

THE TOWER

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To Eleonora and Emiliano

1

“Any sign yet?” asked Peter Simms, glancing up from his phone at the Arrivals gate.

“No, Mr Peter. Not yet,” replied the driver, a young Arab with short black hair and moustache. He was holding a board with an Italian name scribbled on it, which he lifted above the wall of bodies in front of him as a few more passengers straggled out into the main hall of Amman airport.

“It’s absurd. Her plane landed an hour ago, and she still hasn’t come out.”

“Maybe queue at passport control, Mr Peter.”

“Yeah.” He looked at his watch, heaved a sigh and shook his head. Just as he was lowering his gaze back onto his phone, his eyes picked out a slim, tanned figure. Dark hair peeping from under her hat, tinted glasses pushed upwards for a moment as she scanned the room, she was his age or a little younger, maybe early thirties. Beside her, a brown-uniformed porter was pushing her trolley, overloaded with luggage and duty-free bags. She looked left and right. “There,” she said, pointing, and waved her hand.

“She here, Mr Peter,” the young Arab said, turning a smiling face.

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Giulia Ripetti,” she said as she approached. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Peter Simms.”

“I’m Majed, Miss Julia. I go and take the car. You wait there outside with Mr Peter, OK?”

Majed exchanged a few words with the porter, giving him a crumpled note as he dashed out.

Peter took a sideways look at her as she hunched over to put her passport in one of her bags. So this was his assistant – the philologist, the Latin specialist, the literary scholar. He’d thought this category of people only came in gargoyled bodies wearing thick-framed spectacles. He was not disappointed, of course – but he was sorry to be wearing a T-shirt, knee-length shorts and flip-flops.

Giulia took off her hat and glasses, and ran a hand through her hair.

“It’s hot, eh? Even in September.”

“I know. That’s Jordan for you.”

“It’s hot also in Rome. But not so hot. So you are the investigator? I’ll work with you?”

“Yes.”

“You live here?” she asked, glancing at the small leather case at his feet.

“Me?” He felt his cheeks go hot. “No. I’ve just arrived too... you know... I live in London.”

“Ah, OK.”

He cleared his throat. “You’re certainly planning to stay for a while?” he said, with a smile and a little jerk of the head towards the pile of suitcases on her trolley.

“What? Oh, I see.”

Minutes passed. Car after car rolled by in front of them, until a faded-red Lada 21 screeched to a stop by the kerb and Majed jumped out.

“Jesus H.,” said Peter, looking at the near-wreck as Giulia raised her eyebrows.

“Sorree. Sorree,” Majed said. “Company car broken this afternoon. So I come with wife’s uncle car. Sorree.”

He opened the boot as the porter started to dismantle Giulia’s luggage pile.

“Wait, wait, wait,” called Peter, raising a hand. “Look.” A makeshift repair to a loose corner of the number plate had resulted in a sharp, rusty screw sticking out three inches inside the trunk. “Don’t damage the cases.”

“No problem, no problem,” said the porter, wedging the luggage in the boot one piece at a time. Peter shoved his suitcase in, as far as possible from the screw.

Soon they were out of Queen Alia Airport and onto the long stretch of road that cuts across the desert plain surrounding the city. They had only been driving a few minutes when the glow of a steep, truncated cone appeared on their right-hand side.

“Is that it?” said Peter, who was sitting in the passenger’s seat. Majed looked to his right. “Yes, Mr Peter.”

“And what do you call it? I mean – in your language.”

“What we call it? We call it ‘Al-Burj’.”

“*Al... Boorsch*. The Tower.”

“Yes, Mr Peter. You know Arabic? *Hal tatakallamu alloghab al-arabiah?*”

“*Qaleelan*. I used to speak a few words. A long time ago. Now I’m a bit rusty. Do you know when they are going to complete it?”

“Al-Burj? Oh” – Majed leant over, taking his eyes off the road for an alarmingly long time – “perhaps two month, three month. Tower got big belly.” He made the money gesture. “Eat plenty of dollars from Saudi and Qatar. They build quick, before oil run out.” He gave a mad laugh and straightened up behind the wheel. “Many people don’t want Al-Burj. They say it’s bad for

Jordan, for Q'ran. Bring too much people from outside.” He lapsed into silence, although it was clear he wanted to say more.

