



Will love or  
loyalty conquer?

*Her  
Last  
Assassin*

VICTORIA LAMB

## About the Book

Lady-in-waiting Lucy Morgan is once again torn between her dangerous attraction to William Shakespeare and her loyalty to Queen Elizabeth I.

England is facing its gravest threat yet. The Spanish have declared war, and Elizabeth finds herself attacked by sea – and by Catholic conspiracy from within her own court. Master Goodluck goes undercover, tasked with discovering the identity of this secret assassin, leaving his ward Lucy not knowing if the spy is alive or dead.

Meanwhile Queen Elizabeth is growing old in a court of troublesome young noblemen, while Lucy is struggling to love a man whose duties lie elsewhere.

When the final challenge comes, these two women must be ready to face it. But there is one last surprise in store for both of them . . .

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# *Her Last Assassin*

Victoria Lamb

*For Steve Haynes, my Goodluck*

'Cropp'd are the flower-de-luces in your arms ...'

William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part 1, I, i*

'My tongue will tell the anger of my heart  
Or else my heart, concealing it, will break.'

William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew, IV, iii*

## *Prologue*



*Nieuwpoort, Low Countries, July 1588*

IT HAD BEEN entirely too long, Goodluck thought, since he had watched the white cliffs of Dover fade in the distance, and committed himself to this dangerous venture: a new name, a new language, a new mission. All courtesy of Sir Francis Walsingham, the Queen's ever-resourceful spymaster.

'A few weeks,' Walsingham had insisted, passing him a bag of coins with his secret orders. 'That is all you will need to uncover their plans. If the Spanish move against us, they will likely come from the Low Countries first. It is the point nearest England which is friendly to Spain. Do not fail us this time, Goodluck. Do not fail Her Majesty.'

Yet the weeks had stretched into months, and until today Goodluck had been no nearer the evidence he had been sent to discover: the timing of the Spanish invasion, a threat that had loomed over England now for several years but which no one could accurately predict.

It was summer now, and he was homesick for England. Goodluck poured another bucketload of kitchen slops, cold and greasy, out of the window into the sunlit yard below. The low-lying fields beyond the manor house and the makeshift garrison were still flooded, though the built-up paths between them had dried out in the sun, thick with yellow-tipped wild flowers that might have reminded him of English meadows if it had not been for their sickly sweet

smell. He was glad not to be looking out to sea, for the sight of the Dutch harbour crammed with high-masted warships, hundreds more of them bobbing at anchor beyond the harbour wall, their bright pennants flapping in the breeze, made him itch to be back in London, making his report to Walsingham.

It would not be long before the Spanish fleet and their allies sailed against England. Goodluck did not wish to be an English spy stranded in an enemy country when that happened.

He turned back and dropped the wooden bucket next to a heap of cabbages. 'Boy!' he roared at the lad whose task it was to keep the spit turning. 'That meat is burning again!'

The lad muttered some excuse, but turned the spit a few times in a desultory fashion, his gaze resting sullenly on Goodluck as he began to wipe down the knives.

Goodluck could hardly blame the boy for his lethargy; the whole garrison at Nieuwpoort lay under a malaise, eager to fight but held constantly on the leash as they waited for the order from Spain. An order which never came.

A red-faced porter ran back into the room with an empty platter. He wiped his brow on the inside of his sleeve. 'The Spanish lord is calling for more wine. Sir William says his noble guest is thirsty. Too much salt on the beef tonight.'

Goodluck shrugged, and spat on the earth floor. He laid the Dutch accent on thick, his voice rumbling through the narrow stone room. 'Don't blame me. Jeggers prepared the beef.'

'Where is Jeggers?'

'Gone for a piss.'

'Well, when he gets back—'

'What am I, your errand boy? I'm a cook. So let me cook.' With a furious bellow, he turned back to the lad drowsing again on the warm hearth stones, the pink-fleshed porker hissing and singeing in the heat of the flames. 'Up, up! The meat, boy!'

Goodluck waited until the porter had gone in search of the cellarman, then decided it was time to end this masquerade – and not a moment too soon as far as he was concerned. He had to make his report to Walsingham before the fleet sailed and it became redundant. He knew Sir William Stanley had received orders today from Spain.

