

The Book Burner



Allison Epstein

Mephistopheles. *Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed
In one self-place; for where we are is hell,
And where hell is, there must we ever be.
And to conclude, when all the world dissolves,
And every creature shall be purified,
All places shall be hell that are not heaven.*

Faustus. *Come, I think hell's a fable.*

Mephistopheles. *Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind.*

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, 2.1.111-18

Prologue

London, 30 May 1593

The sky was dark and threatened rain. Heavy clouds rolled over the open roof of the Rose, pressing the warmth of early summer downward and bringing an unseasonable darkness to the standing crowd assembled on the packed earth floor. But nothing as trivial as a storm would persuade them to move from their places, not when the stage played host to a drama such as this. They were packed shoulder-to-shoulder, easily a thousand of them if there were ten, heads craned upwards at the thrust stage. Upon which stage a man, dressed in the black of a university scholar, paced the boards, holding a book in his hands.

“Come, Faustus, begin thine incantations, and try if devils will obey thy hest.”

Seemingly in time with the man’s sonorous voice, the clouds pressed in closer. It was mid-afternoon, but already men in black doublets had appeared at all doors of the theater with torches, with which they lined the stage. Without human help, it would soon be night hours before its time. The wind set the fire dancing, and strange shadows grasped at the hem of the man’s cloak as he stepped into the chalked circle on the boards. He opened the book to a page in the middle and raised his eyes to the sky, searching for the blessing of a God that no longer heard or cared what he did.

The better-dressed gentlemen in their box seats, sheltered beneath the overhang painted with swirling colors of sea and sky and stars, peered down upon the stage from a more comfortable distance. Though the space between them and the reckless magician in his white painted circle was larger than for those with their elbows resting on the stage, they felt the uncomfortable proximity as

well as any. There was a ghost lurking behind the stage. Something beyond words haunted the theater, waiting only to be summoned to strike. There were some fears that transcended the distance between those standing and those seated. Fear of rain was not one of them. Fear of the devil was.

Hovering at the edge of the pit, nearly as far away from the stage as he could manage without arriving in the street outside, a quiet, fair-haired man stood some steps apart. Rather than pressing closer to the action to breathe in the heady spell of the theater, the magician Faustus' actions came to him as if through a misty curtain. He saw the stage, but beyond that, he saw something more. Not all devils and ghosts in the theater were called up by verse and actors. Some of them hid in silent shadows that could only be seen by those who knew where to look.

Faustus lay his book open before his feet. The shadows from the torches mingled and danced in savage rhythm, wary to breach the perimeter of the circle. "Then fear not, Faustus, but be resolute, and try the uttermost magic can perform!"

The man took another step backwards, until his back pressed against the wooden beam supporting the box seats. He had not known exactly what to expect from the yellowing playbills plastered to the theater beams, their stark black letters reading, "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, by the right honorable members of the Lord Strange's Men. Written by Ch. Marlowe." That was not to say he did not have ideas. Anything with that signature was familiar to him. Though an actor spoke the lines, he heard them read in the voice that had written them. A voice with ideas that frightened him into silence. He should not have needed to come alone. He could not have been the only one to catch the scent of danger.

"Ipse nunc surgat nobis dictatus Mephistopheles!"

The sky above rumbled with the sound of distant thunder.

I

Cambridge, October 1585

“For God’s sake, I thought he’d never finish.” Kit closed his eyes and exhaled deeply. The exhausted sound enshrouded him in a thick cloud of tobacco smoke, and he tapped the edge of the pipe against the seat of his chair to clear it of ash. “I’ve never needed a smoke more.”

“Pass me the bottle.” Tom leaned to reach toward the beer resting on the post of Kit’s bed. His fingers closed six inches away on empty, sober air. “I’m dying here, come on.”

Kit took the beer in one hand, bowing his head over it with reverence, and solemnly formed the sign of the cross over his forehead and shoulders. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the union of Thomas Watson and cheap beer in holy matrimony. *In nomine Patris, et Fili, et Spiritus Sancti,*” he concluded, and presented it to Tom with great ceremony.

Tom rolled his eyes, flushing red to the tips of his ears. Between them, he had always been the better at taking priests and scriptures at their words. He fancied this had something to do with their upbringings – a London native had more to lose from speaking off-book than a Canterbury man grafted onto Cambridge by the charity of others. Still, Tom’s distaste for blasphemy did not outweigh his desire for a drink. Christ had a taste for wine, after all. He took the bottle with one hand and cuffed Kit on the back of the head with the other, a gesture more playful than violent, like swatting a fly. “I wonder if you’ve resigned yourself to going to hell,” he said.

“‘Resigned’ makes it sound like such a terrible thing.” Kit kicked his feet up on the desk in front of him, scattering the loose pages of his half-translated rendition of Ovid in all directions. “You

forget about Dante's outer circle, with the pagan geniuses, where all the fun happens."

"You'll be warmer than that, see if you won't," Nick countered. "Cozying up to Paolo and his whore Francesca, with the rest of them as can't keep their hands to themselves."

"My apologies that all your pleasure *comes* from keeping your hand to yourself," Kit responded lazily. "Spare me the war of words, Nick, I'm exhausted. I thought I would fall down dead in the middle of Mass. Does the rector think we don't already know what that charlatan Saint Paul has to say about shunning the sinner? As if that ass hasn't used that same passage in his sermons three hundred times. And who in that room did he think wouldn't be shunned? Didn't Christ say something about throwing stones at people who lurk in stairwells with the maids, or sleep through Mass, or..."

"Or drink on a Sunday?" Tom grinned and passed the bottle back.

Kit waved a hand dismissively. "The least of my sins. All Protestants are hypocritical bastards, and if I claim one thing and do another, I'm only following the example I'm set."

"Not everything is a cause to run off into the woods and start an amoral cult," Tom reminded him. Kit's penchant for flouting authority simply because it was there was both exciting and extremely exhausting. He couldn't keep glancing over his shoulder his whole life. "You can't do away with logic and morality because it suits your purpose."

"Can't he?" Nick asked drily. "I didn't think he was known for doing much else."

