

JGH Hoppmann

THE ASTROLOGER

A downright untruthful affair

Thriller

ArsAstrologica



dedicated to Basia

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PROLOGUE

The Presidium of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg
hands over to the
"Archives du Conseil de l'Europe"
the following volume with the explicit note
"Strictement Confidentiel".

These are the eyewitness accounts of a
disgraced former police student and his fiancée,
a bakery sales assistant with a criminal record.

The documents are of global political relevance
and require a thorough "vérification de la véracité"
with regard to the life and work
of the legendary astrologer Scultetus.

GREAT RADIANCE

29.12.2019 Sun



UPPER LUSATIA

05:58 Rothenburg

Snow blows over the display, settling like icing sugar on freshly baked cinnamon stars, on the soft crusty rolls, the wholemeal bread and rock-hard salt particles. Thick clouds of condensation drift out of the nostrils of the girl behind the counter. She flattens her scarf tighter around her slender neck, buttons her cardigan over her flowery apron. A few little spots, not so visible in the winter air, gleam on her forehead and cheeks.

A face without freckles is like the moon without stars, says her lover. Her eyes are resembling suns and her naked fingertips are like curious mice as they peek out of the cut-off woollen socks she wears as gloves.

The emergency lighting comes on at the front of the Saxony Police College. Max brings out a fresh cappuccino from the academy, because a proper coffee machine in the bakery van is still in the planning stage.

"Careful, Evi, it's hot!"

"Thank you. Here's a bag of pastries for today's duties. The Great European Planet Festival. Bodyguard for the night."

"Nope. Escorting a celebrity from Berlin to Dresden. You can come too. A voucher for the hotel, bed and breakfast included and a f ticket with access to the VIP lounge."

"You're nuts, Max!"

"Yep."

"The tickets are in your name!"

"No problem. In the evening we can go to the party, then afterwards ... "

"Me with my pimples among all those celebrities?"

"A face without ... "

"Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Three hundred years since the dream wedding of 1719. Did you know how many children that Saxon prince made for his princess?"

"Fifteen."

"We need to talk."

"About what?"

Evi's face gets red. All her freckles seem to fade away.

Headlights flash. A heavy, chrome-plated luxury car draws up. The lady behind the wheel has put on blood-red lipstick. Provocative makeup encircles her eyes. She gets out, smiles and waves the car keys. Beneath her opulent Persian lamb coat lurks an elegant black business dress, unusually for this time of year. She cuts an amazing figure.

Max reaches for the pastry bag without looking at Evi.

"Wow! A VW Phaeton GP4 from the Transparent Factory in Dresden. Fuel injected. 6 litres displacement. 12 cylinders, 450 hp at 6050 revs. See you later!"

The fair lady clocks the kiss Evi blows after him. She slides in on the passenger side. Her skirt rides up, revealing suspender stockings and tanned thighs fresh from the solarium.

The police student revs up the engine and sets off on his assignment. Rolling grit splatters against the rusty bakery truck. Wide-walled tread tyres knead the black asphalt. The red tail lights speed away into the bushy pine forests.

BERLIN 07:42

City Motorway, Sonnenallee Exit

The festival director, Aurora Celestico, is leafing through her correspondence. Every now and then, she leans over to the central console and changes station on the radio. As she does, her suit jacket flies open and Max can't resist lowering his gaze towards her lush décolletage. She acknowledges with a frivolous smile, raises her arm and brushes her wild hair behind her ear. The scent of perfume spreads, mixed with the smell of armpit sweat.

She signs her papers with a gold-coloured pen. Pink painted fingernails. Well-kept hands, no wedding ring. A quiet whoop as a purple banknote falls out of a transshipment.

"500 Euros from the European Central Bank. The covering letter, a stamped-addressed envelope - oh, how it smells! - and this." The lady holds out a drawing to her bodyguard: symbols connected by colourful strokes, characters and numbers. "Do you have a clue what this is, young man?"

"Shure. A horoscope. Got one too."

She caresses with her fingertips over the lines. Sucks on the gold cap of her pen. Looks deeply into Max's eyes.

"Original from India?"

"Yeah. But ... "

The festival manager smiles mischievously.

