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S. J. PARRIS

Heresy

HARPER

PROLOGUE

Monastery of San Domenico Maggiore, Naples 1576

The outer door was thrown open with a crash that resounded along the passage and the floorboards shook with the purposeful marching of several pairs of feet. Inside the small cubicle where I perched on the edge of a wooden bench, taking care not to sit too close to the hole that opened over the cess pit beneath, my little candle flickered in the sudden draught of their entrance, sending wavering shadows growing and shrinking up the stone walls. *Allora*, I thought, looking up. They have come for me at last.

The footsteps halted outside the cubicle door, to be replaced by the furious hammering of a fist and the abbot's throaty voice, strained beyond its usual placid tones of diplomacy.

'Fra Giordano! I order you to come out this instant, with whatever you hold in your hands in plain sight!'

I caught a snigger from one of the monks who accompanied him, swiftly followed by a stern tutting from the abbot, Fra Domenico Vita, and could not help smiling to myself, in spite of the moment. Fra Vita was a man who, in the ordinary course of events, gave the impression that all bodily functions offended him mightily; it would be causing him

unprecedented distress to have to apprehend one of his monks in so ignominious a place as this.

'One moment, Padre, if I may,' I called, untying my habit to make it look as if I had been using the privy for its proper purpose. I looked at the book in my hand. For a moment I entertained the idea of hiding it somewhere under my habit, but that would be fruitless – I would be searched straight away.

'Not one moment more, Brother,' Fra Vita said through the door, a quiet menace creeping into his voice. 'You have spent more than two hours in the privy tonight, I think that is long enough.'

'Something I ate, Padre,' I said, and with deep regret, I threw the book into the hole, producing a noisy coughing fit to cover the splash it made as it fell into the pool of waste below. It had been such a fine edition, too.

I unlatched the door and opened it to see my abbot standing there, his heavy features almost vibrating with pent-up rage, all the more vivid in the gusting light of the torches carried by the four monks who stood behind him, staring at me, appalled and fascinated.

'Do not move, Fra Giordano,' Vita said tightly, jabbing a warning finger in my face. 'It is too late for hiding.'

He strode into the cubicle, his nose wrinkled against the stench, holding up his lamp to check each of the corners in turn. Finding nothing, he turned to the men behind him.

'Search him,' he barked.

My brothers looked at one another in consternation, then that wily Tuscan friar Fra Agostino da Montalcino stepped forward, an unpleasant smile on his face. He had never liked me, but his dislike had turned to open animosity after I publicly bested him in an argument about the Arian heresy some months earlier, after which he had gone about whispering that I denied the divinity of Christ. Without a doubt, it was he who had put Fra Vita on my trail.

‘Excuse me, Fra Giordano,’ he mouthed with a sneer, before he began patting me up and down, his hands roaming first around my waist and down each of my thighs.

‘Try not to enjoy yourself too much,’ I muttered.

‘Just obeying my superior,’ he replied. When he had finished groping, he rose to face Fra Vita, clearly disappointed. ‘He has nothing concealed in his habit, Father.’

Fra Vita stepped closer and glared at me for some moments without speaking, his face so near to mine that I could count the bristles on his nose and smell the rank onions on his breath.

‘The sin of our first father was the desire for forbidden knowledge.’ He enunciated each word carefully, running his tongue wetly over his lips. ‘He thought he could become like God. And this is your sin also, Fra Giordano Bruno. You are one of the most gifted young men I have encountered in all my years at San Domenico Maggiore, but your curiosity and your pride in your own cleverness prevent you from using your gifts to the glory of the Church. It is time the Father Inquisitor took the measure of you.’

‘No, Padre, please – I have done nothing—’ I protested as he turned to leave, but just then Montalcino called out from behind me.

‘Fra Vita! Here is something you should see!’

He was shining his torch into the hole of the privy, an expression of malevolent delight spreading over his thin face.

Vita blanched, but leaned in to see what the Tuscan had uncovered. Apparently satisfied, he turned to me.

‘Fra Giordano – return to your cell and do not leave until I send you further instructions. This requires the immediate attention of the Father Inquisitor. Fra Montalcino – retrieve that book. We will know what heresies and necromancy our brother studies in here with a devotion I have never seen him apply to the Holy Scriptures.’

Montalcino looked from the abbot to me in horror. I had been in the privy for so long I had grown used to the stink, but the idea of plunging my hand into the pool beneath the plank made my stomach rise. I beamed at Montalcino.

'I, my Lord Abbot?' he asked, his voice rising.

'You, Brother – and be quick about it.' Fra Vita pulled his cloak closer around him against the chill night air.