Surely this was the message they had been waiting for?

Goodluck dragged the leather apron from about his neck and threw it on to the grease-covered floor. He was bare-chested underneath, for the heat of the kitchen made it impossible to work any other way. First dipping his head in a bucket of cold water, Goodluck shrugged into a clean shirt and jacket, his face still dripping. Then he took out his leather purse from the knife chest, clipped it to his belt and went to the door.

‘When Jeggors gets back,’ he told the boy, ‘tell him he’s to finish up with the pork. I’m off to see the play.’

Pausing, he took a small coin from his purse, then threw it to the boy. ‘Here, get some salve for that,’ he said, not unkindly, and nodded to the burn reddening the back of the lad’s hand.

The boy looked surprised but pocketed the coin in silence, no doubt fearing a beating if he spoke out of turn. He was not to know that Goodluck, bad-tempered Dutch cook from the outlying provinces, was in fact an English spy.

Treading heavily down the short flight of stairs into the courtyard, the Englishman waited there a moment, checking that he had not been seen. The summer evening was still hot, the sky darkly flushed to the west with a hint of rain to come, though the day’s heat was lessening as dusk fell. Small black flies crowded about his head, perhaps attracted by the smell of grease, and he shook them away with an irritated flick of his hand.

As he had suspected, everyone was still enjoying that evening’s entertainment in the hall. Travelling players on

their last night in the Low Countries – a troupe of shuffling men he had seen arriving earlier, their carts loaded with theatrical chests and scenery – had come here to perform an English play for the soldiers. Something to keep the exiled Catholics happy as they waited for the signal to sail against their own people.

Keeping his head down, Goodluck trod softly through the narrow grassy maze of lanes about the ancient manor until he reached the back of the hall and began to skirt its high windows. He caught a burst of raucous singing from within, then enthusiastic whistles and applause. A song and a jig to start them off. He recalled the days of play scripts and costumes, and the crude banter of the players' tiring-room. Not that any of his old friends would recognize him tonight, for his famous beard had been shaved off to play the Dutch cook.

For the briefest of moments, he allowed himself to feel again how homesick he was. It had been too long since he was back in his old house at Cheapside, frequenting the playhouse or dicing with friends in the poky taverns beneath the city walls.

He did not know how Lucy Morgan had fared without him, or whether she was still allowing herself to be courted by that married good-for-nothing Shakespeare. He himself had proved useless as her guardian, seemingly never on hand when she needed him most. His ward had fallen pregnant by Shakespeare, saved her reputation by marrying a man repugnant to her, then been attacked by Master Twist, Goodluck's enemy. It was a miracle she had come through such troubles unscathed. Well, perhaps not unscathed. Though she might not see things that way, losing her child had been a blessing, given how hard her life would have been if the boy had survived.

At the edge of the hall, Goodluck stopped dead, squeezing flat against the wall. He had seen a sentry passing the entrance door ahead. Well, he did not need to

go that way, but up. Glancing about once more, hoping the falling dusk would mask his climbing, he found one rough foothold in the wall, then groped above until he found a stone jutting out. Thus anchored, he hauled himself up the wall, grunting under his breath with the effort.

He had been this way before, up the wall and across the tiled roof to listen to Stanley's deliberations under cover of darkness, and tonight there should be no trouble repeating the manoeuvre. Stanley's noble guest had come with a substantial entourage, many of whom would no doubt come milling out of the hall as soon as tonight's play was done, though for now they were safely inside. All the same, to try this climb before sunset was dangerous.

He could not let the chance go by though, dangerous or not. It had been weeks since any messenger had come from the court, and he had heard Stanley discussing this visit two days before, claiming it would 'settle matters once and for all'.

What could that mean but a new plan of invasion?

To hear confirmation of such a move against England, after months of wasted nights listening to empty talk, must be worth a man's life. Even if it was his own.

Reaching the roof above the commander's quarters, he slid forward on his belly, keeping as flat as possible against the still-warm tiles. From here he could be seen by anyone crossing the dyke to the rear of the old house, now headquarters to Stanley's army. But with everyone inside, except for the guards in the inner courtyard and at the entrances, there should be no one to see him.

