
Opening Extract from...

The Sky's Dark Labyrinth

Written by Stuart Clark

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PART I
Ascension

The roads that lead man to knowledge are as wondrous
as that knowledge itself.

JOHANNES KEPLER

1
Rome, Papal States
1600

Scarlet robes were the only sure way to achieve anonymity in public. Even in the narrowest streets, people would shy away as though the garments hid a leper. When physical distance was impossible because of the crush, they lowered their eyes and scuttled past, driven by the fear of judgement. Only children would gaze openly.

Most of the other cardinals took litters so that they could enjoy looking down on their charges, and escape the worst of the summer stench, but Cardinal Bellarmine liked being among the people. Only from within the crowds could he truly feel their respect, their fear. That man in the emerald silk had the clothes of rank and privilege, but not the demeanour. With eyes darting this way and that, his garments were probably bought from the profits of short-changing his customers. Then there was the glutton leaning against the wall, still rubbing his paunch from last night's meal that could doubtless have served an entire family. And the blonde woman with tired eyes, bare shoulders and bold cleavage; her sin was clear for all to see. All of them avoided his gaze, becoming awkward and self-conscious. Such reactions convinced Bellarmine of the need for his work to continue. It gave him courage, especially on a day like today.

'I don't understand why the prisoner has remained unsentenced for so long. He was arrested seven years ago. As a heretic, he should have been burned within fifteen days,' said his companion.

'Capital punishment is a last resort, young man.'

'With respect, I'm thirty years old, hardly a young man.'

'You're half my age, Cardinal Pippe. You're a young man to me.'

They were squeezing through a passageway, knocking shoulders as they headed out of the town while the throng plodded in. The sun was not yet high enough to slice into the alley, making it a popular shortcut for those eager to escape the heat-drenched boulevards. As

the pale stone walls funnelled the pedestrians together, Pippe accidentally placed his sandalled foot in the running gutter. He growled in disgust.

'But it shows weakness to prevaricate like this. Rome must be strong. In the north of Europe, I've heard that witches are burned every day.'

'We are not Lutheran barbarians with their superstitions and summary executions. Everything must have due legal process – even for a heretic,' said Bellarmine.

They turned into a wider street, the sun now fully in their eyes. It was no less of a crush, and the cardinals were still walking against the flow of people. A farmer drove an old sow patiently around them, the smell of the farmyard lingering long after the animal passed from view. Young men with flapping shirtsleeves dodged in and out, hurrying to find work for the day. Scrawny dogs followed scents, and a young girl waved the grimy air away from her nose as her mother dragged her onwards.

Old houses – survivors from the sacking of the city seventy-three years ago – lined the dirt road, which was furrowed with cart tracks and cracked for want of rain. A low cloud of dust shrouded feet and ankles.

A family had chosen that day to move home. Their belongings spewed out of the door across the dirt, slowing people down and causing much head-shaking and muttering. Their donkey flicked its tail at the buzzing flies, occasionally catching one of the passers-by. A burly man lashed another chair onto the donkey's already laden back and, in the midst of it all, the mother did her best to organise the swarming children into some kind of team.

The crack of trampled wood brought a thunderous glare from the man and an apology from someone in the crowd. The two clerics took their turn in stepping around the chattels and the children.

'Why do these people clutter their lives so?' asked Pippe, openly staring at the jumble.

'It is how they define themselves. The rich have land; the poor have knick-knacks.' Bellarmine dabbed his forehead with a lace-trimmed handkerchief. On any other day he might have been amused by the young man's annoyance.

'Shouldn't they turn to God for definition?'

'They do that too.'

They paused at a crossroads to allow a small cart to rumble by. Pulled by a slender boy, it was piled high with bolts of cheap cloth that not even the sun could brighten. Still, it was a start for him. Pippe tapped his foot impatiently, raising more dust. 'I have read that the prisoner talks of the Earth moving through the heavens.'

'We cannot burn him for that; the Church has no position on those teachings.'

'But, Cardinal Bellarmine, the Bible talks of the Sun moving across the sky.' He flung an arm upwards to the brilliant blue dome.

The older man ignored the gesture and began walking once more. 'I agree. The Sun's motion is obvious. I have talked to Father Clavius of the Jesuits . . .'