'I can save you the trouble,' I said. 'It is only Erasmus's *Commentaries* – no dark magic in there.'

'The works of Erasmus are on the Inquisition's Index of Forbidden Books, as you well know, Brother Giordano,' Vita said grimly. He fixed me again with those emotionless eyes. 'But we will see for ourselves. You have played us for fools too long. It is time the purity of your faith was tested. Fra Battista!' he called to another of the monks bearing torches, who leaned in attentively. 'Send word for the Father Inquisitor.'

I could have dropped to my knees then and pleaded for clemency, but there would have been no dignity in begging, and Fra Vita was a man who liked the order of due process. If he had determined I should face the Father Inquisitor, perhaps as an example to my brethren, then he would not be swayed from that course until it had been played out in full – and I feared I knew what that meant. I pulled my cowl over my head and followed the abbot and his attendants out, pausing only to cast a last glance at Montalcino as he rolled up the sleeve of his habit and prepared to fish for my lost Erasmus.

'On the bright side, Brother, you are fortunate,' I said, with a parting wink. 'My shit really does smell sweeter than everyone else's.'

He looked up, his mouth twisted with either bitterness or disgust.

'See if your wit survives when you have a burning poker

in your arsehole, Bruno,' he said, with a marked lack of Christian charity.

Outside in the cloister, the night air of Naples was crisp and I watched my breath cloud around me, grateful to be out of the confines of the privy. On all sides the vast stone walls of the monastic buildings rose around me, the cloister swallowed up in their shadows. The great façade of the basilica loomed to my left as I walked with leaden steps towards the monks' dormitory, and I craned my head upwards to see the stars scattered above it. The Church taught, after Aristotle, that the stars were fixed in the eighth sphere beyond the earth, that they were all equidistant and moved together in orbit about the Earth, like the Sun and the six planets in their respective spheres. Then there were those, like the Pole Copernicus, who dared to imagine the universe in a different form, with the Sun at its centre and an Earth that moved on its own orbit. Beyond this, no one had ventured, not even in imagination: no one but me, Giordano Bruno the Nolan, and this secret theory, bolder than anyone had yet dared to formulate, was known to me alone: that the universe had no fixed centre, but was infinite, and each of those stars I now watched pulsating in the velvet blackness above me was its own sun, surrounded by its own innumerable worlds, on which, even now, beings just like me might also be watching the heavens, wondering if anything existed beyond the limits of their knowledge.

One day I would write all this in a book that would be my life's work, a book that would send such ripples through Christendom as Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* had done, but greater still, a book that would undo all the certainties not only of the Roman Church but of the whole Christian religion. But there was so much more that I needed to understand, too many books I had yet to read, books of astrology and ancient magic, all of

which were forbidden by the Dominican order and which I could never obtain from the library at San Domenico Maggiore. I knew that if I were to stand before the Holy Roman Inquisition now, all of this would be pricked out of me with white-hot irons, with the rack or the wheel, until I vomited my hypothesis out half cooked, whereupon they would burn me for heresy. I was twenty-eight years old; I did not want to die just yet. I had no choice but to run.

It was then just after compline; the monks of San Domenico were preparing to retire for the night. Bursting into the cell I shared with Fra Paolo of Rimini, trailing the cold of the night on my hair and habit, I rushed frantically about the tiny room, gathering what few belongings I had into an oilskin bag. Paolo had been lying in contemplation on his straw pallet when I flung the door open; now he propped himself up on one elbow, watching my frenzy with concern. He and I had joined the monastery together as novices at the age of fifteen; now, thirteen years later, he was the only one I thought of as a brother in the true sense.

'They have sent for the Father Inquisitor,' I explained, catching my breath. 'There is no time to lose.'

'You missed compline again. I told you, Bruno,' Paolo said, shaking his head. 'If you spend so many hours in the privy every night, people will grow suspicious. Fra Tomasso has been telling everyone you have some grievous disease of the bowel – I said it would not take long for Montalcino to deduce your true business and alert the abbot.'

'It was only Erasmus, for Christ's sake,' I said, irritated. 'I must leave tonight, Paolo, before I am questioned. Have you seen my winter cloak?'

Paolo's face was suddenly grave.

'Bruno, you know a Dominican may not abandon his order, on pain of excommunication. If you run away, they will take

it as a confession, they will put out a warrant for you. You will be condemned as a heretic.'

'And if I stay I will be condemned as a heretic,' I said. 'It will hurt less *in absentia*.'

'But where will you go? How will you live?' My friend looked pained; I stopped my searching and laid my hand on his shoulder.

