

THE NEW SWORDS OF ALBION ADVENTURE

A man in Elizabethan attire, including a black hat and a dark tunic with a white ruffled collar and a blue heart-shaped pendant, holds a sword vertically. He is positioned in the center of the frame, looking directly at the viewer. The background is a large, ornate stone hall with high vaulted ceilings and arches.

THE SCAR-CROW MEN

MARK CHADBOURN

Two men in Elizabethan attire are in a courtyard. One man is standing and holding a sword, while the other is crouching or falling. The courtyard is surrounded by stone buildings with arches and a large building with many chimneys in the background.

Alone and on the run, Elizabethan England's greatest
spy must defeat a dark and bloody plot. Or die . . .

ABOUT THE BOOK

1593. Queen Elizabeth's trusted spymaster Walsingham has been dead for two years.

And as plague sweeps through the streets and stews of London, so suspicion and mistrust sweep through the court and government. No one feels safe. Even the celebrated swordsman, adventurer and philanderer, Will Swyfte, is not immune and must watch his back.

It is when his best friend and colleague, the playwright Christopher Marlowe, is killed in a pub brawl that Will decides he must act. The murder has all the hallmarks of an assassination. But in going in search of Kit's killer, he discovers that there are those in positions of power and influence who are not what they seem...

Against a backcloth of growing paranoia and terror, Will detects the malign machinations of England's hidden enemy, the Unseelie Court. Now friendless and with these devils at his back, the country's greatest spy may find that even his vaunted skills are no match for the supernatural powers arrayed against him. The choice is simple: uncover the true nature and intention of this vile conspiracy - or face the executioner's axe...

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Acknowledgements

About the Author

Also by Mark Chadbourn

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**THE
SCAR-CROW
MEN
MARK CHADBOURN**



For Elizabeth, Betsy, Joe and Eve

PROLOGUE

PAST THE CANDLEWICK STREET PLAGUE PIT THEY RACE, BY THE RED crosses blooming on doors like spring poppies, and the words *God have mercy* daubed on house after house. Breath burning in their chests, they stumble and fall in the night-dark alleys only to haul themselves up on shaking legs to run again.

They are not consumed by terror of the sickness that has left London sweating in a feverish vision of its own demise, with florid images of blackened skin and blood haunting every thought. It is fear of what lies at their backs, sweeping through the filthy streets, caught in the glow of candles, like moths, eyes blazing with fierce passions. The ones who have footsteps like whispers, whose passing is a cold breath on the back of the neck.

'Do not look behind. Do not slow,' Christopher Marlowe yells to his companion.

His desperation rings off the wattle walls that press in on either side. In the heat of the late spring night, dark patches of sweat stain his grey doublet. His short Dutch cloak has been torn by a nail and his flat-top hat lost several streets back.

Marlowe is a playwright, one of the most famous in England, but he has other work, secret, dirty and dangerous. In intermittent shafts of moonlight, Marlowe's face appears too pale, his features etched with a profound

sadness that is surprising in a man still in his twenties. His eyes are dark against his almost translucent skin, the clipped black beard and moustache as wispy as the first face hair of a boy.

Beside him, Jack Wainwright is like a Kentish oak. Though almost ten years older than his companion, with a beard streaked with grey, he could easily shoulder a full beer barrel at the Mermaid Tavern on Cheapside. The whites of his eyes show clearly beneath his heavy brows. Scared, he ignores Marlowe's order and glances back.

Lights dance in the dark, drawing closer.

'We could hide and take them by surprise,' Wainwright says with a wavering voice that contains no enthusiasm. Under his working clothes, a loose coat over a shirt belted with cord, his sweat is cold.

'Would you take that risk? You are strong, but you are not a fighting man. And I, God help me, can do damage only with a quill,' Marlowe gasps. At the crossroads, he pauses, tries to steady his pounding heart, takes his bearings and then moves on.

Careering into the middle of a street near ankle-deep in dung, the two men skid to a halt a hand's-breadth from stamping hooves and creaking wheels. Eyeing them from beneath the brim of his battered hat, the driver spits an oath through the filthy cloth tied tightly across his mouth. He cracks his whip and urges the lumbering horse on. It is the death-cart. In the back, the wrapped bodies are stacked like cordwood, leaking fluids on to the roadway with every jerk and rattle. For a moment, Marlowe and Wainwright stare after the wagon as it disappears into the night.

