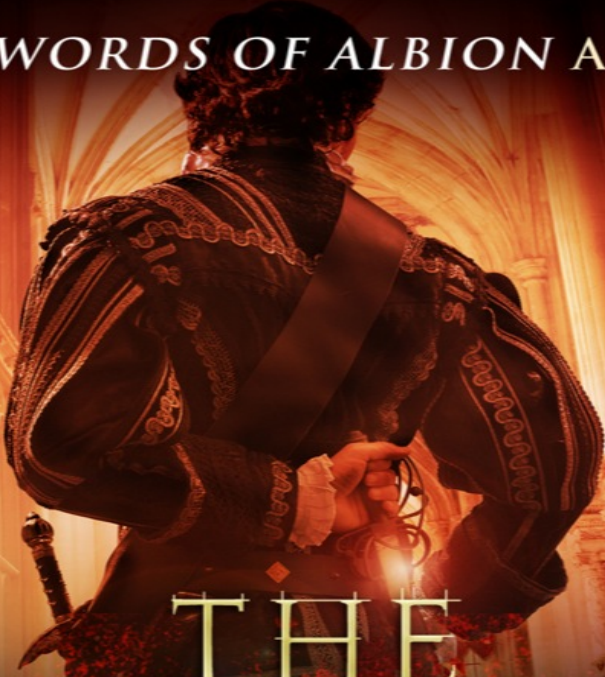


THE NEW SWORDS OF ALBION ADVENTURE

A man in 18th-century attire, seen from behind, holding a glowing lantern. He stands in a grand, dimly lit cathedral with tall columns and arches. The scene is bathed in a warm, orange-red light, suggesting fire or a dramatic sunset.

THE DEVIL'S LOOKING GLASS

MARK CHADBOURN

Two large sailing ships are shown at sea during a dramatic sunset or sunrise. The sky is filled with orange and red clouds. Both ships have smoke rising from their hulls, suggesting they are engaged in battle or have just fired. The water is dark and choppy.

At the ends of the earth, England's greatest spy will confront
our most ancient foe — and face his deepest fear . . .

About the Book

1593: the Queen's alchemist and master of the dark arts Dr John Dee is missing . . .

. . . and in his possession is a mysterious obsidian mirror, an object of great power that, legend has it, could set the world afire.

The call goes out to celebrated swordsman, adventurer and rake Will Swyfte: find Dee and his feared looking-glass and return them safely to London before disaster strikes. But Will learns that the mirror may help him solve the mystery that has haunted him for years – the fate of his lost love, Jenny – and suddenly the stakes are intensely personal.

With a frozen London under siege by supernatural powers, time is running out. Will is left with no choice but to pursue Dee across the ocean, to the devil-haunted lands of the New World and the terrifying fortress home of mankind's ancient enemy, the Unseelie Court.

Facing an army of these unearthly fiends, with only his sword and a few brave friends at his back, England's greatest spy must be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice – or see all he loves destroyed . . .

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About the Author

Also by Mark Chadbourn

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THE DEVIL'S LOOKING GLASS

MARK CHADBOURN



For Elizabeth, Betsy, Joe and Eve



*Go, Soul, the body's guest,
Upon a thankless errand;
Fear not to touch the best;
The truth shall be thy warrant:
Go, since I needs must die,
And give the world the lie.*

Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Lie*

PROLOGUE

THE MERCILESS SUN boiled in a silver sky. Waves of heat shimmered across the seething main deck of the becalmed galleon where the seven sailors knelt, heads bowed. As blood dripped from their noses on to their sweat-sodden undershirts, they muttered prayers in Spanish, their strained voices struggling to rise above the creaking of the hull timbers flexing against the green swell. Harsh light glinted off the long, curved blades pressed against each of their necks.

At the sailors' backs, the grey men waited in silence. Ghosts, they seemed at times, not there but there, their bone-white faces wreathed in shadow despite the unremitting glare. Oblivious of the sweltering heat, they wore grey leather bucklers, thick woollen breeches and boots, all silver-mildewed and reeking of rot. As still as statues, they were, drawing out the agony of the whimpering men before the swords would sweep down.