'I will travel at night, I will sing and dance or beg for bread if I have to, and when I have put enough distance between myself and Naples, I will teach for a living. I took my Doctor of Theology last year – there are plenty of universities in Italy.' I tried to sound cheerful, but in truth my heart was pounding and my bowels were turned to water; it was somewhat ironic that I could not now go near the privy.

'You will never be safe in Italy if the Inquisition name you as a heretic,' Paolo said sadly. 'They will not rest until they see you burned.'

'Then I must get out before they have the chance. Perhaps I will go to France.'

I turned away to look for my cloak. There flashed into my memory, as clear as the day it was first imprinted, the image of a man consumed by fire, his head twisted back in agony as he tried in vain to turn his face from the heat of the flames that tore hungrily at his clothes. It was that human, fruitless gesture that stayed with me in the years afterwards – that movement to protect his face from the fire, though his head was bound to a stake – and since then I had deliberately avoided the spectacle of another burning. I had been twelve years old, and my father, a professional soldier and a man of orthodox and sincere belief, had taken me to Rome to watch a public execution for my edification and instruction. We had secured a good vantage point for ourselves in the Campo dei Fiori towards the back of the jostling crowd, and I had been amazed at how many had gathered to make

profit from the event as if it were a bear-baiting or a fair: sellers of pamphlets, mendicant friars, men and women peddling bread and cakes or fried fish from trays around their necks. Neither had I expected the cruelty of the crowd, who mocked the prisoner with insults, spitting and throwing stones at him as he was led silently to the stake, his head bowed. I wondered if his silence were defeat or dignity, but my father explained that an iron spike had been driven through his tongue so that he could not try to convert the spectators by repeating his foul heresies from the pyre.

He was tied to the stake and the faggots piled around him so that he was almost hidden from view. When a torch was held to the wood, there was an almighty crackling and the kindling caught light immediately and burned with a fierce glow. My father had nodded in approval; sometimes, he explained, if the authorities feel merciful, they allow green wood to be used for the pyre, so that the prisoner will often suffocate from the smoke before he truly suffers the sting of the flames. But for the worst kind of heretics – witches, sorcerers, blasphemers, Lutherans, the Benandanti – they would be sure the wood was dry as the slopes of Monte Cicala in summer, so that the heat of the flames would tear at the offender until he screamed out to God with his last breath in true repentance.

I wanted to look away as the flames rushed to devour the man's face, but my father was planted solidly beside me, his gaze unflinching, as if watching the poor wretch's agonies were an essential part of his own duty to God, and I did not want to appear less manly or less devout than he. I heard the mangled shrieks that escaped the condemned man's torn mouth as his eyeballs popped, I heard the hiss and crackle as his skin shrivelled and peeled away and the bloody pulp beneath melted into the flames, I smelled the charred flesh that reminded me horribly of the boar that was always roasted

over a pit at street festivals in Nola. Indeed, the cheering and exultation of the crowd when the heretic finally expired was like nothing so much as a saint's day or public holiday. On the way home I asked my father why the man had had to die so horribly. Had he killed someone? My father told me that he had been a heretic. When I pressed him to explain what a heretic was, he said the man had defied the authority of the pope by denying the existence of Purgatory. So I learned that, in Italy, words and ideas are considered as dangerous as swords and arrows, and that a philosopher or a scientist needs as much courage as a soldier to speak his mind.

Somewhere in the dormitory building I heard a door slam violently.

'They are coming,' I whispered frantically to Paolo. 'Where the devil is my cloak?'

'Here.' He handed me his own, pausing a moment to tuck it around my shoulders. 'And take this.' He pressed into my hand a small bone-handled dagger in a leather sheath. I looked at him in surprise. 'It was a gift from my father,' he whispered. 'You will have more need of it than I, where you are going. And now, *sbrigati*. Hurry.'

The narrow window of our cell was just large enough for me to squeeze myself on to the ledge, one leg at a time. We were on the first floor of the building, but about six feet below the window the sloping roof of the lay brothers' reredorter jutted out enough for me to land on if I judged the fall carefully; from there I could edge my way down a buttress and, assuming I could make it across the garden without being seen, I could climb the outside wall of the monastery and disappear into the streets of Naples under cover of darkness.

I tucked the dagger inside my habit, slung my oilskin pack over one shoulder and climbed to the ledge, pausing astride the window sill to look out. A gibbous moon hung, pale and

swollen, over the city, smoky trails of cloud drifting across its face. Outside there was only silence. For a moment I felt suspended between two lives. I had been a monk for thirteen years; when I lifted my left leg through the window and dropped to the roof below I would be turning my back on that life for good. Paolo was right; I would be excommunicated for leaving my order, whatever other charges were levelled at me. He looked up at me, his face full of wordless grief, and reached for my hand. I leaned down to kiss his knuckles when I heard again the emphatic stride of many feet thundering down the passageway outside.