The sun sank lower outside Kit's dormitory, casting a reddish-gold light on the three young men within. Tom and Nick sat with their backs to the window, the sun's failing color shadowing their faces but illuminating their edges. It would be dark in less than an hour, but Kit made no move to light a candle. Lighting was in short supply, especially with the interminable Cambridge winter coming on. After spending four Februaries trying to squint at barely-lit pages of text after dark, Kit knew enough to take advantage of the dying light. There would be cause to worry later on, when the nights were longer and darker, but for the moment a natural tendency against movement won out. The air felt thicker, heavier, than it had any reason to, perhaps from the smoke that continued to drift from his pipe

as from the mouth of a sleeping dragon.

“You’re not nearly drunk enough to be calling Christ a charlatan already, Marlowe,” Nick pointed out. “Clever as you are, you’re unreasonably good at missing the point of Mass.”

“The point of Mass,” Kit said, “is to keep stupid men in their place. Which is on their knees.”

Both of the others groaned, and Tom shook his head with an expression of long suffering. “Make yourself comfortable,” he said to Nick. “It looks like we’re being graced with another Kit Marlowe Original Sermon.”

“I save all my best sermons for you, Tom.” Kit grinned. “Even Jesus had his favorite disciple.”

“Just because you spit at the cross for the fun of it, doesn’t mean we’re all born to be heretics,” Tom muttered. He did not hate hearing Kit speak like this, much as he wished it were not done in public quite so often. What caused him to avert his eyes was that he did not trust himself to listen to it. There was nothing more dangerous than a madman with a persuasive argument, nor anything more difficult to reject. He kept his eyes fixed on the bottle as he took it back, and as he did so his fingers barely brushed against Kit’s hand. He pulled away and tried to pretend his ears had not begun to burn – if he did not think about it, no one else would. Kit smiled at his clear discomfort but did not remark on it. Half the pleasure lay in silent observation.

“For the love of God,” Nick muttered. “Do you think we haven’t been preached at enough this evening? Or are you on a mission to give the rector a run for his money?”

“I’m serious.” Kit sat up straighter. “It’s actually possible, you know, for me to be serious.”

“You’ve had me going all this time,” Nick commented. “I’ve always thought you’d do better as some lady’s fool than a scholar who takes things seriously.” Kit stuck out his tongue at him, masking his genuine annoyance with the playful gesture. If there was one thing he was used to, it was comments from Nick and his kind. Generally Nick at least did not mean them, it was true, but these taunts about the validity of his presence at Cambridge cut deeper than he let on. The half of Kit’s tuition not subsidized by well-meaning intellectual patrons came from filling miscellaneous duties around Corpus

as a man-of-all-work. He couldn't exactly call it servitude, not with the proportion of cost to benefit being as it was, and most people obligingly pretended he'd paid his way like the rest. Still, it was the principle of it that prevented Nick's jibes from falling as innocently as they might.

"Think about it, though. What's the last thing you've done in the service of God that you're actually proud of?" Kit asked, subverting his anger into an easier subject. Oddly, it was easier to blaspheme than it was to talk about money or its lack.

"Nothing I'd admit to, I'm sure. Pride is a sin against God, which you'd remember if you stayed awake in Mass long enough to listen." Nick's sanctimoniousness awakened in Kit a rant he had not fully intended to deliver. *He thinks he's better than me because he can afford new clothes three times a term and a private box in church? We'll see about that.*

"The whole damn self is a sin against God," he pressed on recklessly, "and the best men in the eyes of the Church are those who say nothing but 'yes sir' and 'no sir.' Everything that makes a man feel alive, pride, ambition, love, passion, all that's stuff for the confessional, not the congregation, and if you follow God like you say, you're worse than a slave, because you don't know enough to mind it. There are those as will be saved and those as will not, and," he concluded, a light in his eyes that had very little to do with the liquor, "if that's what salvation costs, I'll take my chances with the devil."

Tom glanced at the door. They were alone, but there were still some things you did not say.

"A fine candidate you'd make for the priesthood, you," he said at last. His light tone broke the tension, and Kit smiled at the release from the impending argument. Thank God for Tom, or he'd have broken Nick's nose months before now. Tom Watson was blessed with the rare gift of knowing what to say to prevent him from doing something stupid. Or, at least, more stupid than usual. "Something tells me they won't be hanging your portrait in the Corpus gallery when you leave."

"First undergraduate hanged before commencement, more likely," Nick shrugged. "Let me have a drink."

"Yes, Your Saintliness." Kit passed it from Tom to him. *Hypocritical ass.*

No sooner had the neck of the bottle touched Nick's lips than Kit and Tom sat up rigidly, looking at one another with wide eyes. The hushed silence that fell over the group was broken by steady, rhythmic tapping on the other side of the door, growing gradually louder. Someone was coming. Someone with a purpose, judging by the quick steps, and someone close.

Tom snatched the beer out of Nick's hand mid-sip. "Give me that. Open a window!"

Nick leapt to his feet and threw open the window, while Tom ran to stow the bottle beneath a crumpled pile of shirts beside the bed. Kit hastily thrust the smoking end of his pipe into the washbasin, a thin plume of smoke rising into the air with the sickly-sweet scent of cheap stolen tobacco. He coughed a few times, clearing the remnants of smoke from his throat.

"You can still smell it –"

"Like hell you can still smell it!"

"Nick, give me a book –"

"It's upside-down, you idiot –"

Three sharp staccato raps against the bedroom door.

"Come in!" Kit's attempt at vocal nonchalance was a rousing failure. Nick drove a hard elbow into his ribs, and he glared at him as he turned Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* the right way round. The door opened, and the three young men looked in stunned silence at doorway. A tall, gray-haired man in the robes of a university scholar, his arms crossed severely, now stood half in the room. Kit dropped his book to the ground and rose quickly to his feet, while Tom and Nick followed suit.

"Master Norgate." Whether it was shock and awe or fear and terror that made his voice crack, it was difficult to tell. At twenty-one, Kit thought he had outgrown that. "An honor, sir."

"Master," Nick and Tom echoed.

"Marlowe," the headmaster said, nodding at each boy in turn. "Skeres. Watson."

The three students exchanged nervous glances, for the fraction of a second that they dared while Norgate, in person, was in the room. Five years Kit had been at Corpus Christi, and still he rarely

saw the Master closer than the other end of the hall at meals or at mass. It was not in his nature to mingle with the students while they were up to their ears in Cicero and Aristotle, and still less to do anything unannounced. Even a different selection from the psalter at matins was heralded with the greatest of fanfare. Norgate was an elusive presence at Corpus, appearing only for ceremonial purposes like a noble family's best candlesticks, too costly for working days. And yet here he was, standing in Christopher Marlowe's dormitory. Opening the window had done nothing to air out the smell of guilt and transgression. The heady potpourri of alcohol and tobacco was overpowering. Kit coughed uncomfortably, a small cloud of smoke rising from the pit of his lungs. The Master pursed his lips but said nothing.