Captain Juan Martinez de Serrano knelt on the forecastle, watching the row of seamen from under heavy brows. Even now he could not bring himself to look into the terrible faces of the ones who had boarded his vessel. Aft, the grey sails of the other galleon billowed and the rigging cracked, although there was no wind and had not been for three days. Serrano lowered his head in desolation. How foolish they had been. Though they knew the devils of the Unseelie Court were like wolves, the lure of gold was too great. The captain cast his mind back to that night ten days

gone when his men had staggered out of the forest with their stolen hoard. Barely could they believe they had escaped with their lives, and their laughter had rung out across the waves as they filled the hold and dreamed of the glory that would be lavished upon them by King Philip in Madrid. They had set sail with a fair wind and all had seemed well, until the grey sails appeared on the horizon, drawing closer by the hour.

The steel bit into his neck and he winced. They should have known better. Now, save for the last eight of them, blood soaked into the boards of the quarterdeck where they lay, each one slaughtered within moments, though they were among the fiercest fighters upon the Spanish Main.

A rhythmic rattling stirred him. Raising his eyes once more, he watched a strange figure approach. The sound came from trinkets and the skulls of mice and birds braided into long gold and silver-streaked hair. Hollow cheeks and dark rings under his eyes transformed his features into a death's-head. He wore grey-green robes covered with unrecognizable symbols outlined in a tracing of gold that glistened in the midday sun, like one of the gypsy conjurers who performed at the fair in Seville. Sweeping out his right arm, he addressed Serrano in a voice like cracking ice. 'You are honoured. Our King.'

Serrano swallowed. He sensed the new arrival before he saw him, in a weight building behind his eyes and a queasy churn in his stomach. He closed his eyes. How long would this torment continue? A steady tread crossed the main deck and came to a halt in front of him. Silence followed.

When he had mouthed a prayer, the captain squinted. A pair of grey boots fell into view, and the fur-lined edge of a shimmering white cloak. He heaved his shaking head up, following that pristine cloth until he reached the head of the one who looked down on him. But the brutal sun hung behind the figure and the features were lost. Serrano was glad of that.

'I am Mandraxas, of the High Family, and until my sister is brought back to the land of peace, I hold the Golden Throne.' The voice sang like the wind in the high branches. Serrano could not believe it was the voice of a cruel man, until he remembered that this was not a man at all, but a creature with no understanding of compassion or gentleness or the kindnesses that tied mortals together. 'Who are you?'

The captain muttered his response, his mouth so dry he could barely form words.

'Your name means nothing,' the King replied. 'Who are you, who dares to trespass on our land and steal our gold? Who thinks you are our equal?' When Serrano failed to reply, Mandraxas continued, 'You were damned the moment you insulted us with your arrogance. Let Deortha show you what you truly are to us.' He waved a languid hand towards the main deck where the robed intruder waited. The robed one nodded, the skulls clacking in his hair, and the nearest swordsman whipped his blade into the air and plunged it into the sailor who knelt in front of him.

Serrano cried out as the seaman pitched forward across the sandy boards. Deortha knelt beside the unmoving form, his lips and hands moving in harmony, and a moment later the slain sailor twitched, jerked and with a long shudder clawed his way upright. He swayed as if the ship rolled in a stormy sea, his dead eyes staring.

'*Por Dios*,' Serrano exclaimed, sickened.

'Meat and bones,' Mandraxas said. 'No wits remain, and so these juddering things are of little use to us apart from performing the most mundane tasks.' He waved a fluttering hand towards Deortha. 'Over the side with it,' he called. 'Let it spend eternity beneath the waves.'

The captain screwed up his eyes at the splash, silently cursing the terrible judgement that had doomed them all. 'Let this be done with,' he growled in his own language.

Mandraxas appeared to understand. 'There will be no ending for any of you here,' he said in a voice laced with cold humour. 'You, all of you, will join your companion with the fishes, never sleeping, never dreaming, seeing only endless blue but never understanding.' His words rang out so that all the sailors heard him. 'But, for the rest of your kind, their ending is almost upon them. Listen. Can you hear the beat of us marching to war? Listen.'

A sword plunged down; a body crashed upon the deck. And another, and another, the steady rhythm moving inexorably towards Serrano. He sobbed. It was too late for him, too late for all mankind if the cold fury of these fiends was finally unleashed.

'In England now, the final act unfolds,' Mandraxas said above the beat of falling bodies. 'And so your world winds down to dust.'

Serrano looked up as the shadow fell across him.