'*Dio sia con te*,' Paolo whispered, as I pulled myself through the small window and twisted my body around so that I was hanging by my fingertips, tearing my habit as I did so. Then, trusting to God and chance, I let go. As I landed clumsily on the roof below, I heard the sound of the little casement closing and hoped Paolo had been in time.

The moonlight was a blessing and a curse; I kept close to the shadows of the wall as I crossed the garden behind the monks' quarters and, with the help of wild vines, I managed to pull myself over the far wall, the boundary of the monastery, where I dropped to the ground and rolled down a short slope to the road. Immediately I had to throw myself into the shadow of a doorway, trusting to the darkness to cover me, because a rider on a black horse was galloping urgently up the narrow street in the direction of the monastery, his cloak undulating behind him. It was only when I lifted my head, feeling the blood pounding in my throat, and recognised the round brim of his hat as he disappeared up the hill towards the main gate, that I knew the figure who had passed was the local Father Inquisitor, summoned in my honour.

That night I slept in a ditch on the outskirts of Naples when I could walk no further, Paolo's cloak a poor defence against the frosty night. On the second day, I earned a bed

for the night and a half-loaf of bread by working in the stables of a roadside inn; that night, a man attacked me while I slept and I woke with cracked ribs, a bloody nose and no bread, but at least he had used his fists and not a knife, as I soon learned was common among the vagrants and travellers who frequented the inns and taverns on the road to Rome. By the third day, I was learning to be vigilant, and I was more than halfway to Rome. Already I missed the familiar routines of monastic life that had governed my days for so long, and already I was thrilled by the notion of freedom. I no longer had any master except my own imagination. In Rome I would be walking into the lion's maw, but I liked the boldness of the wager with Providence; either my life would begin again as a free man, or the Inquisition would track me down and feed me to the flames. But I would do everything in my power to ensure it was not the latter – I was not afraid to die for my beliefs, but not until I had determined which beliefs were worth dying for.

PART ONE

London, May 1583

ONE

On a horse borrowed from the French ambassador to the court of Queen Elizabeth of England, I rode out across London Bridge on the morning of 20th May 1583. The sun was strong already, though it was not yet noon; diamonds of light scattered across the ruffled surface of the wide Thames and a warm breeze lifted my hair away from my face, carrying with it the sewer stinks of the river. My heart swelled with anticipation as I reached the south bank and turned right along the river towards Winchester House, where I would meet the royal party to embark upon our journey to the renowned University of Oxford.

The palace of the bishops of Winchester was built of red brick in the English style around a courtyard, its roof decorated with ornate chimneys over the great hall with its rows of tall perpendicular windows facing the river. In front of this a lawn sloped down to a large wharf and landing place where I now saw, as I approached, a colourful spectacle of people thronging the grass. Snatches of tunes carried through the air as musicians rehearsed, and half of London society appeared to have turned out in its best clothes to watch the pageant in the spring sunshine. By the steps, servants were

making ready a grand boat, decked out with rich silk hangings and cushions tapestried in red and gold. At the front were seats for eight oarsmen, and at the back an elaborate embroidered canopy sheltered the seats. Jewel-coloured banners rippled in the light wind, catching the sunlight.

I dismounted, and a servant came to hold the horse while I walked towards the house, eyed suspiciously by various finely dressed gentlemen as we passed. Suddenly I felt a fist land between my shoulder blades, almost knocking me to the ground.

'Giordano Bruno, you old dog! Have they not burned you yet?'

Recovering my balance, I spun around to see Philip Sidney standing there grinning from ear to ear, his arms wide, legs planted firmly astride, his hair still styled in that peculiar quiff that stuck up at the front like a schoolboy hastened out of bed. Sidney, the aristocratic soldier-poet I had met in Padua as I fled through Italy.

'They'd have to catch me first, Philip,' I said, smiling broadly at the sight of him.

'It's *Sir* Philip to you, you churl – I've been knighted this year, you know.'

'Excellent! Does that mean you'll acquire some manners?'

He threw his arms around me then and thumped me heartily on the back again. Ours was a curious friendship, I reflected, catching my breath and embracing him in return. Our backgrounds could not have been more different – Sidney was born into one of the first families of the English court, as he had never tired of reminding me – but in Padua we had immediately discovered the gift of making one another laugh, a rare and welcome thing in that earnest and often sombre place. Even now, after six years, I felt no awkwardness in his company; straight away we had fallen into our old custom of affectionate baiting.