Goodluck came to the broken tile and lifted it until he could see down into the room below. There was Stanley's curly head, and there the darker hair of his Spanish guest, both men standing together by the commander's broad-topped table.

Putting his eye to the crack, Goodluck's heart quickened. A map had been spread across the table, weighted down at

its four corners to prevent it curling up, a map that he did not recognize as any he had seen Sir William Stanley consult before. It must belong to the Spanish lord who had arrived from court, whose name he did not know, but for whom he had dutifully cooked a fine venison pie in wine gravy before turning to the cruder culinary tastes of his entourage, the bare remains of which could still be seen on the sideboard.

‘Here,’ the Spaniard declared in his own tongue, stabbing at the map with a long dark finger, ‘this is where your men will join ours, and together we will sail for England. It will be a great victory over the Protestant rabble and their whore queen.’

‘Indeed,’ Stanley agreed in heavy, well-accented Spanish, and his voice held no irony. ‘And when we take London, it will be my pleasure to see Queen Elizabeth forced to kneel before her new masters, then to order her harlot’s body whipped through the streets. She will cry out for mercy, I have no doubt, as so many Catholics have cried since she came to the English throne. But she will receive none from me.’

The Spaniard laughed, stroking his pointed beard. ‘You have no loyalty to your Queen, señor? I hope you will show more to Spain.’

Stanley came into view below, a tall, gaunt fellow with a shock of dark hair tinged with silver, his thin cheeks flushed either with the heat or with his own natural belligerence.

Goodluck studied him curiously. Here was a man who rarely slept, a leader of fierce conviction and renowned courage, and yet he was a traitor. Stanley’s resentment towards England had reputedly been fuelled by some perceived slight during his long service in Ireland. If so, he had covered his tracks well since then. Indeed, he had served his country brilliantly during the initial conflict with Spain. Goodluck recalled hearing after the battle at

Zutphen, where Sir Philip Sidney had received his fatal wound, that the Earl of Leicester himself had praised Stanley's bravery in dispatches, claiming he was 'worth his weight in pearl'. And yet it was also said that he hated Protestants beyond reason, and Queen Elizabeth above the rest.

'I will show Spain the loyalty she deserves, sir. Your king at least has supported me this past year. My family's estates in England are all now forfeit to the crown. What loyalty has this Queen shown me?'

'Forgive me, Señor Stanley, I did not mean to question your allegiance.' Adroitly, the guest turned the subject. 'My officers were pleased to hear there would be a play tonight. It is a long journey from Spain, and a little wine and entertainment are most welcome. Your own troupe?'

'Travellers.' Stanley offered the Spaniard a dish of sweetmeats. 'They sail for France tonight. No, do not look alarmed. Even if they speak of your presence, it may work to our advantage. I do not want any interference from the French, and I'm sure news of a great fleet here will keep our Froggy neighbours quiet.'

Someone knocked at the door and both men fell silent. Stanley threw his cloak across the map and called, 'Come in,' in English.

Out of sight the door creaked open and someone came in. Goodluck recognized the sweaty porter's voice. 'More wine, sir, my lord. Forgive the delay, I could not find the cellarman.'

'Set it there on the sideboard, light the candles, then leave us. But remain within call. I will need you to escort our guest to bed when we are finished here.'

Once the two men were alone again in the book-lined study flickering with candlelight, Stanley pulled the cloak off the map. 'You have me doubting my own men, my lord, with your stories of treachery.'

'Let us hope I am wrong.'

Stanley poured them both a glass of wine. 'You will find my men loyal. I can vouch for every one of them.'

'In my experience, the ones deemed most loyal are those most likely to betray their masters. And we know someone within your camp is passing back information to that great whoremonger Walsingham.'

Goodluck lay very still at this. Who could have betrayed him? It had to be someone in England, perhaps one of Walsingham's own men. His disguise as a Dutch cook was too good for anyone here to have penetrated it.

'I will investigate your accusations, trust me. And if I do find a traitor within our midst, I will open him with my own sword.'

'I am glad to see the rumours of your bloodthirsty nature have not been exaggerated. You make a good friend for Spain.'

*'Gracias, señor.'*

Sipping his wine, Stanley wandered back to study the map, which even upside down Goodluck could see showed the coast of the Low Countries and France. The southern coast of England had been marked with several large black crosses.

