

After studying art history in Glasgow, Tom Pugh invented a career as a travelling copywriter and teacher, living and working in London, Sydney and Tokyo before settling in Berlin with his wife and two children. *The Devil's Library* is his first novel, inspired by his own overland journey from Moscow to Naples.

THE DEVIL'S LIBRARY

TOM PUGH

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For Katia

AUTHOR NOTE

There is a legend that claims the first men left paradise of their own free will, pursuing the knowledge that would allow them to return as God's equals. Humanity multiplied, and the sacred task was entrusted to a priestly caste, unbound by ties to any land or king, free to follow the shifting currents of power. Traces of the library they created have been found among the ruins of Babylon, in Cairo and on the island of Samos. Variousy described over the centuries as the *Hall of Records*, the *Satyr's Library* and the *Oracle of the Dead*, it appears in these pages only by its most common name, the *Devil's Library*.

CHAPTER 1

Rome, April 23rd, 1558

Rome. City of God on Earth.

Mathern Schoff shook his head in wonder. Until his father's death five weeks earlier, he'd never travelled more than fifty miles from Lübeck.

Schoff had lost weight on the journey south and looked like a boy in his lawyer's robes. He was just twenty-one years old, but he'd braved the lonely road and the brutish behaviour of the sailors with barely a thought. For the last twelve years he'd lived a lie, breaking bread with neighbours, hiding his fear that one of them would see through the exhausting facade. Now, for the first time in his life, he was among men of the same mind and faith.

Schoff hurried through the crowded streets, averting his eyes from the shacks and lean-tos. Rome was a city of ruins, ancient squares colonised by scavenger pigs, beggars sleeping on beds of cracked marble. Schoff ignored them, hardly looking left or right until he reached St. Peter's.

The great square rang to the sound of stonemasons' hammers. Not yet finished, the new basilica was already more of a wonder than Schoff had dreamed. A smile lit his pale face, as he stared at men from every part of the known world. Theologians, priests and pilgrims, notaries, clerks and secretaries, all hurrying towards the Vatican. A detachment of the Pope's Swiss Guard in orange and blue. The immense dome towering over them all.

Schoff's heart soared as he thought of the men he'd left behind in Lübeck. Pope Leo X had invited them to contribute to this glorious church. The merchants should have fallen on their knees in gratitude. Instead, the tight-fisted fools had listened to Luther the Apostate, condemning their souls to eternal damnation for the sake of a few pennies.

The great church continued to soar into the heavens, while Martin Luther was bones in a box, his soul consigned to the flames of Hell these last twelve years. Schoff shuddered; he'd been a child of ten when his father forced him through the crowds in Lübeck's main square, taken a grip of his collar and forced him to watch men suffer the same terrible fate.

Small fires are the cruelest. The flames rise reluctantly, licking toes and ankles.

"Anabaptists," his father had hissed as he pointed at the writhing heretics, holding the back of Schoff's head so he couldn't look away. "Worse than animals."

Memories of fear were supposed to be fleeting, but Schoff still saw the flames rising from the meagre pyre, caressing calves and thighs, hands and torso. The dreadful stench of it. Only one of them had spoken; a young man, wild hair dancing in the waves of heat, screaming at the crowd until his vitals cooked.

"Remember," his father had ordered that evening. "They burned Anabaptists today, but it could have been us." He towered over his trembling son. "That young man's fate will be yours if you breathe a word of what I'm about to say."

When the city converted to Luther's new confession, Schoff's father had remained true to the old faith. He was a secret Catholic, raising his son to smile at Lutherans but despise them in his heart. There was no greater cause, Schoff

had learned, than the destruction of the new heresies, and the ultimate triumph of the one true Church.

Mathern Schoff crossed the River Tiber, walking east along a street lined with tenements cobbled together from blocks of ruined stone. Only once did the vista open out, granting a view of the fabled Pantheon in one direction and the high gates of the Rione Sant'Angelo in the other.

The crowds grew thicker around a group of men lifting the cracked flagstones, attacking the hard-packed earth with pickaxes. Schoff paused to ask a well-dressed merchant for directions to the Angelus. He spoke in Latin and received a courteous reply in the same language.

The university was an austere building. Schoff arranged his features into an appropriately solemn expression. He read the motto carved into the massive stone doorway – *To Contemplate and To Bear the Fruits of Contemplation to Others* – before knocking.

The door swung open.

“Mathern Schoff to see the Master of the Sacred Palace.”

A young monk led him through a beautiful garden. Schoff looked around in wonder. “What trees are these?”

“Orange and lemon,” the monk smiled. “Pistachio, olive, fig, palm and laurel.” He pointed to a crumbling fountain in the centre of the garden. “You saw the men digging in the road? Rebuilding an old aqueduct from the time of the Caesars. Another year and we’ll see this tumble of stone brought back to life.”

The monk led him to a bench. “The Master is busy. He’s unlikely to see you today.”

“Of course not.” The stone bench was cool after his walk through the city. Schoff leaned back and closed his eyes. Gregorio Spina was one of the most important men in

Rome; of course he wouldn't have time today. Schoff smiled, remembering the way his neighbours in Lübeck whispered when they mentioned Spina's name. "*The Master of the Sacred Palace has spies in every city in Europe. Ceaselessly, he urges the Pope to burn more heretics, condemn evangelicals in ever stronger terms.*"

Never before had anyone risen so rapidly through the ranks of the Dominican Order to become Master of the Sacred Palace. Spina was the Pope's private theologian and Chief Censor in charge of the Vatican's List of Forbidden Books, known in Latin as the *Indices Librorum Prohibitorum*.