"This one shows the cash introduction of the Euro: January 1st 2002, Frankfurt (Main). Venus at the celestial limb and Priapos hidden in the twelfth house. The cover letter says 'Do interpret according to the Gorbachev method.' Do you want to? Then it's your money."

"Nope. I ..."

"You will learn how to soon. The internship just has begun."

"Sorry, but Evi is coming to Dresden. Short-term'll be over."

"The little salesgirl in the vintage car? How cute!"

Aurora Celestico shines a thousand times brighter than the tired winter sun. She sucks at her gold pencil in thoughtfulness. Here and there she leaves comments on the page with elegant handwriting, folds it and slides it into the almond-scented envelope. The banknote disappears in the warm hollow of her neckline.

"Look, copper boy! A letterbox out there. Do you see it? Fine. Just stop for a moment and I'll be right back. Then it's off to Alexanderplatz. Eight o'clock sharp we're going to pick up Scultetus, our star guest. At the World Time Clock, I'm so excited!" The festival boss grabs the letter, gets out and turns around once more. "You'll get along wonderfully. I'm sure of it."

With swaying hips, she saunters to the letterbox. She looks perkily over her shoulder and catches Max admiring her bum. She licks the rubber lining of the envelope. Tapes it shut and pushes it through the slit. Prances off lightly. Makes teasing motions. Winks frivolously. Waves the golden pen like crazy. Grimaces, sticking out her tongue.

Spits foam.

Collapses.

"Fuck!"

The police student on his short-term practical training tears off her seatbelt and rushes out of the car. She convulses. Spits bloody foam. Clutches him. Pushes up his jumper sleeve. Writes numbers and digits in a jumbled sequence on his arm with a gold

pen. Turns pale. Can hardly move her lips. Begs Max in a breaking voice to protect Scultetus.

Her pupils tilt back.

With hazard lights on and a fist on the horn, it's off through the city traffic, the high-rise block of Charity-University Medicine Berlin in view. Jam, road works. Mounting the kerb. A hubcap pops off. The oval roof of the emergency room.

Max carries Aurora Celestico in his arms. Shouts at the reception staff. "Colleagues will come soon", they say. Phones ring and no one answers. Finally the paramedics. Pushing him aside. Press a defibrillator to Aurora's beautiful breasts, heavy as an iron. Her limp body rears up – then collapses. Cardiac massage. Breathing mask. Ms. Aurora Piacellis make-up smudges into a clown's grimace. Whistling in the shock generator. Charging for next electric shock. Seizing again. More oxygen! Again heart massage – until the ribs crack.

Max sneaks away. None of it makes sense. Like back in the Afghanistan mission. Friendly fire. Air support with false coordinates. Two comrades got it in the ass and died. Field medic couldn't do anything about it. Shit happens.

UPPER LUSATIA

08:25 Rothenburg

Winter break at the police academy. All students back with their families for Christmas. Except for one doing his short-term internship, out there, somewhere.

The country road stretches out, seemingly deserted. The bread saleswoman watches a limping figure, approaching from the distance in slow motion. It takes half an eternity to the old chicken woman to get to the bakery truck.

Silence and yawning emptiness. Almost unbearable for Evi, just coming from European city Frankfurt/Oder, used to nicking

bits and pieces there from shops in the course of a day, ending in cool chases with the store detectives, before smuggling her takings over the German-Polish Oder Bridge, keeping a constant lookout for the border guards. What a thrill! You have to be wide awake! But here in this a rural area where they once in WW2 blew up all bridges crossing Lusatian Neisse, you can sleep all day. Nothing going on now. Boring as hell!

"Stale bread for the chickens, madam? Let's see what we have today, dear Lady. A couple of soft crusty to go with it? My great-grandmother's secret recipe! Baked slowly at low heat. All for one Euro. And, because it's Christmas, three sachets of Brause Plus for the grandchildren. Original East German product from the Good old GDR! Lick it up with your tongue. Tickles nicely. Great fun!"

The old farmer's wife from the chicken farm points her nibbled index finger at Evi's blotchy cheeks. "Is that from drugs?" She tears open the effervescent sachet and lets the white powder trickle into the snow.

