübeck councillor considered how he might put it without revealing the sympathy that some of the councillors had hinted at for their murderous colleague – they were now even with Hamburg’s Wullenwever. Then he thought he had found the right way to begin.

“Merchant Engelhaar was one of the few among us who refused to adapt to the changed situation, namely that trade had shifted away from the Baltic Sea. We sent our ships to Portugal and Spain – he stubbornly insisted on continuing his grain trade with the Swedes. When it became known that a group of Hamburg merchant families were to be granted, as it were, a monopoly on this trade, he had the Swedish envoy assassinated here in your city and seized the contracts for himself.

When your husband then had the Swede's body taken to Stockholm and spoke there with the Chancellor, he and his family became the target of his despicable schemes… But you will know these details better than we have been able to ascertain so far."

Melissa nodded. "You said he had already been punished for this?"

"We found him dying in his bed, and he seemed to still want to come to terms with himself; he told us everything and wanted to ensure his servant did not get away without punishment. His diabolical servant also poisoned and robbed him. He will hang from the gallows for it!"

"Whether lying dead in his warm bed is a punishment for this merchant is certainly open to doubt!" Unnoticed by the others, Eberhard Moellendorff had been in the room ever since the Lübeck councillor's explanation. "I think he can still receive the punishment he deserves even after his death. Hang his corpse on the gallows in Lübeck alongside that of the servant, or do you wish to spare him that? Everyone will soon know anyway that the crimes are his to answer for and that the servant was merely his tool."

The first Lübeck councillor replied sharply: "I can understand your pain, but I do not think it is your place to interfere in our affairs and decisions!" Then he softened his tone. "We shall give it some thought – whilst you consider what is to be done with the Hamburg merchant and councillor Flemming, who was in cahoots with Engelhaar and has incurred the same guilt as he."

"Gentlemen! Spilt milk won't find its way back into the jug just because we argue about who was to blame!" Mayor Vogeler turned away, took Eberhard a few steps to one side.

He whispered heatedly to him: “Moellendorff! For heaven’s sake, can’t you see what difficulties these councillors have just to be here at all? We ought to give them great credit for setting off so quickly, in the hope of perhaps still saving your cousin’s life! So, for God’s sake, be quiet!”

Eberhard snorted reluctantly, but then nodded and at the same time crossed his arms over his chest.

Satisfied, the mayor turned back to the Lübeck councillors: “Gentlemen, you said you were also authorised to negotiate the treaty between our cities on how we might make the country roads between Hamburg and Lübeck safer again?”

“Yes. That is correct.” The Lübeck councillors, too, were keen to emphasise the common ground between the two cities.

“Come on, Melissa, let’s go!” Eberhard gently took her by the arm and led her out of the town hall: “It makes me sick when they start with their polite, diplomatic subterfuges. We’re out of place here.”

“Eberhard,...”

“Yes, I already know. Marie sent a messenger to my office with the news.” He took Melissa in his strong arms, as if he wanted to protect his cousin from the harshness of the world.

“Hopefully, that Engelhaar was the last of those who refuse to understand that the principles of the old Hanseatic League no longer apply. We’re now thinking on a grander scale, and he’s brought about his own downfall.” He stroked Melissa’s hair comfortingly. “Just think of all the things your husband has supported, initiated and helped bring about during the thirty years he sat on the council. There has scarcely been another period in this city’s history in which so much has been changed and set in motion: the new municipal law, imperial freedom, our sovereignty over the Elbe, the Hamburg Bank,

and the city fortifications, thanks to which we shall remain an island of peace amidst the storm of the looming war. What more could one ask for?"

Melissa pulled away from his embrace and looked at him thoughtfully. "But it's just as Albrecht always said: 'These are merely the foundations we have laid. Those who come after us will need their own strength and the aid of Mercury to build upon these foundations, to make the seed we have sown grow and flourish, and to bring in a harvest worthy of this city.'"

"Do you think he was a dreamer?"

"No, Eberhard, Albrecht was a realist. He knew that you need visions to inspire people."

EXPLANATORY NOTES

Admiralty: The expansion of maritime trade, the increase in legal disputes and the raids by privateers called for an institution in Hamburg dedicated exclusively to maritime trade and seafaring: the Hamburg Admiralty. In the preamble to the 'Admiralty Constitution', Section 1 states: 'The honourable College of the Hamburg Admiralty was established in 1623 by His Excellency Council, at the request of the Honourable Merchants' Guild, to which a public endorsement was added at the Council and Citizens' Convention of 12 February, for the administration of justice in maritime matters, the safeguarding of maritime navigation, and the enforcement of the most excellent regulations on the Elbe, from the city out to the sea."