Another monk arrived, silently gesturing for Schoff to follow him into a large scriptorium. The young lawyer had never seen so many books in one place, bound in different colours but strangely uniform in size; stacked waist-high in the centre of the room and all the way to the ceiling in the corners. Schoff followed his guide through the maze, past a score of seated prelates. Each held a quill in one hand, poised above pots of red ink.

"In here," the man's tone was abrupt. "The Master will see you now."

The Master? Schoff blinked; he'd been expecting a clerk, perhaps a secretary. A simple desk stood in the centre of the room, chairs to either side. A wheeled stepladder climbed to a series of high shelves, piled with papers. Tall windows, hung with gossamer silk, opened onto a private courtyard.

A man sat behind the desk, regarding Schoff with unwavering eyes. He was about fifty, slim and tanned, with glossy black hair surrounding a neat tonsure. He gestured to the empty chair, a diamond on his forefinger catching light from the windows and cutting a line through the gloom.

"Mathern Schoff of Lübeck."

The young man bowed: "Master, my father is dead." Spina's face remained expressionless. Schoff drew a deep breath: "I am here to put my life in your hands."

"To what purpose?"

Schoff hesitated. Spina's eyes were the colour of mahogany. "It was my father's last wish."

The Master of the Sacred Palace smiled. The effect was chilling. "Your father told you nothing of his work for me?"

Schoff shook his head, lacing his fingers to keep them still.

"He never talked to you of Epicurus?"

The peddler of pleasure? Schoff frowned. "My father insisted I read Dante. He would often test me in the evenings. The Epicureans occupy the sixth circle of Hell. They are the first heretics to appear, because they represent the ultimate heresy."

"*In this part we shall find the burial place of Epicurus and all his followers,*" quoted Spina, nodding. "*For whom the soul dies when the body dies.* Your father was preparing you to carry on his work."

The Master of the Sacred Palace rose to his feet. Schoff followed him through cloisters decorated with huge frescoes of the world: ships bobbed artfully between Europe and Africa, monsters guarded the Indies, but there was no sign of the Americas.

Spina took a seat beside the silent fountain. "Epicurus wrote three hundred discrete works during his life; the Church burned every last one, but the Devil is cunning. A poet named Lucretius wrote an account of his hero's philosophy. A single copy survived, hidden in a German monastery. When it was discovered, early in the last century, it unleashed *such* a plague."

Spina's mouth tightened. "I would rather face a dozen Luthers, ten thousand Mohamedans. Did your father explain Epicurus' Four-Part Cure?" He didn't wait for an answer.

“Do not fear God. Do not worry about death. What is good is easy to get. What is terrible is easy to endure. People are terrified – you will have noticed as you travelled south – the talk of witches, strange objects in the night sky, complaints of a new disease that destroys its victims’ flesh. Some claim it comes from the New World; others that it’s a punishment sent by God. Most see no point in trying to make such distinctions – they only wonder whether this world is still a place they can trust.”

There was only the sound of Spina’s voice, which never rose in volume, but seemed to fill with passion. The hairs rose on the back of Schoff’s neck. He did not understand everything Spina said; he could not ask for fear of breaking the spell.

“People are scared,” continued the Master of the Sacred Palace. “Easy prey for men like Luther, who sense the quickening of history, but lack the ability to understand. Petty prophets, with small-minded visions of pestilence and blood. The time of the final battle draws near – but these men are bakers, cobblers, coiners; ignoramuses whose scaremongering plays into the hands of the Antichrist.”

In the sunshine, Schoff saw lines around Spina’s dark eyes and ached to reassure him. “But the reforms agreed at the Council of Trent. The creation of the *Indices Librorum Prohibitorum*,” he felt his heart beat faster. “The expansion of the Tribunals of the Inquisition...”

“Steps in the right direction,” agreed Spina, standing and looking down at his visitor. “It was no accident that Lucretius’ poem was re-discovered. St. Paul warned that the Antichrist would come at a time of great upheaval, flooding the world with novelty – ideas, objects, knowledge, even a new continent – blinding the faithful with the low physical pleasures of life on earth. Epicurus

was also a pleasure-monger, who denied the immortality of the soul.”

Schoff forced himself to meet Spina's eyes. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Publicly, your father was an implacable enemy of Rome, a stance which brought him to the attention of a group of heretics. They will approach you too, soon after you return to Lübeck, and ask you to carry on his work.”

Schoff flinched. “My father was no spy.”

“Your father put aside personal honour for a higher cause.” Spina turned on his heel and strode through the cloisters. Schoff hurried to keep up, almost crashing into him as he stopped in front of a closed door.

“You can keep a secret, I trust?”

Schoff felt the colour rise in his cheeks. “I've spent my life surrounded by heretics and never revealed my true feelings, by word or deed.”

Spina's eyes bored into his. “The Antichrist sows doubt among the faithful. Do not misunderstand me, my friend, or underestimate my commitment to God's cause, but the fires of the Inquisition are a poor defence against his tricks. To defeat the Devil, we must study the ways of his servants.” Spina opened the heavy wooden door and ushered the lawyer inside.

Men in black robes sat at long tables, among a vast tangle of alchemical tools. Alembics – finely wrought stills to separate active ingredients from inert matter – and aludels to reduce them to ash and dust. Hessian crucibles, retorts and heating mantles. The walls were lined with vitrines displaying exotic plants and nautilus shells, bones and fossils, all neatly labelled. Everything was exquisitely crafted, from the copper pipes to the glass bowls and hardwood display

cases. None of the men looked up from their work, and few wore monk's tonsures.

Spina read Schoff's thoughts. "They have a special dispensation to wear their hair as laymen do. Sometimes it is necessary for them to move among their fellow men discreetly."