Proposed invasion points?

'The south is very well for His Majesty's magnificent Armada,' he murmured, pointing to the southern coast, 'but coming from the east, we must concentrate on attaining the mouth of the Thames.'

The Spaniard sounded impressed. 'You intend to put London to the sword yourself, then?'

*'De verdad.'* Stanley was poring over the map, his body between the table and Goodluck's view. 'To take London will be the hardest and yet most vital point of our campaign. When they see their own countrymen sailing up the Thames, doughty soldiers led by exiled Englishmen, the men of London will soon surrender. I can hardly wait to witness our day of triumph.'

‘Your wait is almost over,’ the Spaniard told him softly. ‘The fleet is under way. It will reach the English coast in a few weeks.’

‘My men will be ready.’ Stanley sounded like an excited schoolboy at the prospect of attacking his own country. ‘And the signal to embark?’

‘The arrival of our fleet. Post lookouts along the shore, señor. As soon as the admiral’s ship is sighted, give your people the signal to embark. Your men must remain ready at all times, both day and night, for I cannot say for sure when the fleet will arrive.’

‘But it will be soon?’

‘Patience, señor. Your day will come.’

Goodluck studied the map keenly, committing to memory every enemy position he could make out. It had taken months, but at last he had some useful news for his master. The Spanish Armada was already at sea and would soon be joined by other forces sailing from the Low Countries. No doubt they would meet in the straits between France and England, or at the mouth of the Thames.

This was the news he must carry home. And at once.

On the next tide, if possible.

The Spanish lord spoke again. ‘But what of your other plan? His Majesty asked me to enquire after the letter he sent to support a domestic plot against the Queen. In case our invasion force is not able to reach the Queen before she flees for safety, is your man in position?’

‘I am gratified His Majesty takes such interest in my humble plans. Yes, a letter has been sent by courier, with a small incentive. The courier is a most trusted spy. He works for Spain under the guise of being a true Englishman.’ He hesitated. ‘I needed someone skilled in diplomacy, for there have been problems with our assassin. Though nothing that cannot be resolved with a little persuasion.’

‘I trust you will not disappoint His Majesty again?’

Stanley seemed on edge. 'We were close at Kenilworth, I know. You do not need to remind me of our failure there.'

Watching from above, Goodluck cursed silently. Was this man the unknown plotter behind the assassination attempt at Kenilworth Castle, which he and his ward, Lucy, had helped thwart?

This betrayal was too vile. Stanley had been a knight of the realm, lauded for his brilliant service in Ireland. Yet as soon as Leicester had left the Low Countries, he had surrendered his garrison and troops at Deventer to the Spanish without hesitation. Now he was plotting his queen's death. And not for the first time, it seemed.

Stanley poured himself more wine and drank heavily, then wiped his mouth carelessly on his sleeve. 'It was not my fault we did not succeed. I was busy in Ireland that year, and could not make sure of her death myself. We came closer to success with young Babington's plot. But some at court who might have supported us turned cold after Babington's execution, and the illegal beheading of the Scots Queen, God rest her martyred soul. It seems the English Catholics wish to bring England back to the Church of Rome, but not at the risk of their own necks.'

Would these Catholics never give up their attempts on her life? Goodluck felt sick, and wished he could kill the man. But there was more to learn here, and further traitors to uncover. He must be patient.

'So the appointed assassin is one of us?' The Spaniard sounded sceptical. 'Not another hired mercenary like the female you used at Kenilworth? No, do not give me his name. Names are dangerous. Just assure me that your man will kill England's most infamous whore with his own hands, and draw your country back into the Roman fold.'

'Amen to that,' Stanley muttered, also drinking a toast. 'It is well past time this queen was stripped of her fine jewels and made to burn naked, which is how she would die if I had my way.'

Even the Spaniard sounded uncomfortable at this extreme display of vindictiveness. 'You forget yourself, señor. Once the country is ours, it will be up to His Majesty to decide her fate, not the English. He will be your master then. Let us not forget, heretic or not, Queen Elizabeth is still of royal blood.'

'Only if King Henry was her true father,' Stanley spat out, 'and few Catholics believe that. Her mother Anne Boleyn was a proven whore and died on the scaffold for her adultery, leaving her bastard child rightfully disinherited. Why, Elizabeth could be any man's child.'