Al-Burj... Peter stared at the Tower in the distance. It looked like a runway of lights in the sky. He had read somewhere that its height would be over a thousand metres – the tallest building in the world. But Majed was wrong if he thought that the money came only from Saudi Arabia and Qatar: it flowed from banks, from hedge funds, from private equities and from shareholders’ pockets all over the globe. That was the invisible sap pushing up this rootless, preposterous tree in the middle of the desert.

He turned around to ask Giulia whether she knew any Arabic, but she had dozed off. He was just settling back into his seat when a car from the right lurched across their path – “Jesus!” – and missed them by no more than a yard.

Majed shook his head. “Donkeys,” was his only comment. “These people like donkeys.”

When they arrived at the Grand Hyatt, Peter touched Giulia’s arm to wake her from her doze. As they got out, the hotel boy opened the boot and began hauling their luggage out. There was the fatal rip of leather giving way to sharp metal. Peter went round the back of the car to look at his suitcase, a survivor of trips to Tanzania, Zanzibar and Belize. Why? Why *his* suitcase?

“Sorree, sir,” the boy said, trying to patch the gash in the leather with his hand.

“Sorree, Mr Peter,” said Majed.

“Forget it.” He was angry, but less annoyed by the tear in his expensive travel bag than by the hint of *Schadenfreude* in Giulia’s smile of sympathy. “It’s OK,” he said, as the hotel boy flapped and flustered. “Majed, we’ll see you in half an hour. Just give us time to take a shower and destroy a burger.”

“Yes, Mr Peter.”

And he flip-flopped towards the main revolving door, followed by Giulia and the contrite-looking boy pulling their luggage on a trolley.

The meeting was in a top-floor suite at Le Royal, in Amman's Third Circle.

They were shown into the suite's study, where a man of around fifty – pudgy, nattily dressed, with gold-rimmed glasses, crimped black hair and a goatee – sat behind a mahogany desk, his head immersed in a folio-sized book. Peter was glad his only suit had suffered no damage from the suitcase fiasco, but looking at the elegant dress Giulia was wearing, he regretted his pea-green socks, brown belt and floral shirt.

“Thank you for being here,” their host said, rising to shake hands. “And sorry that it's so late. I wanted to meet you before you visit...”

“*Al-Boorsch*,” said Peter.

“Exactly. Will you take a seat please? Anything to drink? No?” He sat down after his guests. “Had a good journey in?”

“Very good,” Giulia replied.

“Super, Mr Al-Rafai,” said Peter. The late-evening flight, the hour-long wait for Giulia, the clapped-out jalopy, the long, drawn-out ripping of his suitcase. “Super. Thank you.”

“Good. Good. Well, first of all, I'd like to thank you both again for coming all the way to Jordan on this, ah, unusual assignment.” He closed his book – a stamp collector's album. “Have you been filled in on any of the details?”

“No,” said Giulia. “I got the letter from Amman University. All I know is that you need an expert on Giordano Bruno and his Latin works.”

“I know a little,” Peter added, “just what your lawyer mentioned to me on the phone.”

“Oh yes,” the man said, nodding, “my good friend, Henry Lancaster. We were at Westminster together, you know? Then Balliol. We play golf together from time to time.”

“He said there’s been a theft, a disappearance.”

“A theft, yes, of a priceless manuscript. *And* a disappearance. Of a man. You’ll find out much more tomorrow. I’ve summoned you here because I want to convey to you how important this is for me. You see” – he reopened his album with a slow gesture – “when you have assembled a collection, a collection such as mine, you don’t want to see any of its pieces vanish – especially if they’re rare or unique. That’s what keeps the collector awake at night: the fear that his most treasured possession might be... mutilated in this way.”

“Any idea who might be behind it?”

Al-Rafai closed his album again and smiled. “There are theories. There are always theories. I will make sure you are filled in. Mr Simms, Ms Ripetti, a precious item from my library has been stolen – and I want it back.” Each of the last five words was accompanied by a gentle rap on the edge of the desk.

“Your lawyer said that the man who disappeared with your manuscript was a Roman priest.”

“Yes, a Jesuit, Father Marini. That’s somewhat tricky – and more embarrassing, is it not? He had been specially sent by the Vatican to analyse the documents and do some philological work.”

“But you’ve reported the theft to the local authorities?”

Al-Rafai gave a pale smile, then looked towards his butler, who was standing at the far end of the room staring ahead of him with a blank expression. “Don’t let me tell you what I think

of the local authorities. This is a private matter – and it must remain private. Are you religious, Mr Simms?”