"Marlowe, I would have some words with you in private, if you would follow me." It was worded politely, but it was not a request. If he had said, "Marlowe, the scaffold is waiting, remember to bring payment for the hangman," the tone would have been the same. If he had been one for prayer, Kit would have whispered enough to atone for a thousand sins.

"Yes, sir," he managed finally. "Of course."

Master Norgate gestured at the open door with a sweep of his arm, and like a serving-boy ushered out of the banquet hall Kit stepped into the corridor. He threw a sidelong glance at Tom, meeting his eyes with the look of a drowning man searching for a lifeline. Tom spread his arms wide, as if to say, "I warned you, now what do you expect me to do about it?" but with more anxiety than blame. It would almost have been reassuring, to know that Tom cared that much whether or not the Master had him murdered and thrown into the river, but he had been hoping for something more tangibly helpful. But all he needed to do was maintain his composure, and everything would turn out all right. There was no reason to be afraid. He had done nothing wrong.

There, if anywhere, was a lie for the ages.

"Marlowe, you exhaust me," Norgate said, as they passed down the hall in the direction of the outer courtyard. "Just once, I would appreciate not having a vague sense of malaise when I am dealing

with you. Do you think this is something you can manage?"

"For once, sir," Kit said, redoubling his pace to keep up with the Master, "I haven't any idea what you're talking about. Unless you mean the greyhounds in the chapel, in which case I swear on my mother's life I—"

Norgate frowned. "What greyhounds in the chapel?"

He swallowed heavily. "Er... I don't know, sir."

The Master sighed. "Listen to me. I like to think of myself as a reasonable man. I do not knowingly indulge in idiocy if I can help it. And yet, despite my better judgment, I think you know I have a fondness for you."

"A fondness, sir?" Kit looked at the Master with new eyes. Was it usual for scholars to show their fondness for students by general indifference and the occasional beating for the full gamut of crimes against propriety? Not that he had any high hopes for affection from the academics of Cambridge, not that he expected a warm embrace when he strolled into recitation, but if he was on Norgate's short list of favorite students, he had an odd way of showing it.

The Master had ushered Kit past the university chapel, emptied now of the last stragglers from mass but populated by two or three servants, polishing the brass candlesticks for the next morning's service. They glanced up at the unlikely pair as they passed, before turning to one another to gossip in hushed voices. Kit could only imagine what kind of stories they'd conjured up. In a flight of fancy, he imagined them debating how much work would be required to prepare the small chapel for the funeral of a student killed by the Master's wrath.

"How many poor scholars do you think we accept at Corpus Christi?" Norgate let the question hang long enough to invite an answer as they rounded a corner and started up a winding stone staircase. "And who do you think has the final say in which are financed on scholarship?"

"Not many, and you, sir?"

"And why do you think I selected you in particular out of all the boys who finished King's

School in Canterbury, or any of the other grammar schools across the counties, who could not pay their own way?"

"I rather thought it was a masochistic tendency on your part, sir," Kit replied. "Having to endure me as penance for some unspeakable sin."

"I know it's difficult for you, Christopher, but be serious." Kit flinched at this – had Norgate just used his Christian name? "I have faith in your academics that I do not think is misplaced. Master Williams has shown me your writing in poetics, and I confess I have never seen the like. Your command of language is exceptional. Leaving you to a Canterbury shoemaker whose only idea of philosophy is found over the wine-bottle would be a crime. You're made for better things than your family, Christopher. It was my intent you should realize that."

Kit's lips pressed into a thin white line. He thought that what he was feeling was resentment, or something vaguely close to it. It was not surprise, by any means: certainly Norgate was not saying anything he had not said himself to Tom and Nick, or worse. But there was a difference between calling your father a rat bastard and hearing someone else do it. Certainly his sisters would understand his not leaping immediately to their defense, under the circumstances. Equally certainly, his father hardly deserved his support. He could see, conjured up through memory, the long, winding halls of Westgate, the heavy silence of the air, and Meg hanging on his heels as they followed the warden to the cell in which their father sat, cursing the walls and waiting for his children to negotiate his release under the promise to repay his debts as soon as possible, if not before.

Whatever Norgate's reason for bringing up his family, he could not imagine it boding well. What cause did he have to remind him of his past, if not to wrench it back into the present? A present in which it was not wanted. With the Marlowe family crest all but the official seal of Westgate prison, he could only imagine his father's drinking and gambling his way into debts worthy of a monarch had again caught up with him. What was he meant to do about it? Leave school and plead John Marlowe's case in front of the Canterbury High Court? Hardly the glorious purpose he had envisioned for his

newly lauded skills in rhetoric.

Norgate had stopped walking abruptly, and Kit glanced at the door now before them. Though he had never been here, he knew exactly where they were: the Master's office. This could not possibly end well.

"I don't know what you have gotten yourself involved in," Norgate said seriously, "but I advise you, in any case, to be careful. Please do not do anything stupid."

Kit meant to comment that he was quickly becoming the patron saint of doing anything stupid, but then the Master knocked three times, softly, on the door. He had just enough time to consider the strangeness of it – under what circumstances did a man knock on his own door? – before a voice came from inside. "Come in."

The two men looked at each other, and Kit saw an apprehension in Norgate's eyes that made him seriously consider making a run for it. Then Norgate pulled open the door and gestured at him, as if to say, "Be my guest." Would the Master not enter, then? What kind of man would take the trouble to come all the way to Cambridge and commandeer Norgate's office, just to speak with Kit? John Marlowe would never have made the journey, but the Westgate constables might. Perfect.

His suspicions strengthening with every moment, Kit stepped carefully over the threshold into the office. Norgate closed the door behind him.

II

Whatever the better part of the student body believed, Kit had never seen the interior of the headmaster's office. Certainly his penchant for the dramatic and the inappropriate had not escaped disciplinary notice. Nick went so far as to say that the masters would one day name the rod in his honor. But that was for minor offences. Petty theft. Surreptitious blasphemy. Showing up to recitation with the stink of the alehouse on your breath, wearing the same clothes as the day before. This office was the gateway to the underworld in Corpus legend. Once inside, only those with the gods on their side would return alive.