'I had forgotten her mother was a whore. His Holiness the Pope has declared as much himself.'

'That a common bastard has ruled unchallenged for so many years is a travesty of English justice.' Stanley paused. 'I will accept His Majesty King Philip's ruling on her fate, of course. But I cannot hide that I shall be *overjoyed* to tread her bones into the dirt where they belong.'

'Hey, you!'

A shout from the yard below made Goodluck lift his head in alarm, realizing that he had been spotted. He slithered to the edge of the roof and looked down at the drop, wondering how to lie his way out of this one.

'What do you think you're doing? Come down!'

The man spoke English, but with a strong Irish accent. It was dusk and he could not make out the figure clearly, but guessed by his pike that he was a soldier. No doubt one of Stanley's men from the garrison sent to guard the back gate on to the marshy fields.

Acting dumb, Goodluck nodded. He jumped down, but kicked the man hard in the head as he dropped.

The luckless soldier staggered backwards, his pike clattering to the ground. At once Goodluck was on him, dragging the dagger from his belt and pressing the blade against his throat, between the helmet chinstrap and his jacket collar.

'Another word and you're dead,' he promised the soldier in English.

The man struggled.

'Don't be a fool,' Goodluck said warningly into his ear. He had no wish to kill the man. 'Keep quiet, and we'll both live to see another day. Now, what is it to be?'

But the man *was* a fool. He stared at Goodluck through the gloom as though trying to judge how serious he was. Then, seeing one of his compatriots patrolling in the darkness a few hundred feet away, he struggled hard to escape and opened his mouth to yell for help.

The cry was choked off in a gush of blood as Goodluck thrust home the dagger in his throat. The man twisted against him for a few horrific moments, arms flailing, his face contorted with pain. Then he sagged back, a dead weight.

As quietly as he could, Goodluck let the man's lifeless body drop to the ground. He dragged the knife free from his throat - he might need it later - then turned and sped silently to the now unguarded entrance to the yard.

Keeping flat against the wall, he reached the gate without being spotted again, glad of the shadowy cover of darkness, though he could hear the other soldier's footsteps a short way behind him in the yard.

He felt sick at what he had been forced to do, though this was not the first man he had killed in the Queen's service. But he had certainly been one of the youngest, and his stomach rebelled at such a duty.

Goodluck stopped to listen to the sounds of revelry from the hall. It gave him a moment to think. He bent to wipe the knife and his sticky hands on the grass verge outside the gate. The play must have finished long since. Yet the men inside the hall were still dancing and singing. Straightening, he could still smell blood and knew some of it had stained his jacket as he wrestled with the dying soldier.

‘Silas, are you there, man?’ Someone had come wandering out of the hall. He sounded drunk. ‘I heard a shout just then. What is it?’

There was a startled exclamation in the dusk as the man stumbled over the body of his fallen comrade.

He raised his voice, shouting to his friends inside the hall. ‘St Patrick, there’s a foul murderer among us! Come out here, in God’s name, all of you! Silas is dead!’

Goodluck did not wait to hear more. His brief comedy as Dutch cook to the Stanley household was done. It was time for Master Goodluck, English spy, to take his place.

He ran, heading for the narrow marsh-flanked path which he knew would lead him through quiet backways to the town of Nieuwpoort, and the ship-filled harbour beyond it.

Before he even reached Nieuwpoort, he saw his salvation. The departing players, still hooded like monks and shuffling, were following their carts on foot as it rumbled back to the harbour. Stanley had said this was their last stop before sailing for France, that he had given them permission to leave port after their performance. If Goodluck could somehow insinuate himself into their number, or perhaps squeeze aboard a covered cart, he could reach France, and from there buy his passage home.

He kept his distance, not wishing to be seen. Back at the garrison he could see torches flaring in the gathering dusk, and heard shouts echoing across the low fields.

Occasionally one of the players slowed his pace and looked round, his face hidden under his cowl, and Goodluck had to crouch suddenly in the tall grasses, keeping out of sight until they moved on again.

They had played in English tonight, for the sake of the exiled soldiers under Stanley’s command, but could be any nationality – French, Italian, perhaps even Spanish. Italians and Spaniards would promptly hand him over to the

authorities if they discovered a stowaway. But if they were French, he might have a chance ...