'The Jesuits.' Pippe spoke the name as if it were a curse. 'More layers of grey. Why must we continually seek their approval on matters that are so clearly black and white?'

Bellarmine glanced around the crowd, satisfying himself that no one had taken any notice of the outburst. 'We need the Jesuits,' he told the younger cardinal. 'Their missionaries are fearless. They are staunching the spread of Lutherism across Europe every day.'

'But they seem more interested in natural philosophy than theology.'

'Not all of them. But, since you mention it, natural philosophy is interwoven into our theology. It remains as it was handed down by Aristotle. The Lutherans attack us there because they think it's our weak spot, but the Jesuits can defend us; their mathematicians are without equal. Are you old enough to remember when Pope Gregory ordered ten days of October to be dropped, to bring the calendar back in line with the seasons?'

'I was twelve in 1582, of course I remember it,' said Pippe wistfully. 'How could I not remember it? My birthday falls on one of the days skipped that year. A hard lesson for a twelve year old who was left wondering if he'd have to wait another twelve months to turn thirteen.'

'Father Clavius made those calculations,' said Bellarmine. 'The old way of calculating the length of a year had thrown Easter into

confusion. Now, thanks to the Jesuit method, we have the most accurate calendar in the world, and the Lutherans are still arguing about whether to swallow their pride and adopt it. The Jesuits have put us ahead.'

'And they know it. They're arrogant. The Black Pope . . .'

Bellarmine grabbed Pippe by the arm and dragged him to a nearby doorway. 'Who have you heard call him that?'

Pippe stared at Bellarmine.

Bellarmine demanded again, but Pippe did not answer.

'You refer to the head of the Jesuits as the Praepositus Generalis, never as the . . . that term,' said Bellarmine.

'But there are rumours he's going behind our backs, advising the Pope privately, rather than working with the cardinals.'

Bellarmine shook his head curtly. 'Jesuit Catholicism is not in doubt.'

'Are you afraid of them?'

Bellarmine looked away. Eventually he said, 'If the Church's hierarchy is no longer simple, it is because times demand it. The Pope will always be the head, but the Jesuits are now the backbone.'

Pippe lifted his chin. 'Well, I don't trust them.'

'Stop talking, cardinal, before you say something that both of us will regret.' Pippe frowned, then looked directly at Bellarmine. 'You're one of them . . .'

Bellarmine nodded slowly, watching the effect of his admission. Pippe bit his lip. For a moment, it looked as if he might flee, but he controlled himself and stood his ground. 'I didn't know,' he said meekly.

'I say this as a friend, it's better to have Jesuit respect than contempt. Now let us put this conversation behind us, along with this reeking doorway.' Bellarmine cut back into the street, forcing Pippe to catch him up.

'Now, as I was saying, I've spoken to Father Clavius, and he assures me the ideas of Copernicus that Giordano Bruno advocates are unworkable. Ingenious but unworkable. They require even more mathematics than the method they're designed to replace, and their predictions for the positions of the planets are less accurate than traditional methods. The philosophers will reject Copernican ideas on those grounds alone.

Of much greater concern are Giordano's comments about Christ's divinity. You have read the reports?'

'Yes, cardinal. He believes that Christ was just a man skilled in the arts of magic.'

Bellarmine nodded. That was only the start of it. Bruno also refuted the transubstantiation of the sacrament into the blood and body of Christ, and openly denied the Virgin birth. 'His list of heresies is a long one. I'm afraid for him.'

'Afraid for him? We should be afraid for Rome. We cannot risk another Martin Luther. The world still reels from his wickedness. Half of Europe's Catholics cleaved off into Lutheran heresy because of his demonic vision.'

'That, young man, is why I have to end this business with Giordano one way or another today.'

The pair arrived at a quieter part of town. Though just a few turns from the main streets, the people had all but vanished, the hubbub dissolved in the soupy air. The calm was eerie, and Bellarmine shuddered as the gaol's oak door scraped open.

'Welcome, gentlemen, it's not often we have such distinguished visitors.' The gaoler fussed around them as if they were much loved dinner guests. Bellarmine remained silent as their host raised a flaming torch and led them down a flight of spiral steps. At a small doorway, the gaoler flicked his cape over his shoulder. 'He won't give you any trouble.'