CHAPTER ONE

BEDLAM RULED IN the eight bells inn. Tranquillity was for landmen who sat by warm firesides in winter and took to their beds early, not for those who braved seas as high and as hard as the Tower's stone walls. Here was life like the ocean, fierce and loud and dangerous. Delirious with drink, two wild-bearded sailors lurched across the rushes, thrashing mad music from fiddle and pipe. With shrieks of laughter, the pockmarked girls from the rooms upstairs whirled around in each other's arms, their breasts bared above their threadbare dresses. The rolling sea-shanty crashed against the barks of the drunken men clustered in the shadowy room. In hazy candlelight, they hunched over wine-stained tables or squatted against whitewashed walls, swearing and fighting and gambling at cards. Ale sloshed from wooden cups on to the boards, and the air reeked of tallow and candle-smoke, sweat and sour beer. The raucous voices sounded lustful, but underneath the discourse odd, melancholic notes seemed to suggest men clinging on to life before they returned to the harsh seas.

When the door rattled open to admit a blast of salty night air, the din never stilled and no eyes turned towards the stranger. He was wrapped in a grey woollen cloak, his features partially hidden beneath the wide brim of a felt hat. Behind him, across the gleaming cobbles of the Liverpool quayside, a carrack strained at its moorings, ready for sail at dawn. The creak of rigging merged with the lapping of the tide.

The new arrival closed the door behind him and demanded a mug of ale from the innkeeper's trestle. A seat in one of the shadowy corners called to him, away from the candlelight, where he could watch and listen unnoticed. If they had not been addled by drink, some of the seamen might have recognized the strong face from the pamphlets, the close-clipped beard and black hair curling to the nape of the neck, the dark eyes the colour of rapier steel.

Will Swyfte was a spy, *England's greatest spy*, so those pamphlets called him, *the bane of the Spanish dogs*. Only the highest in the land knew his reputation was carefully constructed for a country in need of heroes to keep the sleep of goodly men and women free from nightmares of Spanish invaders and Catholic plotters, and other, darker things too. Swyfte cared little. He did his dark work for Queen and country without complaint, but kept his own machinations close.

He sipped his drink and waited. As the reel of the shanty ebbed and flowed, he caught snatches of slurred conversation. Tall tales of haunted galleons and the clutching hands of dead sailors. Of cities of gold hidden in the lush forests of the New World. Of a misty island that came and went as if it were alive. Of golden lights glimmering far out across the waves and far down in the black deeps. Through the eyes of the sailors, the world was a far stranger place than their land-locked fellows believed; and Will Swyfte knew the sea-dogs were correct. They had sailed to the dark shores of life, where the truth lived, and had paid a price for their wisdom. The spy noted the leather patches over missing eyes, the lost legs and hands, the scars that drew maps of the world across their skin. He felt a kinship. Like him, they were cut off from the peace and order that most experienced, although his own wounds were not so easily seen.

He thought back more than a week to Nonsuch Palace, a day's ride to the south-west from London's fetid streets.

While the Queen recovered her strength in her bed, under the observance of the Royal Physician, turmoil reigned throughout the grand building. Servants scoured the chambers and searched the grounds. The Privy Council had been cloistered in the meeting room for more than an hour when the knock had come at Will's chamber door.

His assistant, Nathaniel Colt, had been waiting on the threshold, flushed from running through corridors warmed by the late autumn sun. His dark green doublet was stained with sweat under the armpits and his brown hair lay slick against his head. 'Sir Robert sent word from the Privy Council meeting to summon you to his chambers,' he gasped. 'There was fear in his eyes, and his voice wavered. Is this it, then, Will? Invasion? Our enemies are marching towards us?'

The spy hid his true thoughts with a grin. 'Nat, you worry like an old maid. Do you see me rushing to arms?' Enemies, yes, but not the ones Nat feared. Not the Spanish, nor their Popish agitators. No, he meant the true Enemy - those who lived by night, and treated men as men did cattle.

'I do not see you rushing to a flask of sack, and that worries me more.'

Will rested a reassuring hand on the young man's shoulder. 'England lurches from crisis to crisis, as always, but we stand firm and we abide. This will pass.'

His words seemed to reassure Nat a little. Will left him resting by the open window and made his way through the noisy palace. Lucky Nat, who slept well at night. He saw only glimpses of the greater war. Will sheltered him from the worst horrors for the sake of his wits, and would continue to do so while there was breath left in him.

The spymaster's door was hanging open when Will arrived. Fresh from the Privy Council meeting, Sir Robert Cecil was firing orders at a clutch of scribes and assistants as he marched around the chamber. The Queen called him

her Little Elf because of his small stature and his hunched back, but his sharp wits and cunning were more than a match for any other man at court. He had a feel for the games of high office, and his ruthlessness made him both feared and powerful.