'Come, Bruno,' Sidney said, putting an arm around my shoulders and leading me down the lawn towards the river. 'By God, it is a fine thing to see you again. This royal visitation to Oxford would have been intolerable without your company. Have you heard of this Polish prince?'

I shook my head. Sidney rolled his eyes.

'Well, you will meet him soon enough. The Palatine Albert Laski – a Polish dignitary with too much money and too few responsibilities, who consequently spends his time making a nuisance of himself around the courts of Europe. He was supposed to travel from here to Paris, but King Henri of France refuses to allow him into the country, so Her Majesty is stuck with the burden of his entertainment a while longer. Hence this elaborate pageant to get him away from court.' He waved towards the barge, then glanced around briefly to make sure we were not overheard. 'I do not blame the French king for refusing his visit, he is a singularly unbearable man. Still, it is quite an achievement – I can think of one or two taverns where I am refused entry, but to be barred from an entire country requires a particular talent for making yourself unwelcome. Which Laski has by the cartload, as you shall see. But you and I shall have a merry time in Oxford none the less – you will amaze the dullards there with your ideas, and I shall look forward to basking in your glory and showing you my old haunts,' he said, punching me heartily again on the arm. 'Although, as you know, that is not our whole purpose,' he added, lowering his voice.

We stood side by side looking out over the river, busy then with little crafts, wherries and small white-sailed boats criss-crossing the shining water in the spring sun, which illuminated the fronts of the handsome brick and timber buildings along the opposite bank, a glorious panorama with the great spire of St Paul's church towering over the rooftops far to the north. I thought what a magnificent city London was in our

age, and how fortunate I was to be here at all, and in such company. I waited for Sidney to elaborate.

'I have something for you from my future father-in-law, Sir Francis Walsingham,' he whispered, his eyes still fixed on the river. 'See what a knighthood gets me, Bruno – a job as your errand boy.' He drew himself upright and looked about, shielding his eyes with his hand as he peered towards the mooring-place of our craft, before reaching for the oilskin bag he carried and pulling from it a bulging leather purse. 'Walsingham sent this for you. You may incur certain expenses in the course of your enquiries. Call it an advance against payment.'

Sir Francis Walsingham. Queen Elizabeth's Principal Secretary of State, the man behind my unlikely presence on this royal visitation to Oxford; even his name made my spine prickle.

We walked a little further off from the body of the crowd gathered to marvel as the barge was decked with flowers for our departure. Beside it, a group of musicians had struck up a dance tune and we watched the crowd milling around them.

'But now tell me, Bruno – you have not set your sights upon Oxford merely to debate Copernicus before a host of dull-witted academicians,' Sidney continued, in a low voice. 'I knew as soon as I heard you had come to England that you must be on the scent of something important.'

I glanced quickly around to be sure no one was within earshot.

'I have come to find a book,' I said. 'One I have sought for some time, and now I believe it was brought to England.'

'I knew it!' Sidney grabbed my arm and drew me closer. 'And what is in this book? Some dark art to unlock the power of the universe? You were dabbling in such things in Padua, as I recall.'

I could not tell whether he was mocking me still, but I decided to trust to what our friendship had been in Italy.

'What would you say, Philip, if I told you the universe was infinite?'

He looked doubtful.

'I would say that this goes beyond even the Copernican heresy, and that you should keep your voice down.'

'Well, this is what I believe,' I said, quietly. 'Copernicus told only half the truth. Aristotle's picture of the cosmos, with the fixed stars and the six planets that orbit the earth – this is pure falsehood. Copernicus replaced the Earth with the Sun as the centre of the cosmos, but I go further – I say there are many suns, many centres – as many as there are stars in the sky. The universe is infinite, and if this is so, why should it not be populated with other earths, other worlds, and other beings like ourselves? I have decided it will be my life's work to prove this.'

'How can it be proved?'

'I will see them,' I said, looking out over the river, not daring to watch his reaction. 'I will penetrate the far reaches of the universe, beyond the spheres.'

'And how exactly will you do this? Will you learn to fly?' His voice was sceptical now; I could not blame him.

'By the secret knowledge contained in the lost book of the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus, who first understood these mysteries. If I can trace it, I will learn the secrets necessary to rise up through the spheres by the light of divine understanding and enter the Divine Mind.'

'Enter the mind of *God*, Bruno?'

'No, listen. Since I saw you last I have studied in depth the ancient magic of the Hermetic writings and the Cabala of the Hebrews, and I have begun to understand such things as you would not believe possible.' I hesitated. 'If I can learn how to make the ascent Hermes describes, I will glimpse what lies beyond the known cosmos – the universe without end, and the universal soul, of which we are all a part.'

I thought he might laugh then, but instead he looked thoughtful.