As he unlocked the door, Bellarmine crouched to peer into the dark cell. He could make out nothing, not even the dimensions of the silent room. Only the stink of an unwashed body betrayed the presence of someone inside.

'You'll need this,' said the gaoler, handing him the torch.

Bellarmine edged inside and stood up. Pippe craned to see over his shoulder. The floor was covered in straw, and the reek grew stronger.

'Giordano, it is Robert Bellarmine.'

There was no answer. Bellarmine called again.

A coiled figure was discernible in a corner, and Bellarmine feared that he was too late, that Giordano had simply been left to rot. But the prisoner lifted a trembling hand to shield his face from the torchlight.

His hair was a shoulder-length frizz of grey. His eyes were screwed shut like a newborn pup. It took a long time for them to open. Bellarmine waited. He could feel Pippe's impatience behind him but only when Bruno's eyes flickered with something that could have been recognition did Bellarmine speak again.

'I understand what you must feel.'

Giordano did not move.

'These past seven years . . . I have come to know you, to love you. I want to save you.' He offered the palm of his free hand to the prisoner, whose cracked lips began to move. His voice was a barely audible rasp.

'Fetch me water,' Bellarmine barked over his shoulder. There was a scuffling, followed by a damp wooden cup being thrust at him. He took the vessel with his free hand and held it to Bruno's lips. Pippe removed the torch from his other hand. Bruno's face was cast orange by the flames and his moving lips made words. 'Set me free . . . I will teach my works.'

'Your works are flawed. You cannot be set free until you let go of those beliefs,' said Bellarmine. 'Only Vatican theologians are permitted to interpret the Scriptures. Don't make the same mistake as the Lutherans – translating the Bible into German so that any man can draw a conclusion. It leads to confusion and collapse. You should know that.'

Bruno twitched.

'You risk death if you do not recant. Time is running out.'

'Then deliver me into God's hands.'

'Not God's hands, Giordano. You risk damnation for your beliefs.'

'The Devil will be saved too.'

'That decides it,' hissed Pippe. 'Rank heresy.'

Bellarmine lifted his hand to silence the younger cardinal.

'The Devil is beyond salvation, Giordano,' he said mildly. 'Our greatest theologians tell us so. We cannot pick and choose what we believe. Authority is handed down from one echelon to the next, with all our beliefs flowing like a river from the fountain of God. This cannot be questioned; the Church derives its strength from unity. Do not trouble yourself with matters of interpretation. How can you achieve more than the legions of cardinals who have pored over the Holy Book for centuries and refined our understanding to perfection?'

Bruno stared into the darkness.

Bellarmine felt the stone in his chest grow heavier. He was unable to keep the pleading from his voice. 'A simple recantation is all that we need from you, some act of sincere contrition. Otherwise you strike at the authority of the Church, and we cannot allow that.'

Bruno's eyes suddenly widened in the flickering light. Bellarmine's breath quickened and he leaned closer. 'Yes?'

'I have found God,' whispered Bruno. 'He is not some ethereal being but he is all around us, he is in everything . . .'

Something dark stirred in Bellarmine. 'No, Giordano, no. God stands away from his creation. You mustn't . . .'

'And the Holy Spirit? It is the very soul of the Earth beneath our feet.'

The dread grew, overwhelming Bellarmine's compassion. He locked eyes with Bruno. 'You speak of the underworld, the Kingdom of Hell. I cannot allow you to place God there, Giordano.'

'Kill me, cardinal, I invite it. I demand it. I will have the validation of knowing I was right – of taking my rightful place at God's side. When the time comes for you to kneel before me, I will be ready with my judgement, ready to send you all to Hell.'

There was no mockery in Bruno's tone. Bellarmine fought for breath. He grasped at the stone wall and hauled himself upright, sucking the fetid air into his lungs. 'You are insane, dangerously insane.' He whirled to leave the cell, colliding with Pippe and the gaoler. Sparks flew from Pippe's torch. 'There can be no earthly redemption for this man.' Bellarmine took the spiral steps two, three at a time, gathering his robes so as not to trip. His lungs screamed for fresh air. 'We have no choice but to commit him to God's mercy for final judgement.'