There would be a moon tonight. They might even sail on this evening's tide if it was bright enough.

Down on the docks, Goodluck waited in the shadow of a wagon being loaded with ale barrels from one of the merchant ships. Luckily, nobody seemed inclined to pay any attention to the stout man who knelt to adjust first one uncomfortable shoe, then another, and who later bought an apple from a passing tradesman on his way home for the night. Goodluck stood munching on the apple in the dark mouth of an alley, waiting patiently for the players' carts to move.

Out to sea, he watched the assembled warships bob slowly up and down, chafing at their anchors.

He had almost given up hope when the carter came back at last, and with the help of the other players unloaded the long wooden theatrical chests. These were hoisted on their shoulders and carried aboard a small sailing ship, its narrow mast insignificant beside the vast forest of masts all around it, their warships' pennants slapping gently in the sea breeze. While the cargo was brought aboard and the players stood arguing the fee with the captain, the crew began their preparations to cast off, loosening the ropes and giving Goodluck hope they would indeed be sailing with tonight's tide.

He wondered why the players were in such a hurry to quit the country, but then reflected that a night's lodging might have cost them any fee from their performance at the garrison. No doubt they were keen to move on to the next town instead, perhaps in France, which was only a short voyage along the coast for a quick, light vessel like this.

Finally the crew disappeared below, leaving the deck empty but for one man huddled in a cloak, smoking a pipe as he gazed out across the harbour.

As silently as he could, Goodluck climbed down one of the ropes that hung along the harbour wall, cursing his weight under his breath. He landed on the deck with a thud that set the small ship swaying, and had to duck out of sight as the man with the pipe turned to stare.

There was a coil of ropes to one side of the open deck, and some old sails lying across them. Pulling one of the damp sailcloths over him, Goodluck flattened himself as best he could to the deck behind the ropes. It would do for the hours of darkness, at least. But before day dawned he would have to find a better hiding place.

Preferably one which did not reek of fish.

After another agonizing wait, he heard the sailors calling out to each other in Dutch, and felt the deck sway beneath him at last in a horribly familiar way. Never a good sailor, he gritted his teeth and lay waiting for the ship to clear the choppy waters where the warships were moored. He thought fleetingly of the soldier he had killed back at the garrison, wondering if he'd had a wife or any children to miss him. His belly churned, and the sickness worsened. After that, he thought instead of the message he would bear to Walsingham, then counted slowly backwards from a thousand to pass the time.

Through gaps, Goodluck could see strips of torchlight on the deck, and occasionally a man passing by. Finally daring to raise the sailcloth a little higher, he caught a glimpse of the moon rising over the water, gleaming silver on rolling black waves, and the harbour of Nieuwpoort becoming smaller in the distance.

He was safe.

At that moment, the sailcloth was twitched away from him and he met instead the flash of a dagger blade in his face.

'On your knees, Master Stowaway,' a man ordered him coolly, 'and keep your hands where I can see them! I hope you were not bound for sunny France. For you will find the

English air a trifle sharp, even at this time of year, and may receive a sterner welcome than you were expecting.'

It was one of the players from the garrison, still cloaked but with his hood thrown back. Goodluck stared up at him, raising his hands slowly away from the dagger in his own belt, and almost choked in his amazement.

Even in the moonlight he knew that lean, sardonic face.  
'Kit Marlowe!'

# *Part One*



# One



*Tilbury, England, August 1588*

PENNANTS FLAPPED DOWN the misty white avenue of tents, their bright devices revealed, then hidden again, with each gust of wind. Elizabeth drew rein, hearing the shout of 'The Queen!' go up along the ranks. Robert, Earl of Leicester, glanced back at her: reassuring, almost close enough to touch, her bridle in his gloved fist.

Queen Elizabeth blinked at her favourite, and the mist blurred, then disappeared. Her head jerked. 'On, on.'

The soldiers needed to see her in sturdy health and upright, despite the weight of the silver cuirass Leicester had caused to be made especially for her. She had come to ask these men to die for her and for England. How could she demand such a sacrifice when she could barely sit her horse, or inspect their ranks without tears?