So Kit was surprised to find that the room, instead of the dungeon he had conjured, was no different than any other moderately comfortable study. Dark mahogany bookshelves lined the north and south walls, packed end to end with leather-bound volumes in Greek, Latin, and German. The room's two tall windows opened onto an expansive view of the green, where three first-form boys tossed a tennis ball carelessly back and forth in the dying light. In front of the window was a large oaken desk, big enough for a child to curl up in each of its drawers and fall asleep, with leaf-sprouting vines carved around the legs and into the sides. Rather than a space for expulsion or torture, Kit could imagine Norgate seated amiably at the desk, reading a book of Petrarch's sonnets. But he looked only at the man seated behind the desk, tapping the tips of his fingers together, patiently waiting.

Kit knew instantly that the man seated at the Master's desk was in no way associated with higher learning. This was not to say that he looked unintelligent. His dark brown eyes peered at Kit with the light given to men aware by profession of every detail swirling around them. It was the look

Kit saw in accountants and lawyers who frequented the same taverns as Corpus's students, men who preyed on mistakes and made their fortunes out of slipped figures and miscalculations. The pallor of his face stood out against his black garments – evidently his work kept him indoors. The man felt like an apparition, a ghost dislodged from the portraits of former masters that lined the walls to chastise him for his wrongdoings. Those eyes and that face knew more about him than he had any cause to expect, or any reason to doubt.

“Sir,” Kit said quietly, sinking into an unpracticed bow.

“Christopher Marlowe,” the man said bluntly.

“Yes, sir,” he replied. He kept his head diligently lowered, as if looking the man straight in the face without Perseus' shield would turn him to stone.

The man made a bored gesture with one hand, indicating that Kit should rise. He did so haltingly, wishing he were several inches shorter so not to tower awkwardly over this stranger. Standing straight, he had no idea what to do with his body: it was bad form enough to loaf in front of the desk like a hat stand, worse form still to sit.

“Did Master Norgate tell you why you are here?” the man asked.

Kit nudged the floorboards with the toe of his boot, tracing a small uncomfortable circle. “No, sir, but whatever I've done, I assure you I am deeply sorry for it.”

“A terrible diplomatic answer, Marlowe,” he said darkly. “You shall have to be trained to do better.”

He blinked. “Trained, sir?”

“Do you know who I am, boy?” The man pressed the tips of his fingers together and pointed the resulting triangle at his audience of one.

“No, sir.”

“Sir Francis Walsingham,” the man said curtly, then added when the name alone did not have the desired effect, “Secretary to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.”

Oh. Well. And here he was, smelling of tobacco with his hair standing up like a stable boy's. Fortunately, Sir Francis did not wait for Kit to respond to this pronouncement.

"My time is extremely valuable, Marlowe," he said coldly, "and what's more, it's extremely valuable to Her Majesty. So you may take it as a sign of how seriously I take this conversation that I have come in person."

The uncertainty became more than Kit could stand. "Is it my father, sir?" he blurted out finally. If he needed to negotiate John Marlowe's way out of the Tower, he wanted at least to know the worst.

Sir Francis looked at him, and Kit fell silent again. "Your father?" he repeated. "What the devil does your father have to do with it, boy? I came here about *you*."

"Me, sir?"

"*Me, sir?*" Kit did the smallest of double takes. Had the royal secretary just *mocked* him? "I was told you were no fool, Marlowe. Please do not prove me wrong so early. I am not accustomed to being wrong. Yes, you. How much do you know of what the Royal Secretary does at court?"

"Exactly as much as I should know, sir, and no more than I ought."

Sir Francis rolled his eyes. "Don't be clever," he snapped. "The duties of the Royal Secretary extend beyond merely managing the correspondences and treaties between Her Majesty and neighboring countries. There are other matters I deal with, less publicly announced but of a much greater importance. I do not, of course, expect you to know about these, but they will be of the utmost interest to you. My staff, though not inconsiderable," he continued, "has lately proven insufficient to deal with our nation's circumstances. It is of the utmost importance that my charge is fulfilled to the letter, without exception, but with the men at my disposal this has become impossible. And that, Marlowe, is where I require your cooperation."

Patriotism was a foreign concept to Kit, as were most words ending in "ism." There was little need for flag-waving in the streets of Canterbury, especially in Blackfriars Road where the closest thing one got to a royal procession was a throng of pilgrims in un-dyed sackcloth murmuring Latin

prayers. The royalty who graced those parts wore the cassock and the crucifix, archbishops living and archbishops martyred. Queen and country were stumbling blocks in the way to the only two goals that mattered: staying out of hell and staying out of prison. Other than her power to remove his father's head from his shoulders if the fancy struck her, Kit had to confess that he paid the Queen about as much attention in his day-to-day life as he did Spain's embargoes against the Venetians. But when someone whose name began with "sir" told you to cooperate in the name of the monarchy, you did not point out these details. You nodded silently and listened.

"You will have heard, I'm sure," Sir Francis went on, unconcerned that the conversation had become rather one-sided, "about the massacre on Saint Bartholomew's Day some years ago in Paris, in which the mass of French Catholics fell upon and slaughtered all those following the true church."

It was not a question. Fortunately, Kit's studies were not restricted to the cloister and the library. An equal number of useful things could be gleaned from spending an evening in the White Stag with a long smoke and a pint of sack. While the masters of Corpus could not trouble themselves with anything that had happened within the last two hundred years, the people of Cambridge were more interested in yesterday than antiquity. The massacre of Paris was some years in the grave by now, but both Canterbury and Cambridge still buzzed with the threat of armed Catholics who forgot that their place was in Rome or hell, not politics. If such a thing could happen in France, what would stop it from spreading to England? What was to prevent native recusants from taking inspiration from the French papists, burning and slaughtering Protestants as they went? The threat, even the paranoid threat, of a sword blessed by the Pope at your neck had the power to stay with him.

"Of course, sir," Kit agreed. "A hard thing to forget."