Altona: Just 'a musket shot' away from Hamburg, there are several versions of how it came to be named. Originally an insignificant *village* inhabited by fishermen, it was elevated to the status of *a market town* in 1603. Following the death of the last Count of Schaumburg (1640), the area was annexed by the King of Denmark, who granted Altona *town* rights in 1664. In deliberate contrast to Hamburg, the Counts of Schaumburg had already permitted freedom of religion and trade within the (then) Altona **Freedom**.

Berenberg: The oldest firm in Hamburg still in existence today (Berenberg Bank). Its business activities have been documented since 1590, having begun with the brothers Hans (1561–1626) and Paul Berenberg (1566–1645). They ran a cloth trading business as well as general import and export operations.

In 1605, they signed the contract concluded between the Hamburg City Council and the Dutch families. Rudolf Berenberg (1680–1746) was already a city senator, and from the beginning of the 18th century, the Berenbergs became increasingly active in the acceptance, discount and mortgage businesses.

Mayors: Until the constitutional reform of 1860, four mayors were elected in Hamburg from among the councillors. Two of them, alternating annually, were 'active' mayors (i.e. they held office), whilst the other two
'sitting' mayors (i.e. their office was suspended). There were no regulations governing the term of office, so there were mayors who held office for more than thirty years. It became customary for one merchant and a lawyer served as 'active mayors'.

Citizenship: Until the 19th century, a distinction was made – based on the amount of citizenship tax paid – between full citizenship and limited citizenship. Those with full citizenship enjoyed the privileges of being eligible for appointment to the council (politically significant), using the municipal scales (important for merchants) and hunting in the Hamburg forests (a pastime). Around 80 per cent of the city's inhabitants did not possess citizenship and were regarded as **'protected subjects'** in the sense of an authority (appointed by God).

Fund for the 'Eighths': To raise the ransom for the release of Hamburg captains and helmsmen captured by pirates (off the coast of North Africa), this fund was established in 1622; members were required to pay a contribution of eight reales in pesos into it before setting sail. As this contribution was too high for ordinary seamen, the **'Slave Fund'** was established in 1624, with contributions deducted directly from the wages of the crews of Hamburg ships.

Frederick III, Duke of Holstein-Gottorf (reigned 1616–1659). In contrast to his father, who remained loyal to the Danish crown, he pursued a policy of close cooperation with Sweden. His reign marked the high point in the history of the Gottorf court in Schleswig, which he developed into a cultural and social centre.

Gustav II Adolf (1594–1632), King of Sweden (from 1611). Crowned king at the age of seventeen, he inherited three wars from his father: the Kalmar War against Denmark, the war against Russia and the war against Poland. He emerged victorious from all three. Through the Articles of War (1621), he established an army that was, at its core, purely Swedish, and played a leading role in repelling the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The successes of the imperial troops forced him to intervene in the Thirty Years' War, and he met his death in 1632 at the Battle of Lützen.

Herwardeshude: In 1246, Countess Heilwig von Schauenburg founded the Cistercian convent 'In valle virginum' in Herwardeshude (on the site of today's Fischmarkt). In 1295, it was relocated from the Elbe to the Alster. From the 14th century onwards, the surrounding villages of Ohlsdorf, Barmbek, Bramfeld, Borstel, Eimsbüttel, Niendorf, Eppendorf and Winterhude belonged to the convent. In 1529, following the expulsion of the 'false brides of God', the nuns were housed in St Johannis Convent (now Rathausmarkt), which was secularised in 1536 to become a Protestant convent for nuns. In 1837, a new building (on what is now Klosterwall) was erected, which was sold to the Finance Committee in 1911 for 2.5 million gold marks. The new building in Eppendorf, which cost 1.8 million, has been the convent's headquarters ever since. In 1866, the convent sold the Herwardeshude estate for four million to a consortium, which developed the Harvestehude district there.

Hospital of the Holy Spirit: In 1227, Count Adolph IV of Schauenburg built the Convent of St Mary Magdalene (today: Adolphsplatz and the Stock Exchange) to fulfil a vow (victory

in battle). Attached to the convent was a hospital which, following demolition, relocation, destruction and reconstruction, is now a care home in the Alstertal.