'Sounds like dangerous sorcery to me, Bruno. And what would you prove? That there is no God?'

'That we are all God,' I said, quietly. 'The divinity is in all of us, and in the substance of the universe. With the right knowledge, we can draw down all the powers of the cosmos. When we understand this, we can become equal to God.'

Sidney stared at me in disbelief.

'Christ's blood, Bruno! You cannot go about proclaiming yourself equal to God. We may not have the Inquisition here but no Christian church will hear that with equanimity – you will be straight for the fire.'

'Because the Christian church is corrupt, every faction of it – this is what I want to convey. It is only a poor shadow, a dilution of an ancient truth that existed long before Christ walked the earth. If that were understood, then true reform of religion might be possible. Men might rise above the divisions for which so much blood has been spilled, and is still being spilled, and understand their essential unity.'

Sidney's face turned grave.

'I have heard my old tutor Doctor Dee speak in this way. But you must be careful, my friend – he collected many of these manuscripts of ancient magic during the destruction of the monastic libraries, and he is called a necromancer and worse for it, not just by the common people. And he is a native Englishman, and the queen's own astrologer too. Do not get yourself a reputation as a black magician – you are already suspicious as a Catholic and a foreigner.' He stepped back and looked at me with curiosity. 'This book, then – you believe it is to be found in Oxford?'

'When I was living in Paris, I learned that it was brought out of Florence at the end of the last century and, if my advisor spoke the truth, it was taken by an English collector

to one of the great libraries here, where it lies unremarked because no one who has handled it has understood its significance. Many of the Englishmen who travelled in Italy were university men and left their books as bequests, so Oxford is as good a place as any to start looking.'

'You should start by asking John Dee,' Sidney said. 'He has the greatest library in the country.'

I shook my head.

'If your Doctor Dee had this book, he would know what he held in his hands, and he would have made this revelation known by some means. It is still to be discovered, I am certain.'

'Well, then. But don't neglect Walsingham's business in Oxford.' He slapped me on the back again. 'And for Christ's sake don't neglect me, Bruno, to go ferreting in libraries – I shall expect some gaiety from you while we are there. It's bad enough that I must play nursemaid to that flatulent Pole Laski – I'm not planning to spend every evening with a clutch of fusty old theologians, thank you. You and I shall go roistering through the town, leaving the women of Oxford bow-legged in our wake!'

'I thought you were to marry Walsingham's daughter?' I raised an eyebrow, feigning shock.

Sidney rolled his eyes.

'When the queen deigns to give her consent. In the meantime, I do not consider myself bound by marriage vows. Anyway, what of you, Bruno? Have you been making up for your years in the cloister on your way through Europe?' He elbowed me meaningfully in the ribs.

I smiled, rubbing my side.

'Three years ago, in Toulouse, there was a woman. Morgana, the daughter of a Huguenot nobleman. I gave private tuition to her brother in metaphysics, but when her father was not at home she would beg me to stay on and

read with her. She was hungry for knowledge – a rare quality in women born to wealth, I have found.'

'And beautiful?' Sidney asked, his eyes glittering.

'Exquisite.' I bit my lip, remembering Morgana's blue eyes, the way she would try and coax me to laughter when she thought I grew too melancholy. 'I courted her in secret, but I think I always knew it was only for a season. Her father wanted her to marry a Huguenot aristocrat, not a fugitive Italian Catholic. Even when I became a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toulouse and finally had the means of supporting myself, he would not consent, and he threatened to use all his influence in the city to destroy my name.'

'So what happened?' Sidney asked, intrigued.

'She begged me to run away with her.' I sighed. 'I almost allowed myself to be persuaded, but I knew in my heart that it would not have been the future either of us wanted. So I left one night for Paris, where I ploughed all my energies into my writing and my advancement at court. But I often wonder about the life I turned my back on, and where I might have been now.' My voice trailed away as I lowered my eyes again, remembering.

'Then we should not have had you here, my friend. Besides, she's probably married to some ageing duke by now,' Sidney said heartily.

'She would have been,' I agreed, 'had she not died. Her father arranged a marriage to one of his friends but she had an accident shortly before the wedding. Drowned. Her brother wrote and told me.'

'You think it was by her own hand?' Sidney asked, his eyes dramatically wide.

'I suppose I will never know.'

I fell silent then, and gazed out across the water.

'Well, sorry about that,' Sidney said after a few moments,

clapping me on the back in that matter-of-fact way the English have, 'but still – the women of King Henri's court must have provided you with plenty of distractions, eh?'

I regarded him for a moment, wondering if the English nobility really did have as little fine feeling as they pretended, or if they had developed this manner as a way of avoiding painful emotion.