Man after man looked up at her as she passed, good trusting faces smeared with dirt, sunburned under the brims of their helmets, and she could not look them in the eye.

By her own decree, albeit hurried through by certain of her advisors, her royal cousin Mary, Queen of Scots, had laid her head on the block. Now little over a twelvemonth later, Spain was at war with England, openly and without pretence, a war she had worked for so many years to avert. All her plans of conciliation lay in tatters, for the enemy's ships were already at sea, had been sighted off the coasts

of Cornwall and Devon, might even now be in the narrow straits between England and France. If a Spanish invasion force were to come sailing up the river Thames, as Walsingham and Leicester believed they might, many of these stout-hearted Englishmen would perish at their hands.

A dais had been erected on a sandy mound, furnished with a high-backed chair and shaded from the August sun by a white-canopied roof flapping sulkily in the wind. Elizabeth dismounted and stepped up on to the dais, disdaining her favourite's outstretched hand. She refused to sit but stood instead, gazing out across the motley army Leicester had managed to assemble at Tilbury, some men in livery, some in leather jerkins, others stripped down for the heat, nut-brown and little better than common workmen as they dug out the embankments.

At Leicester's signal, a trumpet sounded, calling the nearest men to attention. Weary soldiers leaned on their spades and mattocks in the trenches, staring expectantly at the dais; others scrambled up the sandy banks, as though eager to hear what she had come to say. Those nearest the dais dropped to their knees with due reverence, baring their heads in her presence despite the strong sun.

A flag whipped lightly overhead. She glanced at Robert, suddenly unsure, then saw that he was looking away at something in the distance. The wind scudding on the river perhaps, or the vast makeshift barrier he had built out there across the Thames, a ramshackle dam of flotsam and other debris lashed together to prevent the Spanish fleet from sailing any nearer to London.

Turning to the assembled soldiers, she found her voice.

'My loving people,' she began, raising her voice to be heard above the cries of the gulls overhead, 'as you can see by my armour, I have come here today resolved to live and die among you all. To lay down for my kingdom, in the

midst and heat of battle, my honour and my blood, even in this dust of Tilbury's shores.'

A murmur ran through the crowd at this striking declaration, and she drew breath, seeing the gazes of those nearest her fix on her face, eager for more.

'I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king. And of a king of England too! And I think foul scorn that Parma, or Philip of Spain, nor any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm.' She paused, aware of Robert's keen glance; he had not heard this speech before she delivered it. 'Rather than allow dishonour to be brought upon you by my sex, I myself will take up arms. I will be your general, judge, and rewarder of your virtues in the field.'

One of the men in the fresh-dug trenches, his face hidden behind the raised pikes of the guards who had accompanied her to Tilbury, cried out, 'Aye, there have been few enough rewards!'

She shook her head, seeing Robert's hasty movement, and held out a hand towards the unseen speaker. 'Yes, I know you deserve rewards for your great love of England. And I assure you, in the word of a prince, those rewards shall be duly paid. In the meantime, my lieutenant general shall be here in my stead. Obey and follow him, for never did any prince command a more noble or worthy subject than the Earl of Leicester.'

Elizabeth heard some dissent from further afield, and raised both hands, concerned not to let it grow into outright mutiny. These men were not trained soldiers but farmers, common yeomen, field labourers handed a mattock or a pike and told to stand their ground if the Spanish should land. Only a few squads of mercenaries were there to swell their ranks and show them how to fight for their country.

There was sweat on her forehead, but her speech was nearly at an end. If she could not persuade them to do their

queen loyal service, despite a lack of armaments and food, despite poor boots and having nowhere to sleep but under the stars, then England would be at an end.

‘I do not doubt that by your obedience to my general, and your valour in the field of battle, we shall win a famous victory over the Spanish and all those enemies of my God, my kingdom, and my people,’ she finished, crossing herself with a loud ‘Amen.’

Leicester cheered and tossed up his cap, whereupon all his officers threw theirs into the hot blue sky, also cheering.

Men knelt on all sides as she walked among them in the dazzling August sunshine, their helmets off, some bowing their heads in awe, others hoarsely crying, ‘God save Her Majesty!’