“I was until the age of five.”

“What about you, Miss Ripetti?”

“I’m a Catholic.”

“I’m Catholic too, a Melkite Catholic. There’s a large Catholic community in Jordan, did you know? Almost three per cent of the entire population, I think. But this is a Muslim country, and religion and politics remain very delicate issues. You will remember all the controversy when the Pope visited the Holy Land last year? So be careful.”

“Of what?”

“Of what you say, of what you do. You see, there is strong opposition, among the locals, to the presence of that tall building in our land.” He made a dismissive gesture, then looked down and began to work the corner of the leather album with his finger. “It’s run by Americans, after all – who are not famous for their sensitivity towards other cultures and religions.”

“That’s a mild way of putting it.”

“Indeed. Indeed.” He looked up with a gloomy smile. “But you must be exhausted.” He got to his feet. “I shall see you in the next few days. In the meantime, I’ll arrange for you to be briefed. Hopefully you’ll have good news for me soon. Keep me informed, will you? And thank you again.”

He shook their hands, and they were shown out by the butler, who escorted them into the lift.

“Fancy a quick drink?” Peter said as they descended.

“OK.”

They made their way to the terrace restaurant on the tenth floor. It was too late to get food, but drinks were still being served. Peter ordered a beer and Giulia mineral water. The warm

air, the synthetic palm trees and the creamy-coloured slabs of marble gave the terrace the artificial feel of a tourist village. There was no one else there apart from them. They sat on the balcony, from where a large swath of night-time Amman could be viewed. Far away rose the glowing outline of the Tower.

“This man, Mr Al-Rafai – who is he?” asked Giulia as she grabbed her glass. “There’s nothing on the web.”

“He seems to have found a way of eluding not just Google but also the editors of *Forbes*,” said Peter, laughing. “But my understanding is that he’s worth a few billion dollars.”

“Yes? And how has he made his money?”

“No idea. All I know is that he’s paying me four times my going rate. Presumably it’s the same for you.” He took a swig of beer, then added: “And I’m not cheap.”

“Neither am I.”

He glanced at Giulia’s amused face, at her hair being teased by the night-time breeze, and couldn’t help himself from wondering: was she married, was there a boyfriend?

“A part of the Tower is dark,” she said after a long pause, looking into the distance.

“I think they’re fixing the last panels of glass near the top.”

“But it’s already open to the public?”

“Parts of it. That’s what I heard.”

Giulia looked at her watch. “Perhaps it’s time to go.”

“Sure.”

The waiter came to collect the empty glasses, and they settled the bill and went down to the lobby, where Majed was waiting to take them back to the Hyatt.

Peter proceeded to his room. He tuned the TV to BBC News and began to undress for a shower when he heard a light knock at the door.

“Yes?”

Giulia’s face was strangely tense.

“I found this on my pillow,” she said.

“A Bible?” he turned the book in his hands. “A strange courtesy in a Muslim country.”

“Open it.”

He did so and frowned. Along the fold line there was a dead earthworm, cut in half. Either side of it, the words “BOOK” and “WORM” were scrawled in what appeared to be blood.

“I’m not squeamish,” Giulia said, “but I don’t like this.”

“Of course.” Peter thought for a moment. “Perhaps it was left there by the previous occupant. Do you want to change rooms?”

“No, it’s fine. I’m too tired now.”

“All right. Leave it with me. I’ll complain with the managers.”

“OK. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

He closed the door and had another good long look at the book and the dead earthworm. He was puzzled and unsettled by that strange message. As Al-Rafai had warned, they would have to be careful in their moves – very careful.

2

Rome, August 1569

The sun was rising when the coach left the dim outskirts of the Campagna Romana and rolled onto the first paved streets of the Eternal City. Giordano glanced at his travelling companion, old Father Ambrogio, and smiled: not even all the bumps and jolts of the carriage could shake him from his slumber.

They had left their monastery in Naples three days ago, summoned to Rome by Pope Pius himself. The previous year Giordano had presumed to send him a book, asking for permission to dedicate it to him. Now he feared that his work might have been misunderstood, and that His Holiness was going to reprimand him. Otherwise, why had he been sent for in such haste, after begging for an audience the year before? And why was he being escorted by the formidable Father Ambrogio Salvio da Bagnoli – basher of heretics, burner of books, Vicar of the Dominican Order and Provincial at San Domenico Maggiore?