When the black-gowned secretary saw Will, he dismissed the bustling aides and closed the door. 'Gather your men,' he snapped, feigning calm with a lazy wave of his hand. 'You ride north today in search of Dr Dee.'

'You know his whereabouts?'

'A carriage was seen travelling along the Great North Road. I received word back this morning that it has taken a turn towards Liverpool.'

'You are sure?'

'Yes.' Unable to contain the apprehension he felt, the spymaster turned away to calm himself. 'Dr Dee was seen in the company of that Irish whore, Red Meg O'Shee. They must be stopped before she spirits him away to her homeland. If they reach that land of bogs and mists, we will never see Dee again. And then . . .'

England will fall, Will completed the unspoken thought. Dee was the architect of the country's defences. He worked his magics to keep at bay the supernatural forces that had tormented England for as long as men had walked the green fields, and the Irish chieftains had long envied that protection; they had suffered long and hard under the torments of the Fair Folk. But whatever wall Dee had constructed around England with his ancient words of power and candles and circles had been crumbling. Dee was the only man who could repair those defences. Without him, the night would sweep in.

'The threat is greater than you know.' Cecil bowed his head for a moment, choosing his words carefully. 'The mad alchemist has in his possession an object of great power. For years he denied all knowledge of it. But shortly before

he was spirited away, he confided in me that he had used it to commune with angels.'

'Angels?' Will laughed. 'I have heard those tales, but Dee is most definitely not on their side.'

'This is a grave matter,' the spymaster snapped, a twitching hand leaping to his flushed brow. 'Should this object fall into the hands of our enemies, there will be no laughter.'

Will poured himself a cup of romney from a jug on a trestle table littered with charts and documents. 'Then tell me the nature of this threat.'

'It is a looking glass.'

The spy peered over the rim of his cup, saying nothing.

'No ordinary glass, this. An obsidian mirror, supposedly shaped by sorcerers of an age-old race who once inhabited the impenetrable forests of the New World.'

Will furrowed his brow. He remembered Dee showing him this mundane-looking object at his chamber in Christ's College in Manchester, where he had, no doubt, been tormenting the poor brothers. 'Brought back to Europe in a Spanish hoard?'

Cecil's eyes narrowed. 'Legend says it could set the world afire, if one only knew how to unlock its secrets.'

The spy drained his cup. 'Very well. I will take John Carpenter, the Earl of Launceston and our new recruit, young Tobias Strangeways. We will ride hard, but Red Meg has a good start on us.'

The spymaster narrowed his eyes. 'You allowed Mistress O'Shee into your circle. You trusted her, though you knew she was a spy—'

'I would not use that word. Tolerated, perhaps. I understood her nature, sir, and I am no fool.'

'Is that correct? I heard that you were more than associates. I need assurances that this woman has not bewitched your heart or your prick. If that were so, I would despatch another to bring her back.'

‘There is no one better.’

‘You have never been shy in trumpeting your own achievements, Master Swyfte,’ Sir Robert said with pursed lips. ‘Nevertheless, I would rather send a lesser man I can trust to succeed in this most important . . . nay, utterly vital . . . work than one who will be led by lust to a disaster that will damn us all to Hell.’

‘I am no fool,’ Will repeated, setting aside his own uncertainty regarding his feelings for the Irish spy. ‘There is too much at stake here for such distractions.’

‘I am pleased to hear you say it.’ The spymaster ran the gold-ringed fingers of his right hand across his furrowed brow. ‘If Dee leaves our protected shores, he will be prey for the Unseelie Court, and the repercussions of that are something I dare not countenance.’

Will left the cold chamber with fire in his heart. Within the hour, he and his men were riding north as hard as their steeds could bear. Red Meg would expect him to be on her trail – she was as sly a vixen as he had ever known – and she would not make it easy to recover Dee. He had seen her kill without conscience. Even the affection she felt for him would not stand in the way of her carrying such a great prize back to her homeland.

Braying laughter jolted Will back to the Eight Bells. The musicians had put away their instruments and were swigging malmsey wine in great gulps. The girls flopped into laps or draped themselves over shoulders in search of the night’s earnings. Arguments sparked. Punches were thrown.

Dee’s knowledge was dangerous and he needed to be returned to London at all costs, that was certain. But the alchemist revelled in misdirection and illusion, the spy knew. Was this mirror truly the threat Cecil feared? Or in this time of uncertainty had the spymaster simply given in to superstition and fear? Will shrugged. The world was

filled with worries, and the truth would present itself sooner or later.