He led Schoff further into the room. At one long table – its surface scarred and pitted from a thousand experiments – a monk filled a large, earthenware vessel with sawdust, while another polished a thin sheet of copper.

"An experiment based on ancient Indian texts," explained Spina. "And here," he led Schoff on, "the Toys of Dionysus; a golden serpent, a phallus, an egg and spinning top. We also collect and investigate the knowledge of the ancients." Spina's voice was a painting, full of light and colour. "We are at war. It is our duty to fight the enemy with every available weapon."

Schoff could hear the beating of his own heart as he followed Spina into a small, private courtyard. He did not want to return to his grey city on the Baltic Sea.

"Let me stay, Master. Let me join you."

"Your place is in Lübeck, collecting intelligence on the Otiosi."

Schoff recoiled. The group of heretics Spina had mentioned? Even the name was repellent.

"They spread Epicurus' doctrine," continued Spina. "Their leader passes himself off as a harmless scholar, but make no mistake – Giacomo Vescosi is just as much a prophet of the Apocalypse as Luther."

"Of course," Schoff's voice rose. "Vescosi must be destroyed."

"And make a martyr of him?" Spina shook his head.

“The Lord is good, Schoff; *wherever the greatest danger lies, there you will find the path to Man's salvation.* Unwittingly, Vescosi and the Otiosi serve our purpose, sending mercenaries in pursuit of ancient manuscripts, studying them for references to the Devil's Library. Like us, they mean to discover the secret of its location.”

Spina's stare seemed to penetrate Schoff's soul. “Thousands upon thousands of heretical texts; a swamp of lies and error. Scrolls that belong in the Vatican Library to be studied by men trained against their seductions; if that proves impossible, they must be destroyed.

“But among the filth, like a diamond at the centre of the Devil's black heart, God has placed a treasure, a weapon to defeat the Antichrist and pitch his hordes back into Hell. There is a book among the countless volumes of the Devil's Library that will teach us to unchain soul from body, to move freely among the angels who flow around us like a hidden river. This world is an illusion Schoff, conjured by Satan to stop us reaching Paradise. The book I speak of will lay waste to his lies. It will give us the power to remake this world as God intended and no man need ever doubt again!”

Spina kissed Schoff on both cheeks. His dark eyes shone in the afternoon light. “Return home, Mathern Schoff of Lübeck. Denounce the true Church. Spit on the Eucharist if they make you, and pray each night for tidings of the Devil's Library.”

CHAPTER 2

Amsterdam, August 21st, 1561

Matthew Longstaff heard footsteps on the stairs, approaching his room in the eaves of a modest inn. He remained at the window, clear blue eyes tracing the squat towers of Amsterdam in the evening light. He was thirty-five years old and powerfully built from a decade's soldiering in the south – brutal work, but there were few honest trades open to a man without land or country.

His visitor knocked; three quick taps. From habit, Longstaff was armed – stiletto in his left boot, short blade strapped to the inside of his forearm, and a dagger taped beneath his short-waisted jerkin – but he wasn't expecting trouble.

“Come in.”

The door was unlocked. The man who entered was in his fifties, out of breath from climbing so many flights of stairs. He wore a black tunic and fanned himself with a wide-brimmed hat. Longstaff smiled. He'd known the Dutch merchant Quist for three years and liked him.

“Good to see you again, Meneer.”

Quist smoothed the tails of his long black coat and sat heavily on Longstaff's bed. The ropes were loose and the mattress sagged beneath his weight.

“Great Lord,” he shouted, falling backwards.

Longstaff reached out a hand, laughing as he helped Quist regain his balance.

“You have a commission for me?”

“Another book, my friend. Greek this time, written on middling parchment, neatly bound in red leather and inlaid with metal. You do know Greek?”

“I know the characters.”

“Good.” Quist’s face was lined, but the eyes sparkled as he searched his robe for a piece of paper. “The book we want is a thirteenth century copy of a manuscript by Aristarchus; *On The Planets, Their Characteristics and The Orbits They Describe Around The Sun.*”

Longstaff remained silent. A book of astronomy, from the title – perhaps they were hoping to find support for the theories of the Polish stargazer, Copernicus.

“Where is it?”

Quist spread his paper on the bed to reveal the floor plan of a large building. Longstaff counted at least two dozen rooms.

“You’re looking at the upper storey,” said Quist, placing his fingertip on a pair of windowless rooms in the centre. “The book is here.”

It wasn’t like Quist to play games. As far as Longstaff knew, the merchant was a member of a loose-knit group of antiquarians, well-funded amateurs with an eccentric desire to preserve the last remaining scraps of the past.

“What is this building?”

“Before Constantinople fell to the Turks – more than a hundred years ago now – the library there was the finest in the world... ”

“Constantinople?”

The Dutchman shook his head. “Emperor Paleologus put up a brave fight. Before he was killed at the end of a seven-week siege, he made it possible for many of his subjects to flee. His niece escaped with several hundred books.”

“Several hundred? She must have been a courageous woman.”

“Sophia Paleologina was an extraordinary woman,” replied Quist. “Her reward was marriage to Ivan III, brokered by Pope Paul III in an attempt to unify the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. She took her books with her when she went to Moscow. Today, they form the heart of her grandson’s library.”

Longstaff let out a short bark of laughter. “Moscow? You’re out of your mind.”

“We’re offering a substantial reward.”

Longstaff gestured at the hand-drawn map. “What building?”

“The Terem Palace, where the royal family have their apartments. We know the exact location of the book...”

“Suicide,” Longstaff traced a line around the sketch. “The Terem Palace stands within a citadel. The Russians have been building the walls for the last three hundred years.”