With a rough shove, the older man urges his companion on. 'We shall not outrun them.'

'No. It is too late for us now,' the playwright mutters under his breath. 'Perhaps it was always too late.'

The route between the filthy hovels is as black as pitch, but Kit has run it many times to avoid the constables and

beadles, the drunken cutpurses and the low men to whom he owes money. Continuing west, they pass the open shutter of a cellar crammed to bursting with the poor, huddled in the dark in the reek of their own sweat. Pale faces glance up from the gloom, eyes wide with hopelessness.

Marlowe picks a path through a maze of stables and stores until he sees the spire of St Paul's silhouetted against the night sky. The cathedral would be open for sinners to find sanctuary. He urges Wainwright on.

'We can bolt the door,' he says, clapping a hand on his fellow's shoulder. 'Pile the pews against it.' Although he knows it will do little good.

The fugitives tumble into the candlelit cathedral and slam the heavy door behind them. The echoes rumble like thunder through the cavernous interior of the grand old building. Their breath ragged, they inhale the ghost of incense. With trembling fingers, they draw the bolts lightning-fast, a moment before something crashes against the oak with the force of a carriage. The two men are hurled across the worn flagstones, the impact knocking the wind out of them. Whatever is outside continues to pound the door with a steady, deafening rhythm.

Thoom. Thoom. Thoom. A funeral drum.

The blood hammers so loud in his head, Marlowe can barely think, but after a moment he gathers himself. 'Quick! Help me!' he calls. Wiping the moisture from his brow, he scrambles to his feet and runs to the nearest pew. It is too heavy for him to lift alone, but Wainwright grasps his end and raises it effortlessly. The two men haul it across the door, and then return for two more.

'Twill not delay them long,' Wainwright shouts above the booming echoes. His face is red, his sweat vinegar-sharp in the air.

'It will buy us a moment or two. That is all I need.' Fighting back his queasy dread, Marlowe, followed by

Wainwright, runs down the nave's great length. The locals call it Paul's Walk and it is nearly six hundred feet long, making the cathedral the third-longest in Europe, so the clergy boast. Past the scars of the destruction inflicted by Old Henry's dissolution and the Chantries Acts they race, under the vaulted roof and past the triforium which gives the cathedral a grandeur that makes Kit wish he was a Christian with a God who would listen to his pleas. He fixes his attention on the stained glass of the great rose window at the east end, hoping to see a glimmer of dawn, although he knows in his heart there is still a good half-hour to go.

In the sanctified interior, Jack Wainwright has calmed a little, though he winces at every crash against the door. 'What were they doing in that house? Did we really see that ... that terrible thing?' he asks, kneading his hands. Marlowe knows his companion hopes for a denial. When none comes, Wainwright crosses himself and blinks away tears of dread.

'Put it out of your mind. We have little time left to us. Spend it on whatever pleasant thoughts you can summon.' Distracted, Marlowe continues to search along the nave.

'Pleasant thoughts!' Wainwright exclaims, lifting his hat to run his fingers through sweat-plastered hair.

Marlowe tries to ignore the sour taste of failure. He recalls the hope he felt as he readied himself for the mission at sunset, but as in all his dealings with the Enemy he had also prepared himself for the worst. Now it is a matter of make-do and hope once again. Against his hip, the sack weighs heavily. Will its contents be enough to turn the tide of events?

As the crashes against the great oak door grow louder, he glances back and knows it will not hold much longer.

Grasping a candlestick, the playwright drives the shadows back until he finds the object of his search in the north aisle of the choir. A wooden plaque has been fastened to a pillar to mark the grave of Sir Francis Walsingham. A

rush of memories surprises Marlowe with their intensity. Though there had never been any love lost between him and England's former spymaster, he still thinks the funeral was a sad end to a powerful man.