"And I assure you, my department has not forgotten it," Sir Francis said calmly. "There are those within our own borders who would like to see the deaths of Paris spread to London. But they are not the only ones making plans. Fortunately, my information is thorough, and reliable." Kit looked at him in disbelief. The Royal Secretary might conceivably have duties beyond stamping seals on

parchment and drafting trade agreements with the Dutch. But thwarting rebellion? Underhand observation of secret Catholics? Conviction and murder?

“Are you telling me, sir, that –”

“That in addition to Her Majesty’s secretary, I also direct the Queen’s intelligence agents?” Sir Francis finished. “Yes, Marlowe. That is what I’m telling you. I’m glad reports of your intellect were not so greatly exaggerated.”

Espionage. Double-dealing. Lies and half-truths. Papists and massacres. Kit’s mind was spinning. “I’m afraid I still don’t understand, sir,” he managed at last, tasting the sharp bitterness of understatement. “Why are you telling me this? It seems... inefficient to spread that information too widely, doesn’t it?”

The corners of Sir Francis’ mouth inched upward across his face – in other men it might have been called a smile, but here it was nothing more than a geographical rearrangement of facial features. “Certainly if I had no other intended use for you than to enjoy your surprise, it would be a poor choice for national security,” he agreed. “But I think I’ve already told you I am not a man who spends time frivolously. I have been in communication with Master Norgate about you, Marlowe. About your aptitude for the sounds and rhythm of language. Your skill in spoken rhetoric and persuasion. Your utter inability to fulfill even the most basic of social expectations, which he tells me manifests itself everywhere from the chapel to the whorehouse. In my line of work,” he finished, “all these speak enormously in your favor.”

Unsure whether to blush or thank him for the compliment, Kit did neither. He remained waiting for the conversation to arrive at its destination, which was becoming less vague but no more credible.

“I do not wish to interfere with your education,” Sir Francis went on, waving one hand as if to shoo away a fly. “You will be an enormous asset to the commonwealth with your prodigious academic gifts.” The phrase brought a smirk to Kit’s face despite himself. He made a mental note to scribble down the phrase for moments when his self-esteem had taken a loss. *Prodigious academic gifts*. That

was the kind of praise reserved for philosophers like Sir Thomas More. Most often, by themselves. “But in addition to your work here at Cambridge, I am proposing further employment for you. Under my jurisdiction.”

Propriety and social niceties be damned. Kit sat in, or rather collapsed into, the chair in front of the desk. Maybe the tobacco smoke had been headier than he thought. Maybe the beer he had shared with Tom and Nick had contained some horrible drug that caused violent hallucinations. There was no other way to explain what had just been said to him. Moments before, he had been recovering after a particularly brutal Mass, and then all of a sudden the entire world had changed.

“You want me to spy for you,” he said flatly.

Walsingham did not bat an eye at the stunned omission of his title. “You will be briefed thoroughly as to our expectations before you are discharged on your duties,” he went on, as if Kit had already agreed, “and you will not be sent alone until my colleagues have adequately instructed you. We have no intention of throwing you to the hounds, as much for our benefit as for your own. Your mistakes, or God forbid your discovery, have consequences that reach far beyond the bounds of your life. We are speaking in terms of sacred continuity and national security, Marlowe. I assure you, I do not take my selections lightly. But I have been persuaded that you will serve well in the name of Christ, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, and myself. Please do not disappoint me.”

The very idea of it would have been farcical if Sir Francis had not been so deathly serious. Christopher Marlowe, a boy from the back streets of Canterbury, hiding behind tapestries on the hunt for Catholic conspirators? Her Majesty’s intelligence agents were a profound state secret, discussed only in elite circles among the highly privileged and close-lipped, and considered general knowledge by the whole of England. No one knew how the Queen brought men into her circle, or who, or what they did under her protection, but the concept was as generally known as Seneca, and as bloody. Kit had not yet forgotten the reports of the execution of Edmund Campion, nor the stories of how Nicholas Throckmorton’s eyes had roved wildly for half a minute after removing his head from his shoulders.

This was the world Sir Francis was proposing. This was a world men died in.

“I thank you for the offer, sir,” he began, “but I think you ought to consider looking elsewhere. I mean to say, I’m not...”

Sir Francis looked at him, only looked, and Kit flinched backward as if he’d been struck. The look in the Royal Secretary’s eyes was that of a demon told in the midst of brokering for a man’s soul that his customer wanted to seek out a second opinion.

“Marlowe, allow me to make something vibrantly clear for you,” Sir Francis said with painstaking calm. “Her Majesty the Queen does not make mistakes. And she does not make requests. Anything less than compliance is a denial of Her Sovereign will. Which, I need not remind you, is treason.”

Images flashed through Kit’s mind in rapid succession. Treason. The Tower. The metal rolls of the rack, coated with copper stains of rust. The creaking branch of the gallows. Iron pikes on Tower Bridge, entering one end of a crimson-stumped neck and soaring through out the crown. He ran his hand along the back of his own neck, suddenly ill. Never before had he placed so high a value on his body being in one piece instead of four.

Sir Francis had noticed his discomfort. The vengeful gleam in his eyes was fading quickly, replaced by observant detachment. “You will receive a dossier from my associate in the next few days, which will explain the basic parameters of your position,” he went on, like an accountant detailing his weekly expenditures. “Under no circumstances will you share this information with anyone. You will not speak of this meeting to anyone. You have never met me, and the Queen’s spies do not exist. I will send my associate the details of your assignment, at which point we will begin to proceed further in this business.”

Business. Kit played the word over again in his mind. It was easier to narrow onto the sounds of the words, to the total exclusion of their sense. Lying and double-dealing and a life built on equivocation, that was business, then? Perhaps to the men at court. When was the last time a courtier

said what he meant? Honesty paved a sure path to Tyburn Hill and the scaffold, everyone knew that.

Business. Perhaps.

“Here.”

The Royal Secretary reached into his pocket and dropped a small handful of coin onto the Master’s desk. It clattered with the unmistakable sound of crowns. Gold sounded different than silver when it fell. Its echoes were louder, and more convincing. He had never seen so much gold in one place without having been melted down for use in a church service, and he had no doubt that to Sir Francis Walsingham, these fifteen crowns were nothing. Anything less than a sovereign was nothing.

“Consider this an advance. In expectation for services rendered. You may go.”