“You’ve shown great resourcefulness in the past.”

“I’m not negotiating, Quist. I won’t do it.”

The Dutchman walked to the window. “Give me one last chance to change your mind?”

“You’re wasting your time.”

Quist raised his hand. “You never talk about your past, Meneer Longstaff, but it wasn’t difficult to discover a few facts. You made quite a name for yourself, fighting with Il Medeghino in the south.”

“I am no longer a soldier.” There was a hard edge to Longstaff’s voice. He did not want to be reminded of his years in Italy.

“No longer much of anything.”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Longstaff drew a dagger from his sleeve. "What is this?"

The door swung open. Two men stood in the entrance. The first moved like a soldier. Longstaff raised the dagger.

"No need for that." The second man was richly dressed in a bottle-blue doublet. He wasn't handsome – the eyes were too small, nose too flat, the mouth too wide – but he carried himself with unmistakable authority.

"Matthew Longstaff," said Quist. "Allow me to introduce Sir Nicholas Bacon."

The newcomer turned to his bodyguard. "Wait outside. Come at my call." He looked hard at Longstaff before gesturing at the window. "Faces the docks. Deliberate on your part, or chance?"

An Englishman? Longstaff lowered the knife. Had they truly discovered so much of his past?

"Terrible waste," continued Sir Nicholas. "A man of your talents working as a thief."

Longstaff took a step forward. People were usually more circumspect in his company. "How I make my living is no business of yours."

"Must have been a wrench for you, exiled from England at such a young age and abandoned at the home of a Lübeck herring trader."

It wasn't possible. Longstaff turned to stare at Quist.

"Don't look at him, sir. Look at me. I've come a long way to make you an offer," Sir Nicholas stood with hands on his hips. "What would you risk for the chance to wear your father's name once more – walk his lands as their master?"

His father's name? Sir William Longstaff had owned an estate at Martlesham in Suffolk. Longstaff hadn't seen it since the age of nine. Memories were all that remained

of the only place he'd ever called home – green lawns and the small parlour where his father used to sit in the evenings. Sir William had been a great traveller, coming into contact with Luther's creed on the continent. Longstaff still remembered men arriving at Martlesham to construct a printing press. Four of them, shouting and joking in a language he couldn't understand. Soon after, pamphlets began to appear on the streets of Ipswich, Bury St. Edmunds, Cambridge, and finally London, which was when they came to the attention of the King. Henry VIII ordered Sir William to the scaffold, confiscated his property and banished his son from the country.

Longstaff spat: "There's no way back for me."

Sir Nicholas laughed. "I'm Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England, Longstaff. Give me a year of your life and I'll make it possible for you to return home with Elizabeth's blessing, and lay your father's ghost to rest."

Longstaff stared at Quist. "A small group of scholars and clerks?"

"We seek a mighty prize, my friend. The kind which brings powerful friends."

Longstaff missed the slight hesitation in the Dutchman's voice – when he might have added, "... and enemies." He was too busy remembering his final hours at the house in Suffolk. His father had gone to Cambridge for the day, and Longstaff had felt nothing but excitement when a score of the King's men arrived.

One of his father's oldest friends had ridden at their head; a well-built man named Jarrel, with a neat beard and crooked teeth. Longstaff had run forward, expecting to be grabbed beneath the arms and thrown into the air. A soldier seized him instead, and held him still while Jarrel directed

the rest to the stacks of pamphlets in the cellars and the printing press in the stables. Minutes later, Longstaff and the servants were up against a wall in the great hall, Jarrel pacing back and forth in front of them.

“By the King’s command, this estate is now mine. I hope you will find me a merciful master. There is no reason why unknowing service to a traitor should ruin your prospects of a secure future...”

Only Longstaff had fought, hands hooked like claws, aiming for the eyes. Jarrel had knocked him aside with ease. “As big a fool as your father.”

Quist’s map of the Terem Palace lay on the rumpled bed. Longstaff stared at the neat sketch without seeing it, his mind’s eye focused on another time and place; his father crashing through the heavy doors at Martlesham, sword drawn, his face a mask of fear and anger.

Longstaff had stared at him from the far side of the room, held fast in Jarrel’s arms, head yanked painfully to one side, knife at his throat. Sir William faltered in mid-stride – and his old friend laughed. Jarrel spoke, and Longstaff felt the knife-edge graze his soft flesh.

“A signed confession, or the boy dies.”

Quist perched at the end of the bed. Sir Nicholas shifted impatiently at the window. Longstaff could still refuse their offer. *And then what?* England would remain closed to him. He would lose Quist’s patronage. He could return to soldiering or become a thief in earnest, find a post as fencing master to an inbred princeling – each option worse than the last. Longstaff shook his head, and Quist’s drawing of the Terem Palace swam slowly into focus. The Dutch merchant had pointed at two adjoining chambers.

“What are these rooms?”

Quist smiled. “Ivan’s wardrobe and his library, but the Tzar rarely visits either. They’re nearly always empty.”

CHAPTER 3

Moscow, January 24th, 1562

Moscow seethed and festered in the winter months. The Square of the Conflagration at the heart of the city was a daily melée of fear and folly. Hawkers roared the virtues of hot bliny and home-made kvas, acrobats turned cartwheels and minstrels recited ballads, but nothing could lift the shadow cast by the high walls of Ivan IV's citadel.

Longstaff made his way through the press of people, snow crunching beneath his boots. Sparrow walked beside him; the dog was a cross – mastiff and greyhound, black as night against the dirty snow. Longstaff rested his hand on the hilt of his old *katzbalger* as he stepped over a drunk. The sword was nothing special, a straight, double-edged blade the length of his arm, but he'd grown accustomed to its weight and balance over the years.