He recalls standing at that same spot three years ago amid the tight knot of men: Will, Burghley, a handful of others, heads bowed, faces solemn. Candlelight and shadows, the sweet smell of incense, the muttered prayers of the priest rustling all around. The Queen, whom the great man had served so well, was noticeably absent. There had been none of the pomp and ceremony that usually greeted the passing of such a dignitary, no cathedral draped in black, no procession of the curious public to see the interment. The funeral was at night, out of sight of the masses, as if it was a guilty secret to be quickly hidden away. They blamed the quiet affair on the huge debts that hung over Walsingham at his death, but Marlowe knows the truth.

The flickering candle drips hot balls of wax on to the plaque with its banal Latin inscription outlining what is public knowledge of the spymaster's life. The playwright laughs bitterly at the volumes of truth that have been omitted.

Dropping to his knees, he finds the unmarked stone slab beside the final resting place of his former master's son-in-law, Sir Philip Sidney. He sees that the other great men buried in the cathedral have towering alabaster monuments, but Walsingham's grave is as he lived his life, unobtrusive, a shadow, easily missed.

From the sack tied to his side, Marlowe draws a pot of ink and, with his quill, begins to deface the tomb.

In the beginning was the Word, he writes.

Wainwright squats beside him, babbling, 'Why are we here? Why do you do this?'

The pounding on the door suddenly ceases. The silence that follows is somehow worse.

'Is there nothing that can save us?' the big man pleads. 'I could turn myself to God and pray for forgiveness.'

'If you feel there is some good in it, then do it.' Kit's tone is warm and he hopes it will comfort, but he sees a shadow cross his companion's face and knows he has accepted the suggestion too readily. Wainwright begins to shake until Marlowe puts a steadying hand on his shoulder.

'We should go our separate ways. That at least gives one of us a fighting chance,' the playwright urges in a quiet, calm voice.

Wainwright nods. 'I have no regrets, Master Marlowe. I have done good work for the Queen and our country, though I have not always been a good man.'

'I have no regrets, either. What will be, will be.'

The harsh grating of bolts being slowly drawn echoes along the vast nave. Yet there is no one near the door. Marlowe and Wainwright spring to their feet and shake hands before racing back along the nave, Wainwright to the north door, Marlowe to the south. Crouching behind a stone pillar, the playwright can just make out the vague form of his colleague in the gloom on the far side of the cathedral.

The west doors crash open. The pews fall aside as if they are autumn leaves. Footsteps echo off the flags. Whispery voices chill the blood.

Marlowe knows he should run, but he has to see. Keeping to the shadows around the pillar, he watches the pools of candlelight along the nave. Grey shapes flit around the edges of the illumination. Then, after a moment, one of them walks into full view, stands and looks around.

Naked to the waist, his skin has the colour of bone, his cadaverous head shaved and marked with blue and black concentric circles. Black rings line his staring eyes as he searches the shadows of the cathedral. Leather belts criss-cross his chest to secure the axe and sword on his back. His name is Xanthus.

Ice water sluices through Marlowe, and recognition.

In the candlelight, a cruel smile plays on the lips of the new arrival, and he takes from a pouch at his hip a silver box large enough to contain a pair of shoes. It is ornately carved. Marlowe thinks he glimpses a death's-head on its lid before Xanthus places the box on the flagstones and flips it open.

Run, the voice in the playwright's head insists, but he is in thrall to the curious sight. Why a box? What does it contain?

For a moment the only sound is the wind whistling through the open doors. Then a faint rustling begins. Marlowe spies movement at the edge of the dark interior of the box, one small shape wriggling, then another, then three. And from its depths streams a swarm of black spiders, each one as big as a man's hand. Too many for the size of the box, it seems.

A gasp comes from the other side of the cathedral. *Wainwright, you fool*, the younger man thinks.

Xanthus' lips pull back from small, pearly teeth, he glances into the shadows where the man hides and in a black tide the spiders wash towards the unseen spy. A moment later a cry of agony echoes up to the vaulted roof and Wainwright staggers into the candlelight, tearing at his skin. The creatures are all over him, biting. The pale figure only watches and grins.