Afterwards, she could not recall making her way back down the ranks amid the roaring cheers of the men, nor being led to Leicester’s tent in order to take lunch with him. But she remembered one bright-eyed man who reached out and dared to touch her armoured side in passing, with a bold cry of ‘God save the Queen!’

As though afraid it was an attack by some Catholic fanatic, Leicester knocked the soldier aside like a fly, then called loudly for him to be restrained.

Elizabeth stayed his hand, frowning. ‘Let him be, Robert. The man meant no harm.’

Indeed, seeing the blind faith in the soldier’s face as he scrambled to his knees, staring after her, she thought he was like the man in the crowd who touched Jesus’ cloak in the belief that this contact alone would cure him. Except she was no saviour, Elizabeth thought wryly, offering up a silent prayer against hubris.

Inside the cool shade of Robert’s suite of tents, set a little aside from the filth and squalor of the digging works, she was relieved to find a table and cushioned chairs set out for her in a civilized fashion, and several of her ladies waiting to attend her. Helena Snakenborg and Lucy Morgan were

among those who had accompanied her from court, with fresh-faced young Bess Throckmorton behind them, still in training to be one of her maids of honour.

'Ah, dear Helena,' Elizabeth muttered, stripping off her gloves and holding out her hand to the Swedish-born noblewoman who had served her for so many years, 'my fan, if you would. And a cup of ale before my thirst overcomes me. I am like to melt in this infernal heat.'

While Robert and his men waited outside, she allowed the women to tidy her face and hair and remove the shining silver cuirass, for her back was now aching from its weight. With so many stout guards about these tents, she doubted it would be required to shield her anyway, its polished silver more a matter of show than protection. Robert had encouraged her to wear armour to address the troops, and she had readily agreed, for she knew the mere sight of their queen in armour would imbue in these common soldiers a stronger sense of loyalty than half a dozen speeches ever could, however stirring.

Lucy Morgan dabbed at her hot forehead with a cool cloth. 'Better, Your Majesty?' she murmured.

'I thank you, yes,' Elizabeth agreed, and favoured her African lady-in-waiting with a smile. 'I heard you had been ill. I am glad to see you back on your feet. A summer chill?'

'Yes, Your Majesty. I am quite recovered, thank you.'

Lucy poured a fresh cup of ale from the flagon on the table, and handed it to her with a low curtsey, quiet and respectful as ever in her presence.

She could not fault the woman in manners, Elizabeth thought, for all she had shown other faults in the past. Faults that irked her still. Yet whatever whispers she might occasionally have heard of Lucy's lack of chastity, there had never been any proof to bring her to book. And she was Robert's little pet; there could be no doubt of his favouritism where Lucy Morgan was concerned. Indeed, she had only been permitted to return to court after her

last disgrace at Robert's express request. Accused of being unchaste, banished from court, married without permission after some indiscretion, according to Sir Francis Walsingham - another of her senior courtiers who took an oddly keen interest in Mistress Morgan's activities - and now widowed, and back in Elizabeth's service. Well, a widow was respectable enough. Helena was a widow too, and had never looked at another man since her beloved husband died. But there was something unsettling about Lucy Morgan, something not quite respectable ... Elizabeth could not put her finger on what it was about the woman that made her uncomfortable at times. Was it the colour of her skin? Black as the devil, some of the crueller girls whispered behind her back, though Lucy Morgan had shown herself to be a good and diligent servant since returning to court.

Having unlaced the silver cuirass, Helena handed the heavy breastplate to Lucy, then hurried to the tent entrance at some unseen signal. She returned with a smile. 'His lordship the Earl of Leicester is outside, Your Majesty, and would have luncheon served. Will you admit him?'

'Of course,' she agreed impatiently, and settled herself at the table. Lucy knelt to straighten the folds of her silver and white gown, which had become entangled, then stepped back out of the way, hands meekly by her side.

Yes, Lucy was a strange and unsettling creature, and not quite the same as Elizabeth's other women. Yet it could not be denied that she had served both queen and country well since entering service at court. Sometimes it was best not to question a servant's character when their loyalty had proved useful to the throne.

But Robert! She smiled up at him, and saw the answering smile in his eyes. 'How was it?'

Her favourite knelt and kissed her hand as though for the first time, his upward glance one of admiration. 'You were