A fortnight later, Bellarmine awoke with the first hints of dawn. For a while he watched the ochre shafts of light cross his room. The first wafts of incense from the chapels reached his nose. He rose to wash himself but something was wrong. The water, usually so refreshing, stung his face. He stared at his hands, and into the bowl beneath them, seeing the deep lines and bulbous nose of his rippling reflection.

Then he remembered the day.

He kneeled immediately by his bed, welcoming the jolt of pain as his aching knees struck the floor. He searched himself for remorse or

doubt, or anything that would need atonement. He found none. He interlaced his bony fingers and dipped his head in prayer.

There was a sharp rap on his door. Pippe's face appeared. 'Are you coming to the piazza after Matins?'

Bellarmine swallowed, shook his head.

Pippe began to protest but a sharp look silenced him. 'As you wish.' He withdrew.

Bellarmine prayed for God to show mercy on Bruno's soul, so close now to its release.

After the morning's formal prayers, Bellarmine arrived at his office, and was assailed by memories of the first time the condemned man had been brought to him: a boyish demeanour with Dominican fringe and an endearing warmth. And a naivety that had led to this disaster. He tried to banish the images by working, but concentration was a shy visitor that morning.

Later, a dark twist of movement caught his eye. Breathing heavily, he rose to look out of the window. It was smoke, spiralling upwards from the market square. From this distance, it was impossible to tell if his request for a fast fire had been heeded. If it had, the fumes could well have overcome Bruno, sparing him the flames.

The shouts of a cheering crowd drifted on the breeze. Bellarmine's mouth dried. Pippe had been right; he should have been there at the end. In a better world, executions would be conducted in private, but, until that day, the jeering masses must bear witness, so that the warning could be carried onwards.

Goodbye, Giordano, he mouthed, *God receive you and bless you*.

Another victim of a world eager for change, where none was needed.

How many must share your fate before the Catholic Church is restored throughout Europe?

2
Prague, Bohemia

Death danced in Prague. Every hour, the tiny skeletal figure held up an hourglass and beckoned to those in the market square. He was accompanied by Vanity, in the guise of a man raising a looking-glass, Greed, depicted as a merchant shaking a purse, and an Infidel, dressed in Turkish robes.

On this particular day, as the noon bell tolled and the macabre clockwork jig played out, an astronomer stood in front of the town clock. He studied the golden icons on the face of the timepiece. Each represented the current position of a celestial object: the Sun in Libra and the Moon in Aries, edging towards full roundness.

'We arrive at a favourable time,' he said.

'Let's hurry, husband. It's damp, and these bags are heavy.'

He relieved his plump wife of a bundle and hoisted his own from the ground, then turned to the small girl beside him. 'Are you ready to move on, Regina?'

The girl carried a roll of clothing under one arm and a rag doll under the other. 'Astrid is tired, Papa. I have to carry her as well.'

'We'll soon be there,' he said, as much for his own benefit as hers. They set off across the market square, weaving through the crowds. Regina squeaked with delight at a juggler in a gaudy costume of orange and green. She held up Astrid to show her the performer. Next, a basket of dirty turnips caught her attention. She showed these to the doll too. Looking back over her shoulder, she said, 'Come along! Keep up!'

Tottering behind her were two lads from the coaching inn. For a few coins they had been eager to carry the family's trunk of essentials but they did not look too enamoured with their ten-year-old mistress.

Stallholders called from every direction, keen to sell their late harvest produce.

'Mercy! Everything is four times the price it was in Graz.'

'We'll manage, Barbara,' said the astronomer.

'How? It's already cost one hundred and twenty thaler just to move, and we still have two wagonloads of furniture back in Graz. That'll all have to be paid for once we're settled.'

He fought down his irritation, blaming his mood on the fatigue lodged firmly in his muscles. He pushed on, glancing to check that Regina was still close by. A sword-swallower had momentarily captured her attention, but she soon turned away.

Through the hoards of people and baskets, on the far side of the square, the astronomer turned into a narrow residential road.

'You want the next street for Baron Hoffman's house,' called one of the boys.

'Ah, of course. In a week's time, think how familiar these streets will all be.' He managed a wan smile, but his wife looked unimpressed.