Marlowe clasps a hand to his mouth in horror. He sees raw flesh on his companion's face, and blood flowing freely to pool around the man's shoes. Screams fill the vast space of the cathedral. However much Wainwright rips at the spiders, he cannot stop the agony. Wet bone gleams on the doomed man's head, and the back of his hands.

The screams subside. He staggers like a man in his cups, and falls to his knees, still slapping at his skin weakly. And when he pitches forward on to the cold stone, the creatures still feed.

Covering his face, Marlowe tries to drive the hideous vision from his mind.

This is only the start, he thinks.

Gripping the cold iron ring, the playwright throws open the south door and bolts into the warm night. His laboured breathing echoes off the walls of the houses, punctuated by the beat of his Spanish leather shoes on the dried mud. The thunder of blood in his head destroys all thoughts, and it is only when he is racing south through the winding streets towards Blackfriars that he realizes fortune is with him; but not with poor Wainwright.

He forces aside a tide of regret and grief and guilt. Will always told him he would never thrive as a spy because he felt too keenly. Now he understands that the past no longer matters, nor do his failings and dashed hopes. Only the future is important, and the slim chance that he can do something to avert the coming tragedy.

After a few moments the playwright hears his pursuers on the trail once more. Time is short.

Marlowe reaches the muddy banks of the slow-moving Thames, black under the dark sky, and he thinks of the River Styx. He smells wet wood and vegetation, and hears the symphonic creaks of straining ropes on the boats moored along the river's edge. Across the water is his own personal heaven: Bankside, and the gardens surrounding the Swan Theatre and the Rose, and the stews and dives where he can be the man he wants to be, away from the scrutiny and demands of powerful people.

Fearing he is too late, the playwright searches along the sticky path between Blackfriars and Baynard's Castle. But then he hears the stamp of hooves and follows the sound to find a young man dozing beside his horse, swathed in a brown woollen cloak. Kit studies the sleeper briefly, seeing the clear skin and slender frame and innocence, and suddenly he feels so very old. Gently, he shakes the young man awake.

‘Tom? Thank you for coming, but there is now a need for urgency,’ the spy says.

Tom rises, stretching. He is taller than Marlowe, his eyes as grey as the winter sky, his hair blond, falling over his ears and to the nape of his neck. ‘I thought you would not come. What is your wish? The horse?’ he asks sleepily. He doesn’t notice the playwright’s dishevelled state.

‘That is for you, to get as far away from here as you can, and quickly.’ Marlowe looks on his young friend with affection, and a rising sadness, and he tries to keep the edge of fear out of his voice.

A howl echoes only a few streets away. The playwright cannot be sure if it was made by a beast or something that had the shape of a man. *The Enemy can never be considered men*, he thinks with a pang of bitterness. *They have no compassion, no joy or love.*

From the sack at his side, Marlowe pulls a thick sheaf of papers, tied with string and sealed with red wax. ‘Tom, listen to me. You must deliver this to my good friend Will Swyfte.’

‘England’s greatest spy?’

Marlowe smiles wryly. ‘Yes, that is indeed how he is known. But first, and quickly, I must write a note to accompany the work.’ He retrieves his quill and the pot of ink.

A troubled thought distracts him and he peers deep into Tom’s face, searching for familiar signs, knowing it is not enough. Then he puts one hand at the back of the young man’s neck and pulls him into a deep kiss. When he breaks away, he stares into Tom’s eyes; it is still not enough, but he has to hope.

‘What is wrong?’ Tom asks. ‘You are not yourself.’

Marlowe laughs at that.

Hearing his pursuers closing in upon their position, his hand trembles as he grips the quill. Too much is at stake, and he dare not write plainly. But too obscure and Will will

not understand his warning. In the end, he can only trust in his friend's intellect.

I fear this may be our last communication, my dear, trusted friend. The truth lies within. But seek the source of the lies without, he scrawls. *Trust no one.* He underlines this last.

Quickly, he folds the letter and slides it under the string before handing the complete bundle to Tom. By this time, the young man is alarmed by his friend's actions. He senses their finality.

'You will come with me?' Tom asks. 'My horse will carry two a short distance.'