The journey east had been almost pleasant. Travelling by boat and road through an unseasonably mild October, Longstaff had passed the time polishing his few remaining memories of Martlesham, excitement building at the thought of home. He had no desire to resurrect his father's trading empire, but with tentative, growing hope he remembered the fields around the old house, stretching as far as the eye could see.

He paused beside the extraordinary new church, eight unequal cupolas in all the colours of the rainbow, a splash of

joy in a city of snow and fear. He'd been busy since arriving in Moscow ten weeks earlier. He'd found lodgings, picked up a few words of the language and made contact with a group of Saamid wintering nearby. For a price, one was willing to harness his team of twelve dogs and drive Longstaff west. He wasn't trapped in the city until spring arrived, only for as long as it took him to acquire the book.

Longstaff turned his back on the church, hardly glancing at the citadel as he made for his lodgings. He pinched the inside of his forearm: *patience*. Ivan had been in residence throughout the winter, but was due to leave the city soon, leaving only a skeleton guard at the citadel.

Longstaff had found a place to stay, and an ostensible reason for being in Moscow, with a German merchant in a neighbourhood of small traders and artisans. The house was cramped – two small rooms on the first floor with a single open space for stock below.

He followed Sparrow up the narrow stairs and opened the door.

Herr Fischer was in his mid-fifties, narrow shoulders sloping to a round belly. Beneath the grey hair, his normally sour face was wreathed in smiles.

“Are you alright?” asked Longstaff.

“Never better. A messenger came today. The new Tzarina has invited Moscow's leading merchants to display their wares.”

Longstaff looked up. *Was this the chance he'd been waiting for?* “When?”

“Tomorrow. In front of the Terem Palace,” Herr Fischer threw open a chest, producing a bottle of spirits and two glasses. Longstaff had never seen him so animated.

“You'll take me with you, of course.”

Fischer froze: "Out of the question."

Longstaff reached for his purse. "Would one of Moscow's leading merchants appear without someone to do his fetching and carrying?"

"I have a boy. Our arrangement is for board and lodging."

"Arrangements change," Longstaff made an effort to soften his tone. Ten years ago, Herr Fischer had been one of the city's wealthiest merchants, before the English had forced a new route to Muscovy and smashed the German monopolies. "Your boy is a slack-jawed imbecile. Imagine the impression he'll make on the Tzarina and her court." Longstaff weighed the purse on his palm.

Fischer licked dry lips: "You'll do exactly as I say?"

"You have my word," said Longstaff.

*

The heavy cart rumbled over the ditch, which separated the Square of the Conflagration from the citadel. Herr Fischer turned on his seat, catching Longstaff's eye. "Don't speak," he whispered. "Don't look at anyone. Give them a single reason to think ill, and they'll murder you. Then me, then your mutt."

Guards stopped them at the gates. The merchant produced his invitation. Even after so many years in the city, he still spoke Russian with a heavy accent.

Longstaff looked up as the guards waved them on, narrowing his blue eyes against the pale winter sun. The high walls bristled with cannon; soldiers stared down from the gate tower.

The citadel was a city within a city. A long wooden barracks led away from the gates, warehouses to the left,

then a cluster of towers and spires beyond an expanse of open land. Longstaff sat beside the merchant, hoping he cut a believable figure in the servant's smock he wore over his leather jerkin – a bodyguard pressed into menial service by his tight-fisted master.

Fischer shifted on the hard seat. “Be calm,” said Longstaff softly. “Nothing is going to happen.”

The wagon rumbled past a tall stake set in the frozen earth. A pale woman, in a thin white dress, traced stumbling circles round a rigid corpse. She was talking to herself, arms wrapped around her body for warmth. A shudder ran through the merchant's soft frame.

“Prince Yuri,” he muttered. “That woman is his wife. If she can protect her husband's body from scavengers for twelve days, the Tzar will let her have it for burial. As a child, they say Ivan tore the feathers from living birds and dropped puppies from the citadel walls. Before her death, the first Tzarina was able to curb his grosser depredations. The new wife's an illiterate fifteen-year old from Kabarda. She does nothing but encourage him.”

Longstaff forced his weather-beaten features into a smile, masking his disgust. The Russians were tough bastards – previous rulers had hardly showered them with the milk of human kindness – and even they'd taken to calling this one ‘the Terrible’.

Flanked on three sides by stone churches, the great square was crowded with servants, guards and at least two-dozen of Ivan's boyars – his men-at-arms. Fischer steered towards a group of fellow merchants, arranging their wares in the shadow of the Terem Palace. Longstaff breathed a sigh of relief; from the outside, at least, it matched the sketch

Quist had given him. A two-storey wooden building, with a narrow gallery running round three sides and a wide staircase leading to the main entrance. If the Dutchman was right, Ivan's windowless library was at the centre of the first floor.

Fischer reined to a halt. "We have work to do."

Longstaff touched a finger to his brow, lowering one side of the cart and helping transform it into a make-shift stall. Fischer handed him a bowl of water. "Wash your hands before unpacking the merchandise."

Some of the traders sold fabrics from the East; others dealt in delicacies from the South. Herr Fischer had been a wholesaler once, Longstaff knew, until the arrival of the English forced him to part with Flemish linens at a loss and pay more for Russian furs and metals than they fetched in Bruges. Now he specialised in finished clothes from Italy and France, clocks and musical instruments from Germany, and curiosities from the new world.