The first two words of that sentence were unnecessary. Kit rose quickly to his feet. The shine of the gold burned the inside of his palm as he swept it up from the table. An advance. Without any action yet performed. And how much was a scholar apt to earn in a year? It could not be measured in gold. But he could not dismiss the feeling that he had just accepted fifteen crowns’ worth of blood money, though whose blood would pay for it remained to be seen. It took only seconds for him to pass through the office door and into the corridor beyond. Even so, it took far longer for the image of Sir Francis Walsingham’s black eyes, looking searchingly at him from over steeped fingertips, to pass.

III

“What was that about?”

Kit closed the door behind him. Tom and Nick were still seated with their backs against the now-darkened window, looking at him like he was Orpheus returned from the Underworld. They had barely moved during his half-hour’s absence. He could just imagine them huddled there in nervous council, wondering what horrible punishment Norgate had up his academic sleeves. It was a mark of how much the Master’s sudden appearance had shaken them that Nick had not even retrieved the bottle from its barely-effective hiding place. Watching their suspended curiosity made him suddenly exhausted. What was the worst outcome they could conjure up? Whatever it was, he knew one thing for certain: that imagination, even Nick’s imagination that took such interest in devising invented torments for others, could never have come up with *this*.

“My scholarship,” he said at last. “He needed to explain a change in the terms.”

Tom looked at him askance. “Terms? Are they making you leave, then?”

Kit forced a laugh. “Are you so excited to get rid of me? I know Nick dreams of it, but I thought you liked having me around. They need to add to my charge, that’s all. Apparently my current work doesn’t cover the cost of having to put up with me.” The lie was just vague enough to taste like truth.

“Stuns me, it does, that you let them make you empty their privy and scour their pots for room and board.” Nick’s voice held the unmistakable tenor of one for whom money had never been, and likely would never be, at issue. “They pretend they take in poor bastards like you for your own benefit,

but we all know it's because it's easier than paying servants. You can polish my boots for a crown a month, if you're still hard up."

The gold crowns in Kit's pocket pressed heavily against his thigh, a nagging reminder of what he could not say. "Listen, Jesus washed the feet of pimps and prostitutes, but even he had to draw the line *somewhere*."

It was what the old Kit Marlowe would have said, but this new one, born in the past half hour and still learning to walk unsupported, had not yet adapted to separating feeling from speaking. But had he ever done anything else? Think one way, speak the other. Your thoughts go left, your words go right. Leave, when you want to stay. Was this any different? It wasn't as if he was against lying simply because it was lying. He'd spent his first two weeks at Cambridge with Nick Skeres convinced he was a Dutch immigrant that didn't speak a word of English, just for the fun of it. But when his mind dealt in terms of knives and espionage and politics, the quiet placidity of Cambridge felt unreal, insubstantial.

"Are you all right?" The mask was not yet built, and some of this must have shown on his face. Tom's concern made his heart contract even further. "You look like you've had a brush with Hell. What in God's name happened?"

Kit didn't doubt he looked worse for the wear, but there was no help for that now. "I'm fine," he said unconvincingly, and sank onto the edge of the bed. "Just tired. It's been a long day, you know. Pretending to be moved by the Holy Spirit is exhausting. I think I might lie down a few minutes. Christ knows I don't sleep enough."

Tom looked skeptical – maybe he had underestimated the extent to which Tom Watson could tell when his thoughts and words did not match. "You'll come get me if you need anything?"

Kit rolled his eyes, though he would rather have begged him not to leave, would rather have given into his sudden impulse to cry into Tom's shoulder and confess everything. He had to leave, they both did, before he started saying things he could not say, and doing things he could not do.

Nick looked at the two of them for a moment with growing disgust. “Oh, for God’s sake. I think he can take care of himself without your lacing his boots for him, Tom. We’ll see you at recitation in the morning. Don’t finish the rest of the beer without me, or I’ll have your head.” Nick stood and left through the open door without looking back.

Tom lingered in the doorway for a moment. *Are you sure you don’t want me to stay? I’ll stay, if you ask me.* Kit was not sure, had never been less sure. His mind ran through the thousands of things he might say and eliminated them all, one by one, until he was left with nothing but silence. *Yes, I want you to stay. Which is why you can’t, not tonight.* At last, Tom turned slowly and made his way down the hall into his own room, closing the door on his way out. Kit stayed perfectly still until the final echoes of his footsteps had dwindled away into nothing.

Night had slowly but surely conquered Cambridge. The room’s only light came from a single sputtering candle someone had lit in Kit’s absence. Probably Nick – Tom knew better how much the cost of candles mattered. The room’s shadows flickered and wavered, stretched beyond their normal bounds except for an untouched circle of light around the desk, quivering with the small flame. A perfect setting for demons. Stay within the circle for protection against the darkness. But the darkness had an unhelpful habit of shifting position.

Kit stood up and crossed the room to his desk. The small leather bag of tobacco waited dutifully for him in a drawer, the pipe on the tabletop beneath the shadows. As he rested the end of his pipe against the candle flame and breathed in the scent of the flames catching the leaves, the thick waves of smoke filled his lungs with narcotic stability. It was a moment for intoxication, but where drink would leave him unproductive and drowning in the silence, the pipe gently smoothed the edges of his panic. In its place grew a foggy space of not quite calm, not quite fear, but something in between, parts of both and of neither. The entire world might be flipped on its head, but a long smoke would always do a man good.

Christopher Marlowe. Agent in the service of the Queen.

It had been ridiculous when Walsingham had first proposed it, but he no longer knew what to think of it. Still hardly credible. As if Queen Elizabeth had hand-selected him from the hundreds of Cambridge scholars on the quality of his translation of Ovid's *Amores*. She could not know who he was, could not imagine whether or not he was capable of doing what was asked of him. Sir Francis had not articulated what that was specifically – decorum, of course, prevented it – but he would have to have been a fool not to know. He had been born with both his eyes open. But why choose *him*, for something this mad? Did Her Majesty remember? Of course not. Queens had more important matters to consider than the memory of a decade-old progress. Between the Catholics, the Spanish, and the French, she probably could not remember what she ate for breakfast.

But that did not mean that common events did not have their staying power. There had been no cause to think of this for years, not when faced with the monotony of daily living. Memory was an indulgence for those with the leisure to deal with anything but the present. But Sir Francis' carefully modulated dialect had dragged him out of the lonely darkness of his dormitory. It was with some surprise that he realized the swirling colors, the cheers and the trumpets, all the strands of that gossamer web of memory filled him not with nostalgia but with shame. Shame of what? It had happened. It had been what it was.