'Oh yes, the women there were beautiful, certainly, and happy enough to offer their attentions at first, but I found them sadly lacking in worthwhile conversation,' I said, forcing a smile. 'And they found me sadly lacking in fortune and titles for any serious liaison.'

'Well, there you are, Bruno – you are destined for disappointment if you seek out women for their conversation.' Sidney shook his head briefly, as if the idea were absurd. 'Take my advice – sharpen your wits in the company of men, and look to women only for life's softer comforts.'

He winked broadly and grinned.

'Now I must oversee the arrangements or we shall never be on our way, and we are to dine at the palace of Windsor this evening so we need to make good progress. They say there will be a storm tonight. The queen will not be present, naturally,' he said, noting my raised eyebrows. 'I'm afraid the responsibility of entertaining the palatine is ours alone, Bruno, until we reach Oxford. Steel yourself and pray to that universal soul of yours for fortitude.'

'I would not be the one to boast, but my friends do consider me to be something of a poet, Sir Philip,' the Palatine Laski was saying in his high-pitched voice, which always sounded as if he was voicing a grievance, as our boat approached Hampton Court. 'I had in mind that if we tire of the disputations at the university' – here he cast a pointed glance at me – 'you and I might devote some of our stay in Oxford

to reading one another's poetry and advising on it, as one sonneteer to another, what say you?'

'Then we must include Bruno in our parley,' Sidney said, flashing me a conspiratorial grin, 'for in addition to his learned books, he has written a comic drama in verse for the stage, have you not, Bruno? What was it called?'

'*The Torch-bearers*,' I muttered, and turned back to contemplate the view. I had dedicated the play to Morgana and it was always associated with memories of her.

'I have not heard of it,' said the palatine dismissively.

Before our party had even reached Richmond I found myself in complete agreement with my patron, King Henri III of France: the Palatine Laski was unbearable. Fat and red-faced, he had a wholly misplaced regard for his own importance and a great love of the sound of his own voice. For all his fine clothes and airs, he was clearly not well acquainted with the bath-house, and under that warm sun a fierce stink came off him which, mingled with the vapours from the brown Thames at close quarters, was distracting me from what should have been an entertaining journey.

We had launched from the wharf at Winchester House with a great fanfare of trumpets; a boat filled with musicians had been charged to keep pace with us, so that the palatine's endless monologue was accompanied by the twitterings and chirpings of the flute players to our right. To add to my discomfort, the flowers with which the barge had been so generously bedecked were making me sneeze. I sank back into the silk cushions, trying to concentrate on the rhythmic splashing of the oars as we glided at a stately pace through the city, smaller boats making way on either side while their occupants, recognising the royal barge, respectfully doffed their caps and stared as we passed. For my part, I had almost succeeded in reducing the palatine's babble to a background drone as I concentrated on the sights, and would have been

content to enjoy the gentle green and wooded landscape on the banks as we left the city behind, but Sidney was determined to amuse himself by baiting the Pole and wanted my collaboration.

'Behold, the great palace of Hampton Court, which once belonged to our queen's father's favourite, Cardinal Wolsey,' he said, gesturing grandly towards the bank as we drew close to the imposing red-brick walls. 'Not that he enjoyed it for long – such is the caprice of princes. But it seems the queen holds *you* in great esteem, Laski, to judge by the care she has taken over your visit.'

The palatine simpered unattractively.

'Well, that is not for me to say, of course, but I think it is well-known by now at the English court that the Palatine Laski is granted the very best of Her Majesty's hospitality.'

'And now that she will not have the Duke of Anjou, I wonder whether we her subjects may begin to speculate about an alliance with Poland?' Sidney went on mischievously.

The palatine pressed the tips of his stubby fingers together as if in prayer and pursed his moist lips, his little piggy eyes shining with self-congratulating pleasure.

'Such things are not for me to say, but I have noticed in the course of my stay at court that the queen did pay me certain *special* attentions, shall we say? Naturally she is modest, but I think men of the world such as you and I, Sir Philip, who have not been shut up in a cloister, can always tell when a woman looks at us with a woman's wants, can we not?'

I snorted with incredulity then, and had to disguise it as a sneezing fit. The minstrels finished yet another insufferably jaunty folk song and turned to a more melancholic tune, allowing me to lapse into reflective silence as the fields and woods slid by and the river became narrower and less noisome. Clouds bunched overhead, mirrored in the stretch

of water before us, and the heat began to feel thick in my nostrils; it seemed Sidney had been right about the coming storm.

'In any case, Sir Philip, I have taken the liberty of composing a sonnet in praise of the queen's beauty,' announced the palatine, after a while, 'and I wonder if I might recite it for you before I deliver it to her delicate ears? I would welcome the advice of a fellow poet.'