It was noon when the Tzarina appeared, muffled in fur, at the top of the staircase. Twenty men and women accompanied her out of the Terem Palace, while dozens more rushed to join them from the square. The women were dressed to imitate their Empress, the men wearing layers of brightly coloured shirts to keep out the cold. Each had a dagger in his belt and a thick beard cut square to the chest.

The company moved quickly. The merchant pulled his fine robe across his round belly and pinched his cheeks until they glowed. He was everywhere at once, complimenting clients, laughing at their jokes. He sold three clocks, a dozen gowns and an emerald necklace without losing sight of the Tzarina. Fischer might be a coward and a cheat, but the German was a consummate salesman.

The Tzarina was a silent presence at the centre of the storm – a child with a thin, bird-like face. She pointed to a large beauty case on Fischer’s stall and he bowed so deeply his fingers brushed the snow. The Tzarina turned away, drawing the crowd to the next wagon.

The merchant smiled at Longstaff. “She’ll never pay, but her patronage is worth a fortune!”

Longstaff looked away. In the distance, Prince Yuri’s wife ploughed her circles in the snow. With Fischer distracted by the Tzarina’s Treasurer, Longstaff retrieved the beauty case and joined the line of merchants’ seconds carrying bolts of cloth, tapestries, clocks and sweetmeats into the Terem Palace. He dropped his shoulders, trying to make himself as small as possible. A guard barked. Longstaff lowered his eyes, following the seconds into a vast storeroom.

It was dark inside, the winter sun barely penetrating high, mica-filled windows.

A volley of commands sounded outside. Alarmed, a young merchant’s assistant dropped a packing case. Longstaff kept walking, past chests and rough-woven sacks, waiting for someone to stop him.

A boyar climbed the wide staircase, boots clattering on the wooden boards. “Prince Vorotynsky is resisting arrest!”

There was a stunned silence in the room, everyone knew of the famous conqueror of Kazan. It seemed another of Ivan’s closest advisers had fallen from favour. Longstaff heard the distant clash of steel on steel. He crouched, to set the beauty case down in a corner.

“All of you out!” roared the Captain of the Guard. The seconds dropped their burdens and fled. Longstaff didn’t move. He counted to five, heard the storeroom door slam shut and the sound of fighting fade into silence.

He held his breath. Had he seized an opportunity sent by heaven, or embarked on a path to suicide? Longstaff drew his dagger, certain the storeroom door was about fly open. They would try to take him alive, save him for torture and execution. It would only take a misplaced word from Fischer, a headcount at the citadel gates. And Sparrow? Longstaff shook his head; he could rely on the dog at least. He willed Fischer to pack up and leave, return to his cramped home in the city and pray – if he valued his life.

The door remained shut. Hardly two hours past noon, the room was already beginning to melt into darkness. Longstaff kept low, flinching every time the floorboards creaked above him. He looked up, thinking of the path he would have to take in the dead of night.

CHAPTER 4

The Terem Palace was silent. With luck, the guards would be dozing against their pikes. Longstaff used dirt to darken his face and removed his white shirt. The short-waisted jerkin he wore beneath was padded and lined with silk. Over the years, he'd sewn half a dozen small medallions into the lining; campaign medals from Metz and Marciano, as well as tokens of friendship and remembrance from fallen comrades.

Would he join them now? Fear threatened in the darkness. If the Tzar's men caught him, it wouldn't be a clean death. Gossips in the city claimed Ivan spent hours in the citadel dungeons each night, personally extracting confessions from men he suspected of treason.

Longstaff opened the storeroom door and peered into the corridor. Empty. Moonlight filtered through the gallery windows on the first floor. Thick carpets swallowed his footsteps up a wide flight of stairs. He tested each tread, praying the next wouldn't betray him.

He moved through the palace like a ghost, following the directions Quist had given him. A lone soldier leaned against the wall at the end of a corridor, grey cloak over his chain mail coat, whip curled at his belt.

Longstaff approached in shadow, listening to the even rhythm of the guard's breathing. The man was asleep on his feet, cap pulled low over his eyes, a key hanging from a hook on his belt. Was the door locked or unlocked? Longstaff held his knife a fingers-breadth from the guard's throat and

reached for the handle with his free hand. Unlocked. He pushed it open an inch, terrified it would creak, expecting to see the guard's eyes flicker open. The door swung open on silent hinges. Longstaff slipped inside and closed the door.

Figures loomed from the shadows.

He stabbed, wildly. Felt the knife-point strike cloth and hair.

Dummies. Lit by a single, flickering candle and clothed in Ivan's ceremonial habits; the lesser and the greater, both lavishly ornamented with gold and jewels. Longstaff breathed a silent sigh of relief, sweat cooling on his neck as he looked around. The walls were lined with rows of clothing: furs, tunics, boots and half a dozen crowns. An open door on the far side of the room led to a second chamber.

Longstaff crept across the dressing room. He put his cheek to the doorframe and listened for signs of life.

Nothing. He peered inside, at a strange mixture of armoury and library. Two of the walls were covered with weapons: straight and curved swords, a lance, a poleaxe, a dozen knives and daggers, several pistols. On the third, a huge icon of Christ hung above a heavy wooden chest. And, just as Sir Nicholas had promised, the fourth wall was covered in books and scrolls.

A cat lay asleep among furs on a divan in the centre of the room. A glass stood beside a stoppered decanter of wine on a low table. Longstaff picked it up – a film of dusty sediment suggested no one had been here in days. There was a book on the table, bound in poor-quality leather. He flipped it open. The frontispiece was familiar; he'd seen copies in Germany and the Low Countries; a chronicle of the atrocities committed a century ago by Vlad Tepes Dracul of Wallachia. The new printing presses were fuelling a thirst for sensation and horror.