If he had been taller, maybe the memory would be less compelling. There was very little glamour that looking at something head-on could not do away with, and ever since he had reached six feet in height it had become more difficult to entrance him. But snatched glances and momentary glimpses from jumping to see over the crowd cast a glow on the royal procession. It was the kind of aura he had since come to associate with money in all its forms: attractive, almost otherworldly, and infuriating in the way it could make you invisible. Cries of "God save the Queen!" rang through the streets, snatches of silken banners fluttered overhead, but all he and Meg could see were the backs of Canterbury's citizens, turned out to see the royal progress on its way from Dover to London. He shifted forward to press in for a clearer path, but was blocked by a girl of about seven perched on her

father's shoulders, brandishing a tiny flag of St. George. Maybe his own father would have a better view from inside debtor's lockup. At least he would be higher up.

"What are you two doing back here? You can't possibly see a thing."

Kit had started at the sound of the man's voice, smooth as the silk that fluttered from the processional lances beyond the crowd. He turned hesitantly, holding Meg's hand more out of habit than affection. Between the rich linen doublet and the sheathed rapier at his side, it was obvious that this gentleman belonged in the procession, not in the crowd. If Kit had felt like he did not belong before, this man made him feel closer to the dog currently nosing its way through offal behind the tailor's shop than a subject of Her Majesty. There was no haughtiness or disdain in this man, but there did not need to be – if he did not think of himself as above the Marlowe siblings, he must have been both blind and deaf. And yet, Kit could not decide if that smile was condescending or genuine. He could not remember ever having been smiled at like that, either before or since.

"Don't you want to see Her Majesty the Queen?" the man asked kindly. "It's not every day she comes down on progress, you know."

"Yes, sir," Meg said with a quick curtsy. "Very much, sir."

But Kit had lowered his head and his eyes. He could not look at the young gentleman before him, who embodied a nobility, a life, that did not belong in these streets. He had thought then, and vibrantly remembered thinking it, that there must be another world where men moved with such grace and spoke with such voices. A world that had nothing to do with his father, or his mother, or him.

"There's nothing you'll be able to see from here," the man said. "Here, come." He took Meg by the hand and gave Kit an encouraging smile. The usually immovable people of Canterbury parted to grant him access to the front of the crowd, where the decorated royal horses paced down the dirty cobbled streets, tossing their manes with equine arrogance. Kit sat at the edge of the road with Meg at his side and the gentleman at his back, feet in the gutter with his arms wrapped around his knees, as the stream of gaudy power flowed past. He had never seen anything like it, had never imagined anything

so brave and colorful, not even in the stories he made up in his head at night before falling asleep.

And then, from the midst of the spectacle, he saw her.

It seemed like such a small thing as he looked back on it, shielded from some of the past's sharpness by the dulling cloud of tobacco, but other than the Queen he had never seen a woman ride horseback. The women he had known, principally his mother, were earthly creatures. They spent their days indoors in hot, dark kitchens or in the priory gardens, shrouded in black habits and tending to pale pink flowers. The Queen, her golden-red hair beneath her crown, her warm, vibrant yellow skirt draped across the stallion's marble-white flank, this woman nodding and waving to the crowd, could not be called a woman, in any of the senses he understood. It was as if she melded with her mount to create a new breed of woman, a centaur queen, a creature from a fairy story or the legends of King Arthur. The vision lasted for perhaps half a minute, as the Queen's knights swirled around her like waves against an island, and then the impossible woman had passed, swallowed up by her own pomp and circumstance. The gentleman had rejoined the procession, sometime when Kit had not been paying attention. As quickly as it had come, the multicolored world was gone. The dull brown and gray of Canterbury had returned, and he was alone again.

Twelve years later, the echoes of "God save the Queen!" still rang through the silence, haunting Kit's mind. Vibrant as the memory was, he could not remember having joined his voice to the masses. Surely he would have. That kind of rebellion was restricted to older men, capable of understanding the sedition inherent in remaining apart. And yet, he could not remember any surge of allegiance to the woman who struck him with such awe. How could you feel loyal to a god? The Queen was the occasion for shock and awe, but not fidelity.

Kit blew a thoughtful smoke ring into the air and watched its wispy gray tendrils vanish out of the circle of candlelight. Fidelity, he thought, implied a choice. Could a slave be faithful?

Reaching into his pocket, he took one of Sir Francis' coins and turned it over in his hand. The candlelight tempered its color into the smooth sweetness of honey. As he traced one finger along the

face, the engraving of the Queen's portrait stood out clearly to the touch. He had never expected to receive crowns, let alone serve the head that wore it. How could he have, when the memory of being in the same town as her brought on a warm rush of shame? But he had been chosen, him specifically. There had to be something in that. More, in any case, than another verse translation of the psalms. He didn't know when the university had become too small for him, but he had seen flashes of another world outside of Cambridge, a world where women debated the fate of nations. That world did not come easily for those not born into it. But perhaps it could still come, even if the sacrifice were great.

A cloud of exhaustion had settled on Kit's shoulders, as dense as Atlas's burden if not so visible. It was too much to think about, come all at once. His body longed to retreat beneath the blankets and sleep away the confusion and shock, but his mind would not allow him to rest. The chapel bells had only just chimed half past nine. It would be hours yet before his thoughts would slow enough to permit sleep to replace them. Years of staying awake into the deepest reaches of the witching hour had trained his brain to be most active between the hours of ten and three, a fact that never failed to drive Tom into fits of quasi-parental irritation. He wished Tom would return that night, as he sometimes did when Kit's candle had fought too long for supremacy with the full moon, to urge him to leave his papers and go to bed, for the love of Christ. Had he only sent him away in the hopes that he would disregard the request and come again in the darkness? What good was companionship if you had to ask for it? But it did not matter. He was alone tonight.

Kit reached into the drawer of his desk for a sheaf of paper, pen, and ink. With another deep pull of tobacco, he dipped the tip of his pen into the inkwell, looking at the blank page as a troubled cleric would consider the Gospels. *Let it go. Think of anything else. Let it go.* Time passed, and the candle burned lower. The only sound in darkness was the occasional drip of wax against the pan and the pen scratching against the page. The hours passed like the tides, and night slipped away into the weak grey of morning.