"You're not from round here, don't you."

Evi turns as white as a sheet. Her pimples stand out even more.

"Frankfurt, not the rich one in the Stat of Hessia, but the poor one at the border to Poland. But my friend, he's from the Golden West!"

"Dark sky, the great one?"

"Yes, yes. The Great Bear and the Little Bear and lots of other signs of the zodiac. All this is on offer at the Great European Planet Festival in Dresden. Look, the voucher for all events. Including hotel accommodation! A present from my lover."

"Dark morning, great car?"

"Oh, you mean the festival director's Phaeton. Great vehicle, isn't it? A friend of mine went of with her, as her bodyguard."

"Something on the police radio, they say. Woman dead. Driver – presume your buddy – on the run."

Hastily, a coin is dropped onto the counter. Evi watches its donor dash away. Chicken walk. Without Max, everything is terribly lonely here. She has only known him for a fortnight.

Suddenly he was there, like falling from heaven. Buying traditional savoury biscuits. Staring at her with wide open eyes. Chomping away at the bone-hard pastries as if they were nothing. Salt buns, that's decoration for Christmas, Easter, Sorbian bird weddings here in Upper Lusatia, far away from Frankfurt/Oder. She asked if there was anything else. As answer he stammered something about car quartet, over at his room in the academy. Car quartets and gun magazines. That's all he said. Turned his luscious lips inwards as if to undo his special offer. She had never played trump cards before, Evi said. Will finished work at four p.m. Four o'clock sharp, he was back. Her breasts were on fire, as always on her fertile days. At the gate of the police academy, they checked her identity card. Compared it with her face. Well, it matched just fine. Fortunately, they didn't check her criminal record

Up in his room, her love-to-be had the nerve to present his stupid military magazines. Not with her around! With a single move, she undid his belt buckle, unzipped him and slipped her own woollen trousers down to her Cossack boots, pushed him backwards onto the bed, clamped the hem of her flowery work apron between her teeth and gave him riding lessons.

Love-to-be sprung into action powerfully and precisely, like a sewing machine, even in a supine position with two trump cards and a toy model of a World War II tank howitzer in-between. After three minutes he shot full magazine and her bells rang.

Fire broke out. She brushed clothes off her body. Fed him with cinnamon cookies to regain his strength. Time to look around. No family photos anywhere, no selfies with any smart chicks or stuff like that.

A colourful drawing, stuck to the wall with adhesive tape, tattered, yellowed and greyed: The sky in India, 29 years ago, on the day of his birth, astronomically correct, love-to-be explained. Mumbo jumbo. Max was born in a hippie commune. His mother had abandoned him. Tourists wanted to buy him: a tax official and his wife, a part-time secondary school teacher, both from the city of Bremen passing through. Two hundred Deutschmarks, or 102 Euros and 26 cents in today's money, including a fake birth certificate to save the time-consuming adoption formalities. Bargain price.

In West Germany, the holiday souvenir from India sprouted pitch-black bristles from its previously bald skull. His surrogate mother had wanted a curly blonde angel and insisted on returning this bad buy. Her husband was not so keen. From a tax point of view, a voluntary declaration of child fraud was not recommended: Falsification of documents, possibly an official complaint. His job promotion was at stake. In the worst case scenario, the civil service would insist on the repayment of their preferential loan for their semi-detached house.

This substitute „dad“, a reserve officer of Deutsche Bundeswehr, suggested that the boy be given up to the troops a.s.a.p. As a regular soldier, he would soon be out of the house. So instead of a pacifier, the infant was given a rubber knife and, as soon as he could walk, plastic knight's armour and water pistols. Later then a video console with ego shooter and war games. His favourite was Top Trumps, especially car quartet. As long as his surrogate father won, he deigned to play with him.

It was cool at the troops. Real camaraderie, cohesion, foreign missions. First Kosovo, then Afghanistan. Special Forces Command, KSK. Good times. Well, the occasional Taliban ambush plus friendly fire. Maybe he should have taken better care of his comrades. After that, post-traumatic stress disorder, unfit for military service.