When they arrived at the house, Barbara admired the gothic windows – each as tall as a man, arranged over three storeys – and the large arch of the entrance. She seemed to straighten up. 'It's stone, you didn't tell me that.'

'I didn't know.' Their own house had been made of draughty timber. At night it creaked, and he used to imagine that God was sending him messages.

He gathered his family and rapped on the door. As he did so, the delivery boys set down their heavy load and vanished.

The wide door swung open. A housekeeper showed the new arrivals into a panelled hallway where a boy dressed in black took the astronomer's hat, gloves and cape, and a young woman, thin as a pole, approached Barbara. 'May I take that for you, madam?'

'Thank you,' said Barbara, shrugging off her heavy travelling shawl.

Footsteps signalled Baron Hoffman's approach. He appeared from the depths of the house, a broad smile on his face. 'Johannes Kepler, we have you in Prague at last.'

Kepler, taken aback by the warmth of the welcome, clasped the outstretched arm. 'We will presume upon your hospitality only for a few days, until I can secure a place of our own.'

Hoffman waved a hand dismissively. 'Nonsense, my home is yours for as long as you need it. Any friend of Hans is most welcome. He's a

shrewd judge of character and he tells me you're the finest mathematician in Christendom.'

Kepler could not help but smile at mention of their mutual acquaintance. The charismatic Bavarian Chancellor, Hans Georg Hewart von Hohenburg, was everything that Kepler admired: erudite, enquiring, gracious, well connected, high-born. He had first heard of him some years ago when a courier in bright livery arrived at the Lutheran school in Graz, where Kepler was teaching, and handed over a letter from Rome.

Standing in the courtyard, Kepler broke the wax seal and saw that it was from somebody called Father Grienberger, a Jesuit mathematician. The handwriting was composed of deliberate strokes, each character devoid of flourish, and asked Kepler whether he would help a nobleman – Hewart – with a problem of chronology.

Hewart was seeking the exact date when a magnificent constellation of stars could have appeared. The alignment was described by the classical Roman poet Lucanus in the epic work *Pharsalia*, about the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great.

Kepler's first thought had been an uneasy one: Why were the Jesuits asking for his help? But that evening, curiosity piqued and eager to prove himself, he had brushed away his doubts along with the clutter on his desk and set to his calculations.

He first made rough guesses at the stars he thought Lucanus had been describing, then started to calculate their positions more than 1,500 years ago in the sky, compensating for the drift in the calendar, to see if they lined up. When he could find no match to Lucanus's description, he recalculated, convinced he had made a stupid error. When the answer came out the same, he tried different stars, searching for any pattern that might be reasonable. In the end, he was forced to write back to Hewart stating that the great poet had been caught out in a flash of artistic licence. No such pattern of star had ever existed in the skies above earth.

Hewart responded with more questions relating to other documents: one month it was the precise date of a conjunction between Mercury and Venus in 5 BC; another it was the date of Augustus Caesar's birth and the appropriate star chart to divine his character. Each request was designed to test the veracity of a historical document by checking its celestial descriptions against Kepler's ability to calculate

the position of the stars in times past. With each answer, Hewart built a more precise chronology of history.

As the correspondence mounted, so the letters became warmer. Their sentiments transformed from politeness to respect, and gradually blossomed into friendship. Hewart would offer the young astronomer advice, and never more valuably than in recent times when a hardening of Catholic attitudes in Graz's ruling class had meant that Kepler and his family had been forced to leave because of their Lutheran beliefs.

When he heard the news, Hewart had recommended Kepler to Hoffman, an imperial advisor, who agreed to take them in. To Kepler, the act had underlined the injustice of the exile because both Hewart and Hoffman were Catholics.

'Baron Hoffman, you are most gracious to accept us on Hans's recommendation. May I introduce my wife, Barbara?'

Hoffman smoothed his chestnut hair. It was thinner than it used to be, and his doublet was a little tighter, nevertheless, he retained the power to make a woman blush just by looking at her. He bowed. 'Frau Kepler, time has not touched you.'

Her eyelids fluttered. 'Thank you, Baron.'