'There is nothing I would like more than to ride away with you, good Tom, and recapture those honeyed moments that made me so happy. But I fear it would mean your death. Now, be away, and fast.' Marlowe hears the faintest tremor in his voice, but he hides it quickly, seals it with a smile.

He kisses Tom again, and turns to the boats so his young friend will not linger. He allows himself one quick glance back when he hears the hoofbeats drawing away, and a moment of sadness too, and then he scrabbles to free the mooring rope of the nearest waterman's vessel.

Whispers roll along the river bank. Shadows emerge from an alley.

Lurching into the cold shallows, Marlowe feels the mud sucking at his shoes as he launches the boat into the current and drags himself on board. Loud splashing erupts behind him, but the current takes Marlowe away just quickly enough. Shadows flit along the water's edge, keeping pace.

Ahead, the first gleam of dawn lights the horizon. The playwright looks to the bank and sees the grey forms melt back into the darkened streets.

Marlowe feels no relief. He lies back in the boat, letting the current take him where it will. This life is already over

for him, he knows that. There is no escape.

Somewhere a killer lurks in plain sight, with a plan that threatens to engulf England in a rising tide of darkness. He listens to the water sloughing past the boat and hears in it the whispers that have haunted him since he made the first shocking discovery. Two words repeated in a rhythmic chant.

The end, the end.

The end.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MAN, DANGEROUS AND CONTROLLED, WAS MOVING THROUGH what felt like a dream, with devils and wolves, cats and dragons, dolls and jesters on every side. Fantastical faces peered at him from the growing shadows, gloved hands rising to mouths in surprise or intrigue or desire.

An excited chatter of anticipation buzzed through the upper gallery of the Rose Theatre that evening. Amid the heady atmosphere of timber, fresh plaster, perfume and sweat, the masked guests parted to allow the man through, their whispered comments following wherever he went: *'Spy ... spy ... England's greatest spy.'*

The evening's entertainment was yet to begin, but the Rose was already full. The carriages and horses had been arriving in a steady stream under the late afternoon sun that cast Bankside's green fields and dusty roads in a warm, golden haze. The women had alighted, their flat-fronted bodices and divided overskirts in popinjay blue, or sunset orange, or lusty-gallant red, the celebratory colours sending a message of defiance in dark times. The men wore quilted doublets and flamboyant white ruffs, peasecod bellies, jerkins in cloth of silver and half-compass cloaks. Their colours were more muted, greens and blacks and browns, but the sumptuous velvet and silk embroidered with gleaming gold spoke of that same defiance. The court of Queen Elizabeth, in all its glory, would not be bowed.

The spy, Will Swyfte, was a storm cloud amid the summery festivities, unmasked, dressed all in black, quilted doublet embroidered with silver, a jerkin of fine Spanish leather and a cloak. His black hair reached to the nape of his neck, his moustache and chin-hair trimmed that very day. His eyes too appeared black. He quietly cursed the ornate masks that hid the faces of the good men and women of England as they hung over the wooden rails of the upper galleries. He couldn't see the eyes with any clarity, and certainly couldn't identify any threat that might lurk there. And threat there was aplenty, all around London.

Underneath the musk of the crowd, the man caught the fragrant whiff of the numerous concoctions of herbs carried to ward off the terrible death. It was a pleasant change from the sickeningly sweet stink of rot that hung over the city like a permanent autumn fog.

Pausing at the rail, the spy peered down the well of the theatre to the yard in front of the stage. The audience was lit by the dying rays of the sun falling through the central, open area of the thatched roof. The black-garbed man studied the red-brick and timber frame of the many-sided theatre, noting the best vantage points, the escape routes, the places where a life could be taken without drawing too much attention. Even in that crowded, confined space throbbing with noise, death could wait patiently for an opportunity.

'Still no sign of Master Marlowe.' It was Nathaniel Colt, the spy's assistant, also unmasked. Eyes bright and inquisitive, he was smaller and younger than his master, slim and wiry, with a thin, tufty beard and moustache that made him appear younger still. 'I would have thought he'd rather lose his writing hand than miss his own first night.'

'Kit is a mercurial soul. He very rarely takes the path one would expect. Though I have not seen him for several

days now, I have never known him to miss the opportunity for applause.'