When he showed up in Bremen again after rehab in the army, surrogate parents panicked. They called around to their contacts and quickly got rid of him. Last summer the police school in Leipzig, now the police academy here in Rothenburg, in the middle of nowhere.

Hippies from India are really cool, Evi purred and stroked his little policeman. The limp sausage dutifully went into guarded attention. Reserve magazine are reloaded, ready for the next round! This time she let him ride until the next break.

And Evi? She didn't tell him about the drug smuggling from Stubice in Poland and her criminal record in Frankfurt (Oder) straight away. Why should she? Her love-to-be didn't ask and didn't make a fuss about it. What a pleasure! They fucked and talked half the night. Talking and fucking. The cute police student was full of juice and the baker's girl got the chance to try out some of her S&M tricks.

Afterwards, the snowed-up bakery truck outside in the country lane need some coaxing to get started again.

In Great-Granny's house in the forest village, she kneaded as if in a trance. Rolling little yeast balls out of pre-swollen dough, with a silly little song on her lips. The special slow recipe for buns with a soft crust. Crackling logs lit up in the oven. Replacing again and again, dreaming a little while doing it.

Evi stopped with the firewood when Great-Granny came coughing into the smoky kitchen at five a.m. It took a while to scrape the pitch-black charred mess out of the oven. Then she realized: The scoundrel had stolen her heart!

From then on, Max waited for her every morning in the dark on the country road. Helped her pull up the heavy shutters of the bakery trailer. Put a thermos of black coffee on the counter, made in his student digs. Evi added pieces of lucky night sugar-cubes, fresh cream on top, and cinnamon stars. Breakfast for two under a starry winter sky. After the seminars in the after-

noon he was back to take her up to his room: for trump cards and the other stuff, as usual.

Here and now in the middle of nowhere without him. Free ticket for the Planet Festival. Evi won't let the chicken woman drive her crazy. No, she won't! She's looking forward to a day in Dresden. And to a nice night together in a luxury hotel.

BERLIN 08:30

World Time Clock at Alexanderplatz

Jupiter and Uranus have hats made of snowflakes. The icy planetary machinery squeaks and jerks. It turns laboriously over the hour ring. The hand is at thirteen o'clock in India, where he was born; twelve o'clock in Afghanistan, where his best comrades were killed; and half past ten in Iraq, where a few more of them were hired as mercenaries after their discharge. Good money, bad chances of survival. Tinnitus rings in his ears. Combat stress reaction. He'll get over it in time, according to the rehab centre. He must stay calm.

Beneath the time zone band of the world clock, some washed-out party dudes are swigging Lucky Experience beer, cracking jokes about a wobbly old tramp clutching a cloth bag and shivering with cold. "Take care of Scultetus," Aurora Celestico had begged him not half an hour ago. Now she isn't any more. And no sign of the star guest anywhere. Someone complains that the VW Phaeton is too close to the tram track. Travellers from the Alexanderplatz long-distance train station push wheeled suitcases to the underground station Over by the Saturn media store's delivery entrance a Ford Galaxy. White smoke spews from the exhaust. Behind the wheel a guy with a broad beard. Wasn't he right behind them on the city motorway? Don't get paranoid. Keep your nerve!

Max pops into a snack bar under a viaduct arch of the light rail. One Currywurst, please! What to drink with it? Berliner Weise with a shot? Yeah. Add a touch of raspberry syrup to the sour beer. Chop the sausage into manageable pieces. Add ketchup and yellow powder, and you've got a city breakfast. Tastes good. Hailstones pelt against the windows of the bar. Over there, under the world clock, the lonely guy with the jelly bag, no one else. The radio behind the counter plays "Sunshine Lady".

His arm is itching. He wants to scratch it. He pauses and rolls up his sleeve:

855 PACCAN 00218497 E 62458887 ALYA 442

Funny. Was a business card in the car. Gold intaglio printing on thick, sturdy cardboard. Max dials the number, switches to hands-free and dips his chips in the curry sauce.

An oily voice, Austrian, could be old Emperor Franz Joseph, as he sounds.

"Yes, please?"

"Is that the planet festival?"

"Absolutely right. You are talking to Magister iur. rer. soc. oec. Jovis Morgenstern, Master of Law and Economics, Artistic Director of the Great European Planetary Festival. As is my pleasure and duty - although my management function at the European Central Bank must rest ad interim."