'Please, call me Johann. I have assigned you a maid to make your stay as comfortable as possible.' He beckoned the thin woman who had returned from stowing Barbara's shawl. 'This is Anicka.'

She bobbed at the knees. 'Madam.'

'And who is this?' asked Hoffman, crouching down.

'This is Regina, my stepdaughter,' said Kepler, placing a hand on her shoulder.

'And this is Astrid,' said Regina, offering her doll.

'A pleasure to meet you both.' Hoffman turned to Kepler. 'I have something for you.'

On the ornate hall table was a package, wrapped in waxed paper and bound with string. 'Hans was at court last week. He left this for you.'

'Thank you. How is the Chancellor?'

'In good health but rather preoccupied. I sense urgency in the diplomatic corps these days.'

Inside the wrapping was a vellum-bound book. Kepler flicked to the title page and gasped. 'Ptolemy's *Harmony* – and in the original Greek. I have coveted this for some time.'

'Hans said as much. It is to welcome you to your new life in Prague. Now, honoured guests, you must be tired. Anicka will show you to your rooms, and I will have your trunk brought up. Please join me for refreshments once you are established.'

'It will be our pleasure,' said Barbara before Kepler could reply. Once in their suite, Kepler sank into an upholstered chair, his bony body taking up only half of it. He started leafing through the book, but all too soon his eyes began to close. He was jolted back to consciousness by Barbara telling the maid where to hang dresses and shirts, how to fold stays and underpinnings, and where to place them in drawers, only to move them a moment later when she spied a better place.

'I can do all this for you, madam. You need not worry yourself,' said Anicka.

'How will I know where to find things?'

'I am your maid. You ask me, madam.' When the clothes were stored, Anicka left. All that remained in the trunk were Kepler's books and papers. They took up a good quarter of the space. 'I will sort these later,' he said and went to the window, eager for the cool air that lingered by the glass. His throat prickled.

'Are you unwell again?'

'I am starting a fever, that's all. With God's grace, it will pass.'

She tucked a lank strand of his hair behind his ear. 'You know, I don't think living in Prague will be so bad after all.'

Kepler managed a weak smile. At the next window, Regina was pointing out the sharp spires of the city's skyline to Astrid.

'Come along, you two,' said Barbara, 'we must join our host.'

Hoffman sat at a large table close to the panelled window, basking in the last rays of the afternoon sun. He stood up as the guests made their tentative entrance.

'Come in, come in. Take a seat.'

Kepler waited for Regina to hop into a chair, and then eased it into the table. He seated himself next to Barbara.

Hoffman poured three goblets and passed them round.

'To your new life in Prague,' he toasted.

The wine tasted considerably smoother than Kepler was used to drinking. Though weak, it went to work immediately, and with each sip, he felt the stiffness in his limbs ebb a little more.

'I cannot thank you enough for all you are doing,' said Kepler.

'It is the least I can do for a family who has suffered as you have. Forgive me for asking, but how bad was it in Graz?'

'Just to be Lutheran was to be a target. Every day the Archduke passed new laws against us. It was rumoured that he thought Emperor Rudolph weak because of his tolerance of Lutherans throughout the Empire. So Ferdinand was determined to set an example in his own part of it. First, our ministers were banned, then our hymns, then the possession of Lutheran books. Even to bury a child . . .' He could still feel the tiny bundle that had briefly been their first born, cradled in his arms. Barbara had risen on that morning and dressed in silence, then sat rocking back and forth. Kepler had seen the indescribable pain in her eyes and known that nothing he could do would erase it. Even now that impasse in their relationship troubled him on sleepless nights.

He reached over and took Barbara's hand, steeling himself to finish his sentence. 'I was fined ten thaler because I insisted on burying our child, Susanna, with Lutheran rites.'

Hoffman frowned. 'Archduke Ferdinand is pushing the boundaries of his limited authority. He knows that as Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolph cannot defend Lutherans, and so Ferdinand uses this as tacit agreement to proceed with his persecutions. It is cowardly. Someone must make a stand, but who? If Rudolph speaks up, he risks excommunication from the Vatican, and with the Empire so deeply divided right now, that would surely lead to its collapse. How did it come to this?'