Longstaff moved to Ivan's collection of scrolls and books. He forced himself to work methodically, look at each in turn. An ancient timber groaned and the breath caught in his throat. *A small book, neatly bound in red leather and inlaid with metal.* He scanned the shelves, feeling panic uncoil in his gut. There, tucked away at the end of one high shelf – haltingly, he made out the Greek characters: *On The Planets, Their Characteristics and The Orbits They Describe Around The Sun.*

Footsteps, the soft murmur of a man's voice. There was no time to hide, only to throw himself down behind the heavy chest.

A painfully thin man, stoop-shouldered and hollow-chested, walked unsteadily through the door. He held a staff in one hand, tipped with an iron point. The callus on his forehead was well known in the city – the result of hours prostrated in front of icons. Ivan the Terrible. He looked nearer fifty than thirty; hooded eyes lost in his lined face. What in God's name was he doing here, alone, in the middle of the night? The Tzar poured wine into the dirty glass, drained it at a single swallow and lay back on the divan. From the way he moved, it wasn't his first of the night. A shudder ran across the sharp features as the cat licked his fingers.

Minutes crawled past like hours as Longstaff waited for the gentle rasp of snoring. He rose silently, shoulders cramping, the book in one hand and his knife in the other.

Ivan turned in his sleep. Longstaff froze, staring at the Tzar's lank hair, the mottled skin, a thin ribbon of spittle running into his sparse beard.

Please God, let him go on sleeping. Longstaff stole across the room, his eyes fixed on the Tzar. He reached the outer chamber, ears cocked for danger, waiting in the darkness

until his heart was calm. He hid Aristarchus' book in his jerkin and opened the door to the corridor.

The guard jumped smartly to attention, eyes widening in horror as he realised his mistake. Longstaff buried his knife in the man's throat, wrapped an arm around his neck to stop the blood, forced him silently to his knees and held him there until the body went limp.

Ivan's snores reached him from the adjacent chamber. He dragged the body inside and bundled it behind a tapestry. Longstaff's sleeve was now drenched in blood, his hands were shaking. He pinched the inside of his forearm. *Be patient; find a way out of the Terem Palace, reach the citadel gates before dawn.* He stepped into the silent corridor.

Sentries would be guarding the entrance below. *The gallery?* Longstaff locked Ivan's rooms with the guard's key and crept towards a door at the far end of the corridor, secured with a simple iron bolt. He eased it back and slipped outside.

The freezing night air was like glass in Longstaff's throat. Guards stood round a brazier in the centre of the square, torches burned at the entrance to the church and at regular intervals on the walls beyond. The country was at peace, Longstaff reminded himself. No one was looking for him. The Tzar was safe – feared and loved in equal measure, worshipped as the father of his people. Aside from the few bright spots of torchlight, the citadel was dark and silent.

Longstaff dropped ten feet into shadow. He stayed close to the palace, trailing fingertips along the wooden wall, then along the rough stone walls of the Church of the Twelve Apostles. Now the ground was open, nearly fifty yards to the complex of barracks and warehouses beside the gates. Dawn approached. Longstaff put his head down and ran.

He dropped into a crouch beside the barracks, panting, waiting for the rush of guards. Minutes passed, people stirred on the other side of the wooden wall. Longstaff's fingers cramped on the knife-hilt and still no one came. The barracks offered cover until he was twenty yards from the gates, beside a train of covered wagons. Beyond them, grim-faced guards roused carters from their blankets.

Another minute and the rising sun would strip Longstaff of his last remaining hope. He crawled to the nearest cart, rolled silently on the unpaved ground and pulled himself up, limbs crossed around the heavy axle. He heard a shout and several answering cries, before the wagon rumbled slowly through the gates.

The city was the Tzar's first line of defence, a maze where attackers could be cut down at will. In a dark alleyway, Longstaff rolled clear of the cart – sprawling like a drunk in the gutter. No one gave him a second glance. The wagon train was still in earshot when he picked himself up and hurried to the merchant's house.

He found Sparrow curled beside the door. Herr Fischer was inside, still wearing yesterday's clothes. He turned when he heard Longstaff, looking past him with bloodshot eyes.

"You're alone."

Longstaff nodded. "No one noticed I was missing?"

"What in God's name were you thinking? I nearly had a heart-attack when you didn't reappear."

Cannon-fire. Both men flinched. Church bells rang as Fischer turned to the window and scanned the street. "What have you done?"

"Nothing." *Ivan must have found the dead guard.* "Calm down, Herr Fischer. We're safe." He poured a glass of spirits for the merchant. "Everything is arranged. I've paid a Saamid

huntsman to drive me west. Take me to their camp beyond the city walls. An hour's work and you'll never hear from me again."

Longstaff produced three gold coins from his jerkin. "It'll be like I never existed."

The merchant shook his head. Longstaff slapped him. "Think. What will happen if they find me here?" He withdrew a fourth coin. "You have no choice, Herr Fischer."

Longstaff lay beneath a sheet of canvas, wrapped in his heavy cavalryman's coat, pack and weapons beside him on the flat bed of Fischer's cart. Were they heading for the Saamid camp, as he'd instructed? He pulled back a corner of the cover. There was Fischer, Sparrow beside him on the hard wooden bench. They were moving north, away from the citadel. The cart jolted to a stop as they reached the outer wall. *Remember what I told you, Fischer. Ivan has a long list of enemies; it will never occur to him to suspect a humble merchant's second.* He braced himself, expecting to see the canvas pulled back, a guard's face sneer down at him. Tethers snapped against the ox's hide. The cart moved again, passing through the gates of Moscow.