Or not to pass on the vital secrets he promised three days ago, Will thought. The playwright's hastily scrawled message had implied news of great importance, and a great threat too.

'Why pass on information here?' Nathaniel pressed. 'Why tonight? What could be so important that it could not be conveyed within the safe walls of one of the palaces, or at his own residence, or in one of the many vile and disgusting establishments you and Master Marlowe enjoy?'

The older man had already considered all those questions. 'I will ask Kit when he arrives. In the meantime, Nat, enjoy this fine entertainment that he and Master Henslowe have provided for us.'

With a shrug, the assistant returned his attention to the stage. 'There is still some novelty to be found in these theatres, I suppose,' he muttered. 'When Master Henslowe built the Rose six years ago, I doubted his good sense. The Bankside inn-yards had always provided a serviceable venue for plays.'

'Master Henslowe is sharp as a pin when it comes to matters of gold.' Will leaned on the rail, continuing to search the audience for any sign of danger: a hand raised too fast here, a man skulking away from his companions there. He knew his instincts were rarely wrong. He could feel some unseen threat lurking in the theatre. But where? He turned again to Nat. 'He bought this land for a song, here on the marshy river borders. And the theatre is close to the many earthy attractions of Europe's greatest city, the brothels and the bear-baiting arenas, the inns and gaming dens. There is always an audience to hand.'

'Then he must be doubly pleased that Master Marlowe insisted his first night be held here, for an audience of the court only. With the theatres all closed by order of the Lord

Mayor because of this damnable sickness, Master Henslowe's purse must be crying for mercy.'

'The aristocracy are starved of good entertainment in these plague-days and for a new Marlowe they will clearly travel even unto the jaws of death.'

Will's eye was caught by a subtle nod of the head at the rear of the gallery, where the lamps had just been lit. John Carpenter waited, scowling. His fingers unconsciously leapt to the hair that hid the jagged scar running down the left side of his face, the bear that had attacked him in Muscovy never forgotten.

Pushing his way through the audience, Will nodded to his fellow agent. 'Anything?'

Carpenter grunted. 'I do not understand why we take such measures. Who in their right mind would strike in such a crowded place?'

'An attack here would send a message to the Queen and the Privy Council that nowhere is safe.' Will looked out across the masked audience filling the upper gallery. Though he was half hidden by shadows, one cat-masked woman in emerald bodice and skirts turned to look at him directly. Even with the disguise, Will recognized Grace, the young woman he had been charged to protect and the sister of his own missing love. 'Kit's message implied a mounting danger. We take no risks.'

Carpenter shook his head with frustration. 'The Queen is safe and sound in Nonsuch. A few popinjays make poor targets.'

'You have somewhere better to be?' Will gave a wry smile. 'With pretty Alice Dalingridge, perhaps?'

The scarred man looked away, his cheeks colouring. 'Who do you fear? The Spanish? Papists? Or our true Enemy? The Unseelie Court have not been active for many months.'

'Which is when they are at their most dangerous.' In his mind's eye, Will saw white faces and churchyard eyes

emerging from the night-mist on a lonely moor. Those foul creatures still haunted the dreams of England, and, he feared, always would.

Further along the upper gallery, the good men and women of the court surged back from an area beneath one of the lamps. Angry shouts rose up.

‘Come!’ Drawing his blade, Will raced along the outer wall of the gallery. Carpenter remained close at his heels.

The two men found their ally, Robert, Earl of Launceston, pressed against the plaster, three swordpoints at his neck. His unnaturally pale face loomed out of the shadows like a ghost, the absence of colour in his grey woollen cloak and doublet only adding to his macabre appearance.

His three opponents eyed the two newly arrived men, contemptuous smiles creeping on to their lips. ‘England’s greatest spy,’ the leader sneered.

Will recognized the wiry, red-headed man: Tobias Strangeways, the most prominent of the new band of spies the Earl of Essex had established to rival the traditional secret service. He was a proficient swordsman, but he had a hot temper that meant he would never be a master with the rapier.

‘Leave him be,’ Carpenter growled.