Corresponding Hanseatic cities: In the second half of the 16th century, Bremen in particular sought to develop the Hanseatic League from an economic association of interests into a political and military defence alliance. Only loyal and reliable cities were to be members of this alliance. Following protracted negotiations, on 2 August 1607 the six Hanseatic cities of Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen, Lüneburg, Magdeburg and Braunschweig joined together to form the Alliance of Corresponding Hanseatic Cities. In 1608, Count Friedrich zu Solms-Laubach was appointed as the alliance's joint commander-in-chief; his duties included the renewal of the cities' fortifications. However, this external alliance did not mean that internal disputes (e.g. between Magdeburg and Hamburg over staple rights) had been resolved.

Mennonites: A Protestant religious community founded in the 16th century by Menno Simons, which rejects state coercion in matters of faith, military service and the taking of oaths. Not tolerated by the Lutherans in Hamburg, they settled outside the city in Altona from around 1590. There, in 1601, they were granted permission to establish a congregation and were one of the driving forces behind Altona's growth and prosperity. Best-known names: Van der Smissen, Roosen, Beets, Linnich.

Lower Court: Hamburg's judicial system was under the authority of the City Council. The Lower Court was the court of first instance; the Council itself, as **the High Court**, was the court of second instance and the court of appeal. The Lower Court building stood right next to the Town Hall until the

great city fire of 1842. It comprised two councillors as judges (First and Second Praetor), the bailiff and eight or eleven citizens as lay judges.

Oxenstierna, Axel (1583–1654), Count. A member of theImperial Council, he became the driving force behind internal reforms in Sweden in his capacity as Swedish Chancellor (1612–1654). Following the death of King Gustav II Adolf, he remained the leading force in Swedish politics, which secured significant territorial gains in the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and the Peace of Brömsebro (1645) (Western Pomerania, Wismar, Bremen and Verden / Gotland, Ösel, Jämtland and Halland). He is regarded as one of Sweden's most significant statesmen.

Paracelsus (1493–1541), whose real name was Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim. A physician, natural philosopher, philosopher and theologian who vehemently opposed the classical theory of the four humours. To explain the causes of disease, he sought chemical processes within the body. Driven by a deep piety, however, he saw love as the fundamental basis of the art of healing.

Hamburg's city fortifications: as early as 1531 to 1549, the old ramparts were renovated and extended (Neuer Wall). When threats became apparent at the beginning of the 17th century (the Thirty Years' War began in 1618), it was decided to construct a'New Fortifications' to be built. The city treasurers had built up reserves, and the citizens agreed not only to pay special taxes ('Grabengeld') but also to perform 'manual labour', i.e. to help with the work themselves. They did so for ten years, one day a week. These city fortifications, which also incorporated the 'Neustadt' into the city's defences, had a radius of around 1,150 metres and consisted of an earthen rampart 8 to 10 metres high. Twenty-two bastions and seve-

ral outworks were equipped with a total of 300 cannons. Built between 1615 and 1625, it secured the city of Hamburg an impregnable position during the Thirty Years' War, from which the city was spared. Partially dismantled in the 19th century, it became the route for the railway tracks through the city.

Valckenbourgh, Jan van (1575–1625). A Dutch engineer who travelled through Germany and the Netherlands (Bremen, Emden, Jülich, Braunschweig, Ulm, Stralsund, Rostock) to renovate or completely rebuild the town fortifications there. Hamburg owes the 'Neue Werke' (New Fortifications) of 1615–1625 to his design and supervision of their construction. Built using what was then the most modern technology—a pure earthen rampart—they protected the city from the ravages of war for around two centuries.

Vogeler, Hieronymus. A Hamburg diplomat who travelled to several royal courts (Madrid, London, Vienna, Copenhagen) to represent Hamburg's interests. He held the office of mayor for thirty-three years (1609–1642) and was honoured by the Emperor with a personal letter of ennoblement in recognition of his services.

Wedde: The main police authority in Hamburg, which existed from the Middle Ages (until the 19th century) and was headed by four councillors.

Wullenwever, Jürgen (1492–1537): A native of Hamburg, he became mayor of Lübeck in 1533 as the leader of a radical popular movement. Despite his partly successful efforts to restore Lübeck's supremacy in the Baltic Sea, he was deposed in 1535 following a ruling by the Imperial Chamber Court calling for the restoration of the patrician order and at the request of several Hanseatic cities; whilst on the run, he was executed in 1537 after a dubious trial.