Yes, there will be a rebuke, he thought, as he smelt the morning air, rich with the fragrance of mint and pine resin. But he knew he was innocent of any malicious or satirical intent, and so hoped to explain to His Holiness that this was only a treatise on mnemonics – an art, after all, which had always been dear to Dominican scholars such as the Pope himself.

He had not even been able to say goodbye to his fellow novices. He and Father Ambrogio had boarded the Papal *diligenza* well

before the early-morning prayer. They had travelled through the deserted streets of Naples and round the slopes of Mount Vesuvius in complete darkness, reaching the Appian Way between Arpaia and Capua at the break of dawn.

The warm season had helped them make smooth progress through the harshest part of the journey, from Capua to Terracina, though Father Ambrogio had to stop the coach several times a day, even between stages, because of his aching legs and back. Although he was still in good health, his seventy-eight years of active life were beginning to show in the bend of his frame and the dimming of his mind. Father Ambrogio had spent most of the journey shut in on himself, either dozing or in prayer. He was a silent, severe, impenetrable man – a solemn man of the previous century. Giordano looked up to him as a model of rectitude and austerity: at twenty, he found it difficult to believe he would ever be able to curb the exuberance of his mind and reach such heights of unflinching self-discipline.

The streets of Rome were now bathed in the light of dawn. The paving had become more even, the buildings more grandiose, and the smell of herbs and trees had been replaced by the pungent odour of horse dung and smouldering night fires. Only a few people – for the most part soldiers, labourers and homeless paupers – could be seen wandering around. Ahead, in the distance, the reddish bulk of Castel Sant’Angelo could be glimpsed, while to the north-west rose the white marble of St Peter’s.

“La Minerva’s over there, Iordanus,” Father Ambrogio said, waving in the direction of the Pantheon on the right. “I was Master of Studies there, at the time of the Great Sack. It’s over forty years ago now.”

He chewed on his lip and fell silent again. Giordano thought that would be the last he'd hear from him until their arrival, but Ambrogio added: "They killed people in the streets. Buildings were pillaged and burnt down. Everyone ran away in fear. Even our cloister was empty. I was the only one who stayed behind. I put all our sacred things in big sacks and hid them in the crypt. Then I threw some clothes over my cowl and made my escape. To this day I don't know how I managed to survive."

"It was through the Grace of God, Father," said Giordano. "He saved you for higher purposes."

"Yes," said Father Ambrogio, with eyes that seemed to stare at nothing.

As the coach cut across the square in front of St Peter's, Giordano and Ambrogio raised their eyes to the unfinished dome. The shadowy figures of labourers at work could be made out in the hazy light among the wooden scaffolding.

"It's... divine," murmured Giordano, awestruck.

"Yes," said his superior. "A divine folly. The greatest waste in all Christendom. Only God knows when it is going to be finished, or why it was begun. All this money could have been used to fight the Turks or the heathens of the North – or to help the poor. Why did the old basilica have to be demolished? Rome has been turned into a building site."

They reached the gates to the Papal palace, where two guards with their long blue stockings, yellow-and-blue uniforms and red-plumed caps barred the entrance with crossed halberds. Another guard checked their travelling papers, then waved to the driver to proceed. The coach halted in front of a vast ochre-brick building, which was protected by two more soldiers. Giordano helped Ambrogio off the coach and gave him his arm to lean on as they clambered up the marble staircase and entered the

building. Escorted by one of the guards, they trudged up two more flights of stairs and were shown into the antechamber to Pope Pius's private study, a large room decorated with dark paintings of saints and martyrs.

They were alone: Ambrogio sat on one of the chairs along the walls and immersed himself in prayer, while Giordano walked to the tall window overlooking the Papal gardens. As he let his gaze roam around the chirping foliage and the blue sky, he tried to master his anxiety, reminding himself that he had little to worry about: there was nothing controversial or irreverent in his book.

The gardens made him think of the summers of his childhood, when he played with his friends in the fields around Nola, throwing stones at trees or climbing up to the ruins of Castle Cicala in the afternoon, with his mother calling his name from their cottage at the close of day. He would answer the cry with a joyful voice and run back home through the warm blades of grass and sit with her at table, praying that God would protect their father from any harm in the fields of battle. Then, as the light died out, his mother would tell him stories of centuries long past – of knights and ladies, of saintly men and portentous miracles – and he'd close his eyes in peaceful sleep. Blessed were those days – blessed was that simple innocence and happiness – only too soon replaced by fasts and vigils, hours of meditation and arid study, his soul pent in a solitary cell, his mind forced to the ground or within itself, prevented from reaching out to the true light of the universe...