'Much as it pains me to say this, there were those in our Lutheran community who invited it. Mostly teachers. They stood in front of their classes and attacked the papists like dogs slavering over old bones. In the face of their rabid insults, the Archduke found it easy to act.'

'They say he returned from Rome determined to lead his land back to Catholicism.'

Kepler nodded. 'As is his right in law. All he needed was the excuse, and the foolish teachers provided it.'

'Even so, to include you in their punishment, when you were Ferdinand's Mathematician . . .'

Kepler's body tightened at the memory of that final day. 'I served him with diligence yet, when the time came, it made no difference.'

It had been just after dawn when Kepler had taken his place among those summoned to the town church. The early hour of the call was a blessing because, the previous night, sleep had escaped him. He had prowled the house, tentacles of fear entangling his insides.

Eventually settling into an exhausted heap at Barbara's feet, he crossed his arms on her lap and rested his head. She closed the outlawed prayer book and ran her fingers through his hair. Together they had waited for sunrise, and judgement.

By six in the morning, the crowd was a thousand strong. As the numbers rose, so did the heat. Kepler edged onto a worn pew as officials placed the city rolls on a table in the middle of the church. Behind them was an elaborate wooden throne on a raised dais. Near the altar, a black-robed priest was swinging a smoking thurible of incense, blessing anything within reach.

'Courage,' whispered a passing acquaintance, jarring Kepler from his thoughts. Another squeezed his arm, undisguised pity on his face and possibly a hint of shame. He's going to convert, thought Kepler, experiencing a stab of betrayal.

His tension rose with the clatter of horses' hooves outside. The congregation stood and waited for the procession to appear, all eyes on the young Archduke.

Although twenty-two, Ferdinand still looked as if he were a boy dressed to resemble a man. There was no definition in his doughy cheeks, just a long nose that slid down his face. His sandy mop bounced in time with his skittish gait and his thin moustache had been waxed and kinked upwards. He wore a partial suit of black armour, ludicrously teaming it with riding boots of pale brown leather and a wide-brimmed felt hat.

A phalanx of guards clanked around him, their armour polished like mirrors. Behind them, more officials walked with exaggerated gravitas.

These were the commissioners who would examine each member of the congregation and decide their fate.

Kepler watched as the Archduke advanced, but the young ruler stared ahead with practised aloofness. As he passed, Kepler despaired. Only then did he realise that he was still harbouring the faint hope of recognition and reprieve.

Ferdinand sat on the makeshift throne and signalled for the proceedings to begin. During the inflammatory sermon that followed, the Catholic preacher hurled back all that the Lutherans had dished out. Kepler shut his eyes and silently muttered a prayer, calling for strength and begging forgiveness for the pain he was about to inflict on his family.

One by one, the men were called to the central table where each professed their obedience to Rome – even those who a week ago had been screaming insults at the Pope. All was apparently expunged by this public conversion. When Kepler's name was called from the register, he rose from the pew and walked towards the table, legs unsteady and blood pounding at his temples.

The commissioners regarded him with graven faces. 'Johannes Kepler, you have been called here today so that we may examine your faith. Do you understand?'

'I do.' He searched each face at the table.

'Do you worship in the Roman Catholic way, with your trust placed in God through His Holiness?'

Kepler spoke clearly: 'No.'

A murmur of excitement rippled through the crowd.

'Are you willing to swear your allegiance to Rome?'

'No.'

There was a collective gasp from the crowd. The commissioners held a hushed discussion involving much head shaking. Eventually the central official stood up. 'Johannes Kepler, you are a heretic. You and your family must leave Graz and the entire territory of Styria within six weeks. If you return, you do so on pain of death.'

Kepler looked to the Archduke, who rolled his eyes as if bored.

Hoffman blew out a long breath as Kepler finished his story. 'What a thing to have to endure. Take comfort in knowing that this cannot happen in Prague.'

'I'll be honest with you, I fear that the tolerance that once gave our Empire unity is slipping away. Are we not all imperial subjects regardless of personal belief? I wonder if anywhere, other than the Lutheran heartland to the west, is safe for my family now.'

Hoffman waved the objection away. 'Fear not, Johannes. We cannot be judged by what happened in Graz. Rudolph may be sworn to Rome but – like his father – he is a tolerant man. You and your family are safe now.'