'You had much better ask Bruno,' Sidney said carelessly, trailing his hand in the water, 'his countrymen invented the form. Is that not so, Bruno?'

I sent him a murderous look and allowed my thoughts to drift to the horizon as the palatine began his droning recital.

If anyone had predicted, during those days when I begged my way from city to city up the length of the Italian peninsula, snatching teaching jobs when I could find them and living in the roadside inns and cheap lodgings of travellers, players and pedlars when I could not, that I would end up the confidant of kings and courtiers, the world would have thought them insane. But not me – I always believed in my own ability not only to survive but to rise through my own efforts. I valued wit more than the privileges of birth, an enquiring mind and hunger for learning above status or office, and I carried an implacable belief that others would eventually come to see that I was right; this lent me the will to climb obstacles that would have daunted more deferential men. So it was that from itinerant teacher and fugitive heretic, by the age of thirty-five I had risen almost as high as a philosopher might dream: I was a favourite at the court of King Henri III in Paris, his private tutor in the art of memory and a Reader in Philosophy at the great university of the Sorbonne. But France too was riven with religious wars then, like every other place I had passed through during my seven-year exile from Naples, and the Catholic faction in Paris

under the Guise family were steadily gaining strength against the Huguenots, so much so that it was rumoured the Inquisition were on their way to France. At the same time, my friendship with the king and the popularity of my lectures had earned me enemies among the learned doctors at the Sorbonne, and sly rumours began to slip through the back streets and into the ears of the courtiers: that my unique memory system was a form of black magic and that I used it to communicate with demons. This I took as my cue to move on, as I had done in Venice, Padua, Genoa, Lyon, Toulouse and Geneva whenever the past threatened to catch up; like many religious fugitives before me, I sought refuge under the more tolerant skies of Elizabeth's London, where the Holy Office had no jurisdiction, and where I hoped also to find the lost book of the Egyptian high priest Hermes Trismegistus.

The royal barge moored at Windsor late in the afternoon, where we were met by liveried servants and taken to our lodgings at the royal castle to dine and rest for the night before progressing to Oxford early the next day. Our supper was a subdued affair, perhaps partly because the sky had grown very dark by the time we arrived in the state apartments, requiring the candles to be lit early, and a heavy rain had begun to fall; by the time our meal was over the water was coursing down the tall windows of the dining hall in a steady sheet.

'There will be no boat tomorrow if this continues,' Sidney observed, as the servants cleared the dishes. 'We will have to travel the rest of the way by road, if horses can be arranged.'

The palatine looked petulant; he had clearly enjoyed the languor of the barge.

'I am no horseman,' he complained, 'we will need a carriage at the very least. Or we could wait here until the weather

clears,' he suggested in a brighter tone, leaning back in his chair and looking about him covetously at the rich furnishings of the palace dining room.

'We have no time,' Sidney replied. 'Bruno's great disputation before the whole university is the day after tomorrow and we must give our speaker enough leisure to prepare his devastating arguments, eh, Bruno?'

I turned my attention from the windows to offer him a smile.

'In fact, I was just about to excuse myself for that very purpose,' I said.

Sidney's face fell.

'Oh – will you not sit up and play cards with us a while?' he asked, a note of alarm in his voice at the prospect of being left alone with the palatine for the evening.

'I'm afraid I must lose myself in my books tonight,' I said, pushing my chair back, 'or this great disputation, as you call it, will not be worth hearing.'

'I've sat through few that were,' remarked the palatine. 'Never mind, Sir Philip, you and I shall make a long night of it. Perhaps we may read to one another? I shall call for more wine.'

Sidney threw me the imploring look of a drowning man as I passed him, but I only winked and closed the door behind me. He was the professional diplomat here, he had been bred to deal with people like this. A great crack of thunder echoed around the roof as I made my way up an ornately painted staircase to my room.

For a long while I did not consult my papers or try to put my thoughts in order, but only lay on my bed, my mind as unsettled as the turbulent sky, which had turned a lurid shade of green as the thunder and lightning grew nearer and more frequent. The rain hammered against the glass and on the tiles of the roof and I wondered at the sense of unease

that had edged out the morning's thrill of anticipation. My future in England, to say nothing of the future of my work, depended greatly on the outcome of this journey to Oxford, yet I was filled with a strange foreboding; in all these rootless years of belonging nowhere, depending on no one but my own instinct for survival, I had learned to listen to the prickling of my moods. When I had intimations of danger, events had usually proved me right. But perhaps it was only that, once again, I was preparing to take on another shape, to become someone I was not.