The guard came back and asked them to follow. They were ushered into a smaller room, not dissimilar in style from the one they had just left. The door was closed behind them as they uncowed their heads. Pope Pius was sitting in a red velvet chair

near the far wall, wearing a scarlet camauro and mozzetta over his white vestment. To his left stood a portly cardinal. The Pope shifted in his chair, as if about to get up and greet them, but Ambrogio extended an arm and advanced towards him with little hurried steps, while Giordano kneeled on the cold stone and bowed his head.

“*Dilecte fili et frater,*” Pius said.

The two men embraced, tears welling in their eyes. The Pope stepped back to look at his friend. “*Bonum iter fecisti? Sine cura?*”

“My legs are not what they used to be, dear Father,” Ambrogio replied, still in Latin. His familiar tone, apparent even in that ancient tongue, surprised the young novice near the door. “I am old. I even doubted I could make it to Rome to answer your summons.”

“I wouldn’t have troubled you unless it was necessary to God’s work,” Pius said. “We need your help, brother. The Venerable Iohannes Baptista, Bishop of Nardò, has passed away. We cannot delay a new appointment, and we have decided that you should continue his work in those lands.”

“But Father,” said Ambrogio, struggling to his knees in front of the Pope, “you know how old I am – my strength is failing. I was reluctant to accept when you made me Provincial, and now...”

“Rise, brother, and take heart. You have always been prompt in answering God’s call: this is not the time to hesitate or refuse.”

The great evils afflicting the world, the threat from the Lutherans in the north, the danger from the infidels in the east, the laxity of morals, the aberrations of philosophy, the temptations of sin – Pope Pius urged Ambrogio to remember his calling.

“You are one of the pillars of our Church,” he continued. “You are indispensable to us.”

Ambrogio’s protests soon died down, and they began to talk about the time when they studied under the same tutors in Bologna and worked together in Como. The two saintly men, thought Giordano, without glancing up, must have known each other for close to fifty years.

“And that young man knelt over there,” resounded the voice of the cardinal standing next to Pius, “is he the novice who sent His Holiness that most curious book concerning Noah’s Ark?”

Giordano blinked, not knowing whether to reply.

“Yes,” answered Ambrogio, “he is the most brilliant *puer* in our school. *Propius huc accede, fili.*”

Giordano rose to his feet and walked up to join Ambrogio in front of Pope Pius and the cardinal.

“Remind me, my son, what is your name?” asked Pius.

“Iordanus Bruni, Father.”

“Iordanus...” Pius narrowed his blue eyes and seemed to consider this for a moment. “I’m told you excel in the art of artificial memory?”

“He’s a true marvel of nature, Father,” intervened Ambrogio, who had been Giordano’s master for over a year. “He can memorize any text he’s given. You will show His Holiness your skills, Iordanus.”

“Scipio, please pass me that Bible,” said Pius.

He opened at random the tome that the cardinal handed to him and pointed a finger to the recto page.

“Psalms,” Pius said. “*Fundamenta eius in montibus sanctis.* Will you recite it for us? You can read it once, if you wish, to refresh your memory.”

“There will be no need, Father,” said Giordano.

“And if the page I opened was from Joshua, from Ezekiel? From Galatians?”

“Any page, Father. From any book.”

The Pope stared at him. “Well, then, recite it, this page from Psalms.”

“In Latin or Hebrew, Father?”

Pius gave a little smile and exchanged a glance with the cardinal and Ambrogio.

“Hebrew.”

And the room was soon filled with music – the music of the language of ancient scriptures. Without any hesitation or interruption, with a soft tone that gave his voice almost a celestial ring, Giordano brought back to life those dead verses as if conjuring them up by magic from the depths of an invisible source. The three prelates were spellbound.

“Extraordinary,” Pius said. “Truly extraordinary. And how do you intend to use this skill of yours, my son, and all the knowledge that you can acquire by it?”

“In the service of the Church, Father.”

“Very good, my son. Very good.”

“I believe that thanks to my new system of memory, it will be possible one day to absorb, with little effort, all the fruits of human lore, past and present.”