"Listen ... "

"No, you listen! Impatience and the folly of youth abound from the sound from your voice. And yet, one should pause for a breath of eternity. It was bright and radiant when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe saw the light of day. As he wrote in 'Poetry and Truth', from which I will quote briefly in view of your pestering, standing toe to toe, so to speak.

Like the day that gave you to the world,

*the sun stood in greeting of the planets,
prospering at once, again and again,
according to their law to which you started.
You have to be like that, you can't escape.*

Thus will it lead you on, O mysterious youth, pressing me. May I ask you a humble question: Who revealed my private number to you?

"The festival boss, Celestico."

"Aurora! Are you her gallant? Still green behind the ears, if you'll allow me the bon mot, and shining with such favour."

"Target Scultetus: Request personal description."

"Well, how does he look, our master of all? Always elegantly dressed, as if for the Viennese Court Ball. The last time we met was in the Britzer Garden in Berlin. Lovely grounds, but no comparison to the Grand Parterre at Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna. I digress. Where were we? Oh yes: Scultetus came to Britzer Garden with a Pullman limousine and chauffeur, uttering a 'Pop-pycock' when it didn't suit him, wore a light summer suit. Silk or combed wool? Don't ask me, Mr. Trainee Policeman. As I said, stretch limo ... "

"Other features, scars, tattoos, etc.?"

"Why don't you ask Ms. Celestico? She insisted on picking up the master personally. You know, that lady is a blessing. I confess, I'm overwhelmed by the minutiae. She does everything for me. Of course, I don't let her take away my choice of musicians, opera performances and Semper Opera concerts. Speaking of 'taking': You must have taken her heart by storm. My compliments! Aurora insisted on you as a companion, by name."

"Nope. Never seen her before."

"A rogue! Like Cherubino, the courtier in 'The Marriage of Figaro', he climbs to the highest offices on the strength of his powers of seduction. The young cavalier enjoys protection and keeps quiet. By the way, my friend Swaro from Europol, who

arranged your police internship, would like to know where exactly you are at this moment. I heard something unwholesome happened. Did you betray hidden Masonic knowledge, like Wolfgang Amadeus in 'The Magic Flute'?"

It continues to snow outside. At the world clock, a distinguished gentleman in a fur cap, looking around in all directions. The broad-bearded guy in the Galaxy Ford is watching him too, through binoculars. A little girl with a bobble hat runs up, his mother with a pram follows. Happily family reunion. False alarm.

Tram's coming. Aurora Celestico's heavy carriage has to leave the track. Max lets the opera lover prattle on. The mobile phone is lying there still, there on the counter. At the world clock, he knocks over the shaky old man with the cloth bag, being all white from the snow, chattering teeth from the cold.

"Here, mate. Sit down there and warm up. Buy some Currywurst and chips."

The police student on short-term internship slips him ten Euros, carefully bending his ice-cold fingers around the bank note, and pushes him with gentle pressure towards the snack bar.

"Go on, you'll freeze to death!"

Old man mumbles a feeble "Poppycok" and pads off. A cloud of snow makes him disappear. The tram's bell rings. Doesn't go any further.

Max stops, car keys already in his hand. Stares into the mist of snowflakes. Runs as if for his life back to the chip shop.

"Let the Sunshine in" by Moody Blues on the radio behind the counter. Frozen old man from the world time clock is drooling in anticipation of his sausage and chips. Magister what the fuck Jovis Morgenstern still croaking from the hands-free mobile phone.

" ... and the baritone intones 'Whosoever overcomes the terror of death, swings himself out of the earth heavenwards'. Young people must be introduced to high culture carefully."

Max fishes a crumpled ID card out of the old man's dingy jacket pocket.

"Civil status check."

Austrian goes on lecturing as if he hadn't listened.

"It's Sarastro, from The Magic Flute. Buy yourself an opera guide if you're overwhelmed! Then don't ask such stupid questions."

"Repeat: Personal status query. Schulz, Bertold, 10.1.1940 Breslau."

A happy groan in the hearing.