CHAPTER 5

Lübeck, January 31st, 1562

Mathern Schoff sat in shadow at a chipped wooden table, dark robe pulled close around his body. The Golden Cow had a reputation in Lübeck as a place where the sons of good families went to be fleeced by card-sharps and swindlers. Not at all the kind of establishment he would have chosen.

Four years had passed since his meeting with Gregorio Spina; four years of living among these heretics, accepting their invitations to dinner, settling their disputes. The Otiosi had made contact six months after his return from Rome, in the form of a visiting Bremen merchant. As Spina had predicted, the man came armed with letters, indisputable proof of his father's involvement in this cabal of blasphemy. Forewarned, Schoff had performed the part of a proud son, face shining as the merchant talked.

Slowly, he'd earned their trust. Each autumn he sent Gregorio Spina an encrypted report of his activities. In all other respects, he was a loyal servant of the Otiosi. He took their oaths, served as a postbox, and provided money or lodgings. The members were dull and trusting. He found an odd pleasure in repeating their heretical notions, seeing the faces glow with enthusiasm, but hated dealing with the mercenaries they hired to find their books; unpredictable, violent men.

Gaetan Durant, it appeared, was an exception to this rule. The Frenchman occupied a table ten paces away. Schoff had

recognised him easily from the description he'd been sent – tall and slim, invariably dressed in black, with dark hair combed straight back from a pale face.

Durant also carried himself like a gentleman; he'd swept into the tavern as if it belonged to him, barely tasting a glass of wine before getting drawn into a game of cards – hardly appropriate for someone about to attend a confidential meeting. He looked more a like a man in need of distraction, as he lounged at the table and baited the young dandy opposite.

Schoff sat quietly at his corner table, observing the man he'd come to meet. Unusually for a bookfinder, Durant had sought out the Otiosi, initiating contact through a Bruges bookseller and proving his worth on several occasions since. He'd accept a fee, or course – what mercenary wouldn't? – but claimed his true goal was enlisting the aid of the Otiosi in the search for his missing daughter.

Durant and the dandy played Landsknecht with a pack of block-printed cards. A simple game, named after the German pikemen who'd invented it. Schoff could hear their conversation clearly, even amidst the press of men and whores.

"You're bluffing," the young man's cheeks were pink with alcohol. A gentleman of fashion from a wealthy family, Schoff judged, who didn't object to losing, but expected flattery in return.

"Perhaps," the Frenchman's voice dripped with contempt. "Tell me, did it take you long to dress this morning? It's admirable, the way you've judged the exact point at which breeches become too brash..."

"Enough!" A note of triumph in his voice, the young man placed his cards face-up on the table.

Schoff caught the Frenchman's scent – a cloying perfume. Durant looked bored as he flicked over his cards.

The dandy stared in disbelief. Schoff could hear him breathe, great indignant snorts of air.

“It's not possible.”

The Frenchman raised an eyebrow. “What are you suggesting?”

The young man lurched to his feet. “I'm not suggesting a damn thing. I'm calling you a cheat.” He stumbled over his stool and bumped the neighbouring table. Dice fell from a gambler's hand. An ominous silence descended on the room, broken by the sound of ivory on flagstones.

Schoff held his breath. The Frenchman merely laughed. “It'll be the Devil's own task for these gentlemen to discover which dice were loaded with quicksilver and which with lead, sponges, chaff and coal.”

Mutters rose in the dark tavern.

Durant looked around. “You see. No one likes being called a cheat.”

The dandy drew his sword. A fencing blade, hardly more than a toy.

Pressed against the rough wall, Schoff watched in horrified fascination as the Frenchman placed both hands on the tabletop. He rose with intimidating precision, not stopping until the point of the sword pressed against his chest.

The boy's eyes sought support from the tavern's patrons. Some stared at him, some studied their shoes. Two men made discreetly for the door.

“When you threaten a man,” said Durant, “have the courtesy to look at him.”

The boy lost his nerve. “I apologise. I spoke without

thinking.” Stiffly, he walked between the tables and pushed through the thick velvet curtain.

Durant threw back his head and laughed. Every other man in the room was silent. The Frenchman had called them cheats and chased away an easy mark. Schoff waited to see them stand and issue challenges. Wasn't that how these things were done? He watched in near disbelief as the card-sharps and gamblers returned to their games. Durant resumed his seat, idly toying with his winnings.

Schoff stared at his glass. Should he leave? What could the Otiosi want with a man like this?

Durant was staring right at him. Despite his efforts to remain anonymous, it seemed the Frenchman had recognised him at once. Schoff took a deep breath and nodded at the chair opposite. Loudly, Durant scraped the coins into his purse and approached with a swagger.

“Herr Schoff?”

“Sit.”

“Don't mind if I do.” He hooked an elbow around the back of the chair.

Schoff leaned forward, keeping his voice low. “I've never seen such irresponsible behaviour. The Church in Rome, a dozen princes here in the north – they want us dead. The new humanist philosophy is a direct threat to their own authority.”

“I know, I know. A group of scholars and clerks, whose only protection is anonymity,” the Frenchman waved a hand. “It was *me* who sought out the Otiosi. Not the other way round.”

Schoff inclined his head. “To offer your services in return for help finding your daughter. I believe her name is Laure?”

Durant's expression hardened. "Is there word?"

Schoff drew out the moment before shaking his head. "The message I was given is that you should not give up hope."

The Frenchman replied with a smile of such bitterness he was forced to look away.

"What is it this time," asked Durant. "Another book?"

The lawyer folded his arms, suddenly determined to make the Frenchman pay for his arrogance. "Perhaps it's time we found someone more reliable."

Durant sighed. "Just tell me, Schoff. Your superiors know my worth, even if you don't."