“All the fruits?” Pope Pius glanced at Ambrogio. “Earthly knowledge is not the ultimate aim of our Church or our Holy Religion. Our true objective is to defend our faith against the serpent of heresy.”

“What I meant, Father, is that, you see, all this knowledge *can* be used to the greater glory of God, to make our Holy Church even more impregnable and invincible against its enemies.”

“I see,” Pius mused. “And this little book of yours...”

“*Noah’s Ark*,” said the cardinal.

“*Noah’s Ark*, yes... Is it wise, my son, to choose a biblical subject for a book on mnemonics?”

“I meant no offence to religion...”

“Perhaps you meant nothing at all. It sounds so obscure and far-fetched.”

“I can explain, Father.”

“I am sure you can. I am sure you can. And you’d like to dedicate this work to me?”

“Only if it pleases Your Holiness.” Giordano lowered his eyes to the floor.

“Well, it may please us once we have had time to read it and examine it properly. You see, my son, we are seldom granted the leisure of study and meditation these days. We are living in difficult times – times that require all our energy and courage and prayer.”

“Yes, Father.”

“And all our efforts must be directed towards the defence of our faith. Do you understand, my son?”

“Yes, Father.”

“And you should never allow your eyes to be deflected from that aim. If you observe the precepts of our Holy Mother Church and remain true to the doctrines of our Sacred Scriptures, you may be worthy one day of rising to the highest offices in the service of God and His religion. Just take the man standing next to you as an example.”

“Yes, Holy Father.”

“Now off you go.” Pius put his arm on Giordano’s shoulder and gave him a gentle shake, so as to make him look up. “Cardinal Rebiba will take you to our library, which is the real repository of human knowledge, as sanctioned and approved by our

Holy Office. I am sure he will want to hear a great deal more about your new methods of mnemonics.” The cardinal gave a slow nod of the head, and Giordano bowed and left with him.

Pope Pius watched the door close on the novice and the cardinal. He took hold of Ambrogio’s arm. “There’s something I don’t like about that young man. He—”

“Father—”

“Imagine if someone like him – with such great powers of mind – were to deviate from the true path.” He scrunched up his pointed face and stroked his beard. “Before you leave for Nardò, ensure that appropriate measures are taken to watch his movements and record anything he says, reads or writes. I’d like to receive regular reports on his conduct.”

Ambrogio stared at his old friend with champing lips. “Very well, Your Holiness.”

In the evening, Giordano and his superior returned to Santa Sabina in the coach of Cardinal Marcantonio da Mula, the chief librarian of the Apostolica.

“But you are too young to understand!” The cardinal was explaining a small theological point that Giordano understood very well. “You must realize that – oh no, not again.”

The path of their carriage was blocked by a cortège of dark-frocked men wearing pointed hoods that concealed the whole of their faces except their eyes. They advanced with small, measured steps, chanting sombre litanies. At the head of the cortège, three bearers carried a large crucifix covered by a black veil. Among the column of people was a small wooden pushcart carrying a bare-headed man. Two hooded men flanked him, while a third kept shoving an effigy of Christ to his face for him to kiss it.

“All these processions are a real nuisance,” said the cardinal. “You cannot go anywhere these days without being impeded or

delayed. This morning it was a procession of penitent whores from Trastevere.”

Ambrogio cast a sideways glance at the cardinal: he didn't like the glibness of his tone, and found him too talkative for a man of his calling.

“Who are these people, Father?” asked Giordano.

“These must be from the Confraternity of St John the Baptist,” the cardinal replied. “They're leading that poor man to his place of execution – just over there, on Campo di Flora.”

“And who is he?” Ambrogio pointed at the bare-headed man in the cart with his wooden staff, a parting gift from Pope Pius.

“No one of note – some heretic, perhaps. There hasn't been an idle day for our brother inquisitors of late. You can smell it in the air.”

The witticism was met with coldness by the two friars. Giordano followed the chanting procession as it inched down the street in the dimming light. The pushcart came into full view. Giordano leant out, trying to see the face of the condemned man, who kept jerking his head away from the image of Christ in a gesture of unrepentance. The hooded men continued to advance in a straight line, singing their gloomy *Misereres*, until the tail of the cortège cleared the way and the coach began to move again. Then, just before the cart disappeared behind the corner of a building, the prisoner turned slowly towards Giordano, stared him in the eye and gave a wan, chilling smile.