Once he had drained his ale, he selected his subject, a balding seaman with wind-chapped cheeks and a scrub of white hairs across his chin. Nursing a mug, the man leaned against the wall next to the stone hearth, eyeing the flames with the wistful look of someone who knew it was a sight he'd not see again for long weeks. He looked drunk enough for his guard to be low, but not so inebriated that he could not provide useful information. Keeping the brim of his hat down, the spy demanded another drink and walked over.

Will rested one Spanish leather boot on the hearth and watched the fire for a moment before he said, 'I have never met a man of the sea who was not interested in adding to his purse. Are you that rare creature?'

'Depends what you need doing,' the man slurred.

'All I require are words.'

The sailor's gaze flickered over Will. He seemed untroubled by what he saw. 'Ask your questions.'

'I seek news of two new arrivals in Liverpool who may be requiring passage to Ireland. A woman with hair as fiery as her nature and a tongue that cuts sharper than any dagger. And a man . . .' The spy paused. How to describe Dr Dee in a way that would do the magician justice? 'White hair, blazing eyes, a fierce temper, and a slippery grip on the world we all enjoy. He may have been wearing a coat of animal pelts.'

'I have heard tell of them, an Abraham man, mad as a starved dog, accompanied by his daughter,' the sailor grunted. 'The woman cut off the ear of Black Jack Larch, so I was told. His only crime was to lay a hand upon her arm and ask for a piece of the comfort she promised.'

'That would be Red Meg.'

The seaman smacked his lips, watching Will's hand. The spy unfolded his fingers to reveal a palmful of pennies. Snatching the coins the man continued, 'They bought

passage to Ireland on the *Eagle*, sailing at dawn. Wait at the quayside and you will see them.'

'I would prefer to surprise them before sunrise. Where do they stay?'

'The woman took Black Jack's shell outside Moll Higgins's rooming house. You could do worse than to seek them there.'

'You have earned yourself another drink. Go lightly on the waves.' Will gave a faint bow of the head and turned towards the door. He found his way blocked by three men, hands hanging close to their weapons.

'What 'ave we 'ere, then? A customs man come to spy on us?' the middle one growled. His left eye was milky, a jagged scar running from the corner to his jaw. He wore an emerald cap and his voice had the bark of authority; a first mate, perhaps, Will thought.

'Why, you are good honest seamen. I could find no rogues or smugglers here,' Will replied, his tone as laconic as his gaze was sharp. 'Step aside. My business here is done and I will disturb your drinking no more.' He knew any sign of weakness would only encourage the drunken men further.

The sailor's one good eye flickered from left to right, and in an instant strong hands gripped Will's arms. Someone tore off his hat. The sailor whisked a dagger from the folds of his dirty linen shirt and pressed the tip under the spy's chin, forcing his head up. A blast of ale-sour breath washed over Will as the man searched his features. Silence fell across the rest of the inn. The other drinkers crowded round.

One of the women leaned in, her eyes narrowing. 'I know 'im,' she said in a broad accent. 'That's Will Swyfte, that is. England's greatest spy.' A lascivious smile sprang to her lips. 'I would see the length of your sword, chuck.'

'Later, in the privacy of your chamber, perhaps. Let us not point up how dull are the blades of these fine men.' He

held her gaze and her smile broadened.

‘The great Will Swyfte,’ the one-eyed man mocked. ‘The dewy-eyed women and the witless fieldworkers might be easily dazzled by your exploits, but here you are just another sharp nose poking into our business.’

‘Your business concerns me less than the contents of your privy. I am troubled by greater matters: the security of this realm.’

‘Stick ‘im now. We’ll dump him in the drink and no one’ll be the wiser,’ another sailor said. ‘Let ‘im walk out and we’ll be swarming with tax collectors like rats on the bilge deck.’

Will’s dark eyes flickered over the leering, grizzled faces pressing all round him. He had been here before, too many times, and whether he was looking into the eyes of Spanish pikemen or Kentish cut-throats, he knew the signs; there was no point in further talk.

Wrenching his shoulders back, he unbalanced the two men gripping his arms. With one sharp thrust, he planted a boot in the gut of the sailor wielding the knife. The milky-eyed seaman doubled over with a forced exhalation. Will saw that the drunken sailors were taken by surprise by the suddenness of his movement, and smiled. Sober, they would be a formidable army of cutthroats. Soaked in ale, they wheeled around like small children.