When the scarred spy made to advance, Will held him back with an outstretched arm, although they shared an equal contempt for Strangeways and his men. In a court now riven with factions, Essex’s rival group served only to distract attention from the true threats facing England. ‘Now, now, John. There are only three of them. Why, that is no challenge for Robert.’

‘Perhaps another time.’ Launceston’s voice was as devoid of emotion as his face. ‘A little aid would not go amiss at this moment.’

Strangeways’ eyes were black slits. ‘I warned your man that if he spoke to me again there would be a reckoning.’

Your master may tolerate his unnatural tastes, but I do not have to.' He drew the tip of his rapier in a circle a finger's-width from Launceston's neck.

'You profess a moral stance, yet act like a rogue. Would you spill the blood of an unarmed man here, in full view of women? Even spies like you must abide by the law.' Frustrated that he was dealing with this conflict instead of searching for the real threat, Will's voice hardened and he levelled his rapier at the red-headed man.

'I can beat you in a fair fight, Swyfte.' Strangeways moistened his lips, but Will could see the uncertainty in his darting eyes.

'Leave Launceston alone.' Carpenter took another step forward. 'He is a better man than you.'

'Better than I?' The rival spy gave a mocking laugh. 'Better at killing innocents, and wallowing in their final suffering. He is a devil, with no morals, who deserves to be removed from this life.'

'We are all devils in our own way, Master Strangeways, and you prove it by passing such harsh judgement on a fellow man, with no evidence, only hearsay and old wives' gossip,' Will said.

His attention was caught by a flash of ostentatious white brocade and lace as a man in a ram's mask swaggered from the audience. 'Your day has passed, Master Swyfte,' the man boomed. He removed his mask to reveal himself as Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, in his own estimation the most handsome man at court. 'Your master, Sir Robert Cecil, is proving a poor defender of the realm and a most unfortunate replacement for the sadly missed Sir Francis Walsingham. His spies ... your companions, sir! ... have failed time and again to win an advantage for England in Spain, and in Flanders.'

'Your analysis, as ever, is passionately voiced, sir,' Will said with a bow, 'though I fear not all the details of our great successes have been brought to your attention.'

With a fixed smile, Essex held Will's gaze for a long moment, searching for any hint of the disrespect he knew was there. 'You would do well to study Tobias here, Master Swyfte. He is the future,' he said with a hearty laugh, clapping his red-headed favourite on the shoulder.

Strangewayes grinned.

Will could feel Carpenter and Launceston bristle beside him. 'I have always said Master Strangewayes is a lesson to us all.'

Sensing that his authority was close to being undermined, Essex grunted. Flashing Will a guarded look, he replaced his mask and strode back into the audience.

The black-garbed spy stepped past Carpenter, and with a flourish brought his blade under Strangewayes' sword, flicking it away from Launceston. 'If you wish to fight, then let's have at it.'

Uneasy now he had lost the upper hand, the rival spy glanced around and saw the rows of masked faces turned towards him. Slowly, he lowered his sword, then sheathed it. 'My master was correct. Your time has passed, Master Swyfte,' he sniffed, pretending he was bored with the confrontation. 'England no longer needs you. And if you do not see the truth in that statement now, you soon will. Come, lads.' He turned on his heel and pushed through the audience with his two men close behind.

Will sheathed his sword. 'You have a knack of finding trouble in the most unlikely places, Robert.'

'Is this what it has come to?' Unable to contain his bitterness, Carpenter stalked around them, his fists bunched. 'We fight among ourselves while England slowly falls around us?'

'These are dark days, indeed. And they could grow quickly darker if we do not uncover the threat that may lie within these walls.' Will held a hand out to the Earl. 'Robert, there is still no sign of Kit?'

‘The doormen say Marlowe paid a brief visit earlier this day, wearing a hood to hide his identity. He stayed only a short while, and gave new directions to the players before departing.’ Launceston’s voice was so quiet it was barely audible under the buzzing of the audience.

Will felt a deep foreboding. ‘Speak to the players,’ he ordered. ‘Find what Kit did here this day and why he left in such a hurry. Quickly, now!’