"Yes, there you have him, our master. Bourgeois Schulz becomes Scultetus, gräzisiert nach Humanistenart, if you know what I mean."

"No chauffeur or stretch limo, pretty much scrapped."

"Don't make it too complicated, Trainee Officer. By the way, you on the wanted list, now. My good friend Swaro from Interpol just told me, the telephone we use to communicate has been traced. Stay where you are, Auxiliary Policeman!"

"Nope."

The police student catches his mobile phone off the net and pays for his capital city breakfast. He grabs the old one by the collar of his shirt and takes him away – his sausage and chips and a bag of Wiggles too. Outside beside the Alexanderplatz World Clock the tram bells are ringing off the hook. Angry passengers crowd around Celstico's car. An outraged city lady's doggy demonstratively lifts its leg on the wing. Max starts the powerful engine and sets the wheels spinning. Little mutt squeals in panic. Grubby old man in the passenger seat, dressed in dignified old white, disposes of his chips and flies over the walnut veneer

dashboard with his ketchup and mayo. The whole person is stinking. Max switches off the seat heating as a precaution.

Ford Galaxy breathing down their necks. Accelerating, changing lanes, ignoring blood-red traffic lights, turning sharply, across icy green spaces. VW Phaeton's permanent all-wheel drive shows its superiority and phenomenal acceleration values on the city motorway. Up, up and away!

UPPER LUSATIA

08:38 Rothenburg

The so called "Ello" is a cosy fellow. Evi enjoys chugging with him along the country road at a walking pace. To the right and left, meadows and fields. Nature is in hibernation under a thick blanket of snow. The crunch of the ice breaking in the frozen puddles and the tyres digging through the ruts. This car will soon be sixty years old. It was specially built by the Publicly Owned Enterprise "Robur", situated at the foot of the Lusatian mountains. It's about time for official driver's ed. But who is going to check her on these empty roads? Max has a license, but ... Although the bakery assistant's love for her hero is boundless, there are discrepancies on assessing his driving skills.

Once she let him take the wheel. Never again! As soon as he had learned the trick with the intermediate throttle when shifting gears, he raced the Ello round the rough country lanes at eighty kilometres an hour. Pieces of salt dough, cinnamon stars, quark pockets and softly baked rolls flew in confusion. The cute little police student raved on about off-road rallies with military trucks from Faizabad to Kunduz.

If you're too slow, the Taliban shoot you down with their bazookas, he explained. Why not boosting the three-and-a-half-litre capacity of Great-Granny's truck with an exhaust gas turbo-

charger? No problem. All you need to do is fit a rattle-proof cake crate in the back.

She'd think it about it, Evi said und mentioned, that there's slidely a difference between Afghanistan and Lover Silesia. Then, she kicked him out—just in time before the axle would break. Poor Max had to walk all the way back to the police academy. But, the next morning, he was came to the bakery van. He placed a vintage truck magazine on the counter. There: Turbo carburettor, already ordered. Will double the horsepower of LO 2500, nickname Ello. Installation? Definitely no problem for his father's son – beside doesn't know anything about he real father.

Evi could have eaten him right then and there, along with all those extra soft rolls behnid the counter on the floor.

There's even an automotive head unit inside the Ello: A 130-CCIR Stern Transit, built something around seventy years ago in good – or maybe bad – old communism. Takes time til the Valve amp has full power. Here in the outback there's lot of time. Sometimes it can pick up FM, but mostly it whistles about on medium wave. On the news, there is something about refugees and an agency called "Frontex". Hard to tell for sure. Thousands of winter vacationers are strandet with their cars in the Alps thanks to an avalanche alert, the announcer says in a hideously creaky voice. He doesn't mention any deaths in Berlin or hit-and-runs.

Crossing into Sorbian Pond Land, Evi moves in a gigantic radio silence. Mobile phone reception impossible. No access to WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, SMS or email. No first-person shooter crazies, no permanent phone calls like in Frankfurt or Ślubice on the other side of river Oder. No traffic lights here, buses or trams. When things would had got too hot last month and her gangser mates oder there ended up in jail, she had thrown her expensive smartphone into from the bridge between Poland and Germany and fled to her great-grandmother here in no mans land.