Tearing his arms free, the spy lashed one foot under a three-legged stool and heaved it into the face of his former captor. Bone shattered, blood sprayed. A roar rang up to the rafters. Squealing whores ran for the rickety stairs at the back of the inn. The seamen drew daggers and hooks, each weapon glinting in the candlelight. The men surged forward.

Will felt the familiar heart-rush. He drew his rapier, enjoying the familiar feel and weight in his hand. With one bound, he leapt from a bench to the innkeeper’s cluttered trestle. Cups flew. Coin jangled on to the boards.

‘Who will be the first to feel the bite of my blade?’ he called, kicking the barrel. The wooden tap burst free, the honey-coloured ale gushing out. The keg spun off the table and into the path of the onrushing seamen.

The spy felt no desire to kill any of these rogues; he wished to save his steel for more deserving blood. But they swarmed around him like angry bees, eager to sting him to death. It was as he searched for a route past them that the flagstones began to vibrate as though the trestle were being dragged over cobbles. The sailors came to a sudden halt, eyeing each other with unease. Across the inn, the candle flames sputtered and shuddered as one. Shadows swooped. Breath clouded as a winter chill descended. The sailors murmured, casting anxious glances all around. One by one they put away their weapons.

Through the small, square windowpanes, distorted lantern-light danced in an unnatural manner from the carrack. A moment later, the door crashed open. The master of the quay lurched into the space, his hat askew, his face drained of blood. ‘Take up your weapons and any light you can find,’ he croaked. ‘The devil has come with the fog.’

CHAPTER TWO

THE THICK FOG muffled even the creaking of the sign above the entrance to the inn. Nothing of the quayside was visible, nor any of the lights of Liverpool beyond. Never had Will known such a dense mist to sweep in so quickly. In the time it had taken him to push his way past the quay master and find a hiding place outside, the grey folds had billowed in from the west, consuming all in their path.

He crouched behind the dank-smelling rain butt at the edge of the stone frontage, watching the sailors flood out of the inn and clatter across the cobbles with pitch-soaked brands to light their way. The fog swallowed them in an instant. Distorted calls and responses floated back, before they too were lost. They were simple men, easily frightened by things beyond their understanding. But Will suspected that whatever it was that accompanied the unnatural mist would dwarf their present fears.

Moisture dripped from the inn sign. An angry cry rang out from near the water's edge. A dull querying rejoinder from somewhere further afield, the splintering of breaking wood: odd sounds, incomprehensible in their muted isolation. Will waited, his fingers clenched round the hilt of his rapier.

He sensed the strangers long before he saw them. His head throbbed, his stomach churned. Blood bubbled around his left nostril. Familiar signs, all of them. They were coming, those foul things that had thrown his entire life off its course. Cold anger burned in his chest as his thoughts

took him back from that misty autumn night to the hot summer day in Warwickshire that he could never escape. Jenny was there, then, as she was always in his heart, waving to him across the cornfield, her dress the pure blue of forget-me-nots, brown hair tied back with a matching ribbon. One moment, frozen for ever, along with all the promises of shared summers yet to come. In the blink of an eye, she had vanished. No trace remained behind, no path through the corn to show where she had gone, no footprints. No body. Gone as if she had been whisked up to Heaven by a choir of angels.

Will peered round the water butt at the figures emerging from the folds of grey. No, it was these devils who had stolen Jenny away, he knew now. For what reason, he had no idea, and the mystery of it still sickened him. But never would he give up hope that she was still alive, whatever his friends said. Over the years he had learned enough to convince himself that she did still live, that she was a prisoner somewhere – perhaps across the sea, in the New World where men said the Unseelie Court made their home. Everything he did, every battle he fought, every sacrifice he made, was to find some way to bring Jenny home. She was all that mattered. Not his life and not, though he would never give voice to it in public, his Queen or country.

Four figures swooped forward with near-silent tread, at first almost as insubstantial as the fog that enshrouded them. But when a sailor sprawled across the glistening cobbles, they appeared to coalesce, and take on flesh and bone. Dread crept across the still quayside. Despite himself, Will felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. Here they were, the sum of all human fears since the days of the Flood: the grey men, the Fair Folk, the Fay; their names seemed endless, a way for mortals to skirt around the essential horror that lay at their heart. Three were swathed in grey cloaks and hoods, cold faces as pale as the

first snows of winter and eyes black as coals. The fourth was the leader, Will was certain. He sported a beard and moustache waxed into points, and his black hair was long and sleek. His eyes were lost to shadow, but hard lines edged his mouth and when he smiled he revealed sharp teeth.