CHAPTER TWO

'IF YOU SEE CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE ANYWHERE IN THIS THEATRE, or hear a whisper of his voice, you come to us. Do you understand?' Carpenter growled. He shook the nodding stagehand roughly for good measure and flung the lad to one side. The youth scrambled away backstage, casting fearful glances at the two spies.

'The playwright is not here. I can feel it in my bones,' Launceston said in his whispery voice, looking across the sunlit audience in the yard from the shadows at the side of the stage.

'He is probably drunk in some stew or other and we, as always, are wasting our time,' Carpenter grumbled, itching the scars that marred his face.

A black-haired young woman in a plain white mask stepped lightly up. Plucking off her disguise, she laughed, her sharp blue eyes gleaming. 'Why are you always so gloomy, Master Carpenter?' she teased, folding her hands behind her back and leaning forward so her nose was only a hand's-width from the spy.

'Alice, I am working,' the scarred man began, a light smile rising to his lips unbidden. He still found the sensation unfamiliar, yet pleasing.

'This is an evening for entertainment, not swords and scowls. Do you like my dress?' The young woman showed off her pale green bodice and skirt. It was plain compared

to the lavish dresses of the other women, but it was all a kitchen maid could afford.

'It is beautiful, as are you, but you must return to your friends.'

With a theatrical sigh, the young woman twirled around, casting one teasing look at her love over her shoulder before replacing her mask and disappearing into the crowd.

Carpenter watched Alice go, unable to believe that a woman so warm and generous could have any affection for a man like him. If pressed, he would admit that he did not deserve her. But she was with him nonetheless.

Realizing Launceston was studying him, the spy scowled and said, 'What are you looking at, you elf-skinned giglet?'

'It is difficult to be certain, but it would appear to be a lovesick jolt-head,' the Earl replied dispassionately.

Waving an irritated hand at his companion, Carpenter turned backstage, but the pallid man grabbed him by the shoulder. 'You will get yourself killed, and the girl. The business of spies demands dedication and concentration. There is no place in it for a woman.'

Carpenter threw off the hand. 'Then it is good that I am about to leave this miserable profession,' he snapped.

'Leave?'

'It is my intention to marry Alice.'

'And do what? Become a chandler, or a draper, or sell eggs in the market? You are spoiled for the life that others lead.'

'We deserve our chance at happiness, like any other man or woman,' said Carpenter, jabbing a finger at his friend.

Launceston remained unsettlingly calm. 'You are not like other men. How many have slit a throat, skewered a heart, hanged, strangled, eviscerated, and lopped off limbs? How many—'

'Be still.' The scarred man seethed, long-held resentments bubbling to the surface until he could contain

them no longer. 'For five years now, I have tried to hold your demons in check. That hellish fever! When I see the light in your eyes, my heart is crushed with despair, for I know that I will soon be dragging you away from some drunken man, or some doxy, or a lady of the court even. Boys. Priests. Merchants. Sailors. When your dagger is gripped so that your knuckles are white, I know the madness is upon you.'

'I know.' His pale face blank, the Earl glanced around, half listening.

'I have seen blood ... so much innocent blood.' The bleak memories tumbled over themselves. 'That poor girl near the Tower. That butcher ...' The scarred man shook his head. 'I could not tell him from his wares.'

With mounting desperation, Carpenter saw Launceston eyeing another stagehand dragging a box towards the tiring house, and knew his companion saw only the pulse of blood in the artery, the shape of the skull in the cheekbones, the gleam of organs revealed to air.

'But they all lived, John. You saved them all. And you have saved me,' the Earl murmured.

Carpenter felt desolate. Out of friendship, he had stepped in to keep Launceston from destroying himself without realizing the true price he would have to pay. That act had consumed his life, his every thought; watching, cautioning, knowing that if he ever failed, his conscience would be scarred by the death of an innocent. Launceston's burden had become his burden, and he could bear it no more. *Yet, God help me, I have to. For if not me, who?*

The Earl continued to watch the stagehand, unaware of his friend's turmoil.

So much sacrifice and it was not even noticed. His rage now gone, Carpenter could not meet Launceston's eye. 'No more, Robert. I am spent.'

'Then what is to become of me?'