‘My name is Lansing,’ he murmured, looming over the fallen figure. ‘Others are the wits of the High Family, or the cunning. I am the blade.’ And he whispered into the terrified man’s ear, whispered words that were poisonous and corrupt, words that piled horror upon horror – words that would drive a man mad. Will clenched his fingers round his sword-hilt tighter still, so that his knuckles grew white. He wished he could drive his blade into Fay flesh to ease his anger, though he knew he could never defeat four of them.

When the sailor curled on the cobbles whimpered, the spy recognized the balding man he’d talked to at the Eight Bells. At the same time, he heard the Fay lord say, ‘Tell me now, while you can, where I will find this man, the sorcerer John Dee. Once we have him, there will be an end to this long strife and you will know peace. All of you.’

Will cursed under his breath. The words were comforting, their true meaning deeply disturbing. If the Unseelie Court hunted the alchemist so brazenly, then the matter was more grave than he had been led to believe. He could not afford to allow the hidden Enemy to reach Dee ahead of him, for then he would have seen the last of Elizabeth’s conjurer, and most likely the last of England.

As Lansing continued to question his prisoner, Will lifted down the iron lantern beside the inn door, and wrapped his cloak around it to shield the moving light. He crept along the wall to the cover of the mounds of bales and spice-scented boxes that had been unloaded before sunset.

Running feet echoed close by. Orange light flared across the wall above his head, and he dropped to his haunches

just in time. He could smell the acrid pitch-smoke and hear the sputtering of the brand. Three drunken sailors argued about what devils were loose in Liverpool. They would find out soon enough, Will thought.

Sneaking to where he could hear water lapping in the shadow of the great vessels at anchor, he used his nose to find the reeking barrel of pitch the shipwrights used to seal the hulls. He heaved the heavy butt on to its side and flung the lantern into the slopping contents. As the pitch ignited and the flames roared out, he rolled the barrel hard. The blazing keg hurtled across the quayside to where the Fay were cloaked by the fog.

Cries of alarm rang out along the water's edge. Blazing brands flickered in the dense bank of grey cloud like fireflies on the wing, circling back to where the burning barrel painted the fog orange. The Unseelie Court worked their cruelties best in the shadows. No doubt they would melt away long before the fear-filled sailors discovered them. But had he done enough to disrupt their interrogation before they discovered Dee's whereabouts?

As the tumult swept towards the crackling fire, Will raced into the rat's nest of narrow streets leading away from the dock. The ghost of the Unseelie Court still lingered, a cold breath on the neck in a midnight churchyard. The town was dark, but his mood was darker still.

CHAPTER THREE

LIVERPOOL TUMBLED AWAY down the hillside towards the River Merse where the thick fog bank held its breath, waiting. Yet above the town the night was clear, the Everton Beacon stark against the starry sky. Moonlight limned the blue-tiled rooftops. Candle flames glowed in diamond-pane windows. Here was life, grubby and bloody and loud. Down on James Street, not far from the black bulk of the Old Castle, packs of sailors roamed like dogs from stew to tavern, lured by the fresh meat calls of the competing whores displaying their breasts in the lamplit doorways. Snarls and snapping punctuated the drunken laughter. Bruised knuckles crashed against jaws as rivals brawled, rolling among the contents of emptied chamberpots to the baying of their yellow-toothed fellows.

Liverpool stank of brine and cesspits and smoke.

One desperate doxy keen to earn her bed for the night ventured into the shadowed alley where she had glimpsed three men lurking. From the gloom, John Carpenter watched her approach. Pulling down the front of her dirty emerald dress, the rouge-smeared woman put on a seductive smile. 'Come hither, lads,' she called, hands on hips. 'The comfort of these thighs will give you sweet dreams when you're tossing away on the waves.'

When she saw one of the men step from the enveloping dark, she breathed a relieved sigh. Carpenter knew her thoughts: a few moments of grunting was a small price to pay for a good night's rest. And the well-cut grey doublet

and grey woollen cloak, free of stains and wear, suggested a gentleman, no less. Then a shaft of light from the lantern over the door of the White Hart struck his companion's face and she all but cried out. His skin was bloodless, and his dark eyes held a hellish glow.

'Away, you pox-ridden whore,' Robert, Earl of Launceston, ordered in a voice like autumn leaves. 'Trouble us no more or feel the prick of my dagger - and not the kind you are used to.'

Realizing it was a man after all and no grim spectre, the doxy cursed at the shock she had been given. She turned to summon the sailors to teach this elf-skinned scut a lesson. Before she could cry out, Carpenter leapt from the shadows and placed one hand on her mouth to stop her. His hazelnut doublet was of a rougher cut than his fellow's, but still clean, and though his long, dark hair fell oddly across the left side of his face, he eased a charming smile on to his lips to soothe her. He pressed a silver coin into her grimy palm and released his hand from her mouth.

'My friend has poor manners, mistress. He knows not what it is like to work hard for a living,' he said, with a bow. 'Take this and buy yourself a night off your back.'

The woman giggled and curtsied, flashing one fleeting murderous glare at the Earl as she darted towards the inn to spend her earnings on drink. Once she had gone, Carpenter turned on the noble and hissed, 'Sometimes I think you are more of a threat than our enemies.'

'I am heartened to learn that you think. 'Twas my assumption that you had the wits of a hound, running round in circles yapping and baring your teeth before hunting for food and sleep.' The Earl peered past his fellow spy with studied disinterest, searching the passing faces for the missing Dee. He was a gaunt man, slim but powerful, yet even those who did not know him recognized that there was something askew, something strange about the way his cold gaze penetrated as though he were

peering through skin and muscle to see the sticky organs within, or the manner in which his hand twitched towards his hidden dagger with unsettling regularity.

'I should give thanks that you did not slit her throat there and then,' Carpenter sneered. He pulled his black cap low over his eyes. 'One full day without you trying to skewer an innocent. Let us celebrate!' He felt weary from the effort of restraining his companion's murderous instincts and exhausted by the lonely, unceasing work of the spy. He wanted to be free of that world; even the mundane life of a book-keeper held its attractions, or that of a tailor. Anything. Unconsciously, he scratched the scars that marred his face beneath the fall of his hair, the mark of the thing that had attacked him in Muscovy and a constant reminder of the price this business exacted from him.

'You bicker like old women,' the third man in the alley whispered. Tobias Strangeways was new to their band, as raw as a country apprentice. Red-headed and wiry, the younger man had fancied himself as good a spy and swordsman as Will Swyfte. But when he discovered the true nature of the threat they faced, his arrogance was blunted. Strangeways still thought highly of himself; he proudly showed off the blue silk lining of his cloak, like some fop parading in Paul's Walk, but Carpenter knew he could be relied upon in a fight.

'And you keep a civil tongue in your head or else I will cut it out,' Launceston breathed. Strangeways scowled in response.

The strain was taking its toll on all of them, Carpenter could see, those wearying hours in the saddle riding north from Nonsuch Palace, and then the futile search for Dee through Liverpool's dingy streets. They were starting to tear at each other like caged curs. Blades needed to be drawn and traitors carved, blood stirred and thoughts that fed upon themselves driven out.

'We are all defined by our nature,' he muttered to himself.

'Since dawn we have watched these streets without any reward,' Strangewayes complained. 'That Irish slut has taken to her rooms, wherever they might be, and she will stay there until she can board the ship with her prize and gain the protection of a crew of cock-led apple-johns.'

'And then it will be too late,' Carpenter snapped. 'We will never see Dee again, and this land will be overrun by the things that walk with printless feet and cast no shadows on this earth. And then you, you red-headed puttock, will know what it is like to thrash in the throes of a nightmare from which you can never wake.'

'I am a good Christian man, and I have the shield of God above to protect me,' the younger spy announced, his chin raised in defiance of his seasoned companions.

Launceston and Carpenter exchanged a glance and each gave a dismissive shrug.

'You have no faith in anything,' Strangewayes continued, his cheeks growing red. 'You drink to excess, you gamble, you dally with whores . . .'

'The world is harsh and you must take comfort wherever you find it,' Carpenter said, secretly wishing he had the other man's spirit.

'My heart is only for Grace. I need no other woman.' The red-headed spy pushed past the two other men and strode to the edge of the reeking alley. 'I believe there is more to this life than the filth and the misery we see around us. A higher purpose, hidden yet in plain sight, if we only had eyes to see it.'

'You are a true spy,' Launceston mocked in a dry tone, 'always seeing a face behind the one presented to the world.'

'The plan has not yet been revealed to us, but that does not mean it is not there. And, yes, we are spies and we should be used to peering beneath the surface for deeper