IV

It might have been a charming scene, if he had had the poet's temperament to find it so. Even with a mind inclined toward pragmatics, he had to admit that the small, spare dormitory under the mid-morning sunlight wouldn't have been ill served as the subject for a verse meditation on the rewards and consequences of study. The room's occupant, it seemed, had been burning the candle at both ends the night before. A small stub of wax was all that remained at the base of the candlestick, which had guttered out from lack of fuel sometime in the faint hours of the morning. Strewn about the desk were pages upon pages covered in a narrow, slanting script that frequently doubled back on itself, scribbling out lines and annotating its own margins. Pages littered the floor as well, crumpled into balls and pitched away in frustration. Evidently Christopher Marlowe had had a productive evening, though doubtless the Master would have a thing or two to say about the blatant disregard for economy when it came to paper and candles. That, however, was not his concern.

He turned away from the remnants of a midnight writing purge and took one more step through the doorway. He did not have time to devote to the scrawled verses of a scholar. Who, as it happened, seemed to have found a more pressing calling than the ordinary schedule of lectures and recitations. He chuckled quietly to himself as he took in the sprawled mass beneath the blankets that could only with some imagination be construed as Marlowe. He was several inches too tall for the bed, built for men something shorter than his six feet, and his leg dangled lazily off the edge of the mattress, bare foot brushing the cold wood of the floor though he was still too deeply asleep to notice. The faint trace of tobacco smoke still hung heavy in the air.

After another moment, a wry smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, he shook his head in ironic indulgence and coughed loudly. It was not nearly enough to wake Marlowe from his near-death slumber, earning only a small mumbling noise and a shift under the blankets for its trouble. Not to be deterred, the man took the handle of the door in his hand and slammed it behind him. Hard.

That did it. Kit sat upright with a start, looking increasingly like a victim of a lightning strike with his wide eyes and the dramatic angles his hair had adopted during the night. Horror quickly replaced his confusion as he realized he was sitting in bed, wearing nothing but an old, loose pair of breeches, as a strange man stood in front of his door. This was not the way he had intended to start his Thursday. He could not have gotten out of bed faster if there had been a poisonous serpent curled up at the foot of the mattress. Hastily, he pounced on the shirt he had left crumpled on the windowsill and jerked it over his head. The wry smile on the interloper's face did not fade.

“Good morning, Marlowe,” he said drily. “Or should I say, good afternoon.”

“Afternoon?” In his surprise, Kit had forgotten the importance of being polite to strangers in one's bedroom. “It can't be afternoon, I—”

“Worked a little later than you meant to, looks like to me,” he said, waving a hand at the paper-strewn desk. “It's quarter past one, by the way. Master Williams will be so disappointed his lecture on the Aristotelian unities didn't inspire you enough to pull you out of bed. Which is just as well,” he continued, ignoring that Kit had opened his mouth to defend himself, “as you have bigger things to attend to than pagan scholars.”

“Things?” Kit was not particularly adept at forming autonomous thoughts before he had been awake for at least thirty minutes. No right-minded person would make the mistake of calling him a morning person, even if it were past one in the afternoon. As he combed his fingers through his hair in a last-ditch effort to make it lie flat, he asked the only question he could think of. “Who are you, sir?”

“Terribly sorry, Marlowe, I've forgotten my manners,” the man said. He did not appear in the least sorry. “Arthur Gregory, at your service. Or rather, at the service of Sir Francis Walsingham,

which would really put you at mine. But there's no call to be rude, not when you've only just woken up, is there?"

It took nothing more than the invocation of Sir Francis Walsingham to shake away the last shadows of sleep. Suddenly wide-awake, he could hear the secretary's words in the back of his mind. "*You will receive a dossier from my associate in the next few days, which will explain the basic parameters of your position.*" Apparently "the next few days" meant "immediately." He seized one boot from beneath his bed and jammed his foot into it, still fumbling around for the other. "Right," he said, his voice still hoarse from disuse over his midnight session. "Pleasure to meet you, sir."

"It is," Gregory agreed. "When you've left your dreams behind, Marlowe, you'll be coming with me. There are matters Sir Francis has told me to explain to you, in private. But you'll know all about that, I'm sure."

By this time, Kit had become fully dressed and in the general vicinity of presentable. It was a skill born of many days waking with the chiming of the six o'clock bells summoning Corpus students to matins and somehow making it into the pews before the priest had arrived behind the altar. Somehow, though, he doubted his current destination was anywhere near the kingdom of heaven. "He was a little vague on the details," Kit said, "but what I haven't been told, I'll be quick to learn."

"If not, on your own head be it." Kit decided that he and Arthur Gregory were not destined to be friends. "Come with me, then." He turned and opened the door, bowing Kit into the corridor with a sarcastic flourish. He followed. What else was there for it?

It felt strange, strolling through the halls of the college when everyone else was attending a lecture on Greco-Roman theories of poetics. This was hardly the first class not to be graced with Christopher Marlowe's presence, but ordinarily when he chose to avoid scribbling notes about the exact definition of pathos, some stealth was required. There was something oddly liberating about walking risk-free past students who were doing what he, on any other day, would have risked a beating by refusing to do. But this wasn't an afternoon of liberty he had to look forward to. Kit hadn't yet

forgotten the thrill on the back of his neck at the mention of an axe.

He was already convinced that Gregory had never stepped foot in Cambridge before. If his thumping tread had not been a suggestion, his insidious habit of dropping his H's revealed he had never received the rod for laziness of diction. But the man clearly knew his way around the grounds. Within moments, they had made their way out onto the green and down the slope towards the town proper. Kit couldn't have advised a more efficient way to vacate the campus if he'd been asked. Maybe that was part of the skill set of an agent for the Queen. An aptitude for locating and employing the nearest exit. He couldn't decide if this boded well or ill for his future.

The campus of Corpus Christi, as Saint Peter would have wanted it, loomed majestically over the small clapboard buildings of the town. This was not Kit indulging his taste for shimmering rhetoric; the campus felt somehow regal as he glanced back over his shoulder, with its two steeples, one on either side of the enormous glass window at the end of the great hall, standing erect above the town. Twin guardians of the city, like two professors on either side of a lecture hall, daring students to flout academic code. It was a beautiful building, brown stone and clear glass, but it was an oppressive beauty, one that robbed the atmosphere of any air that had not sufficiently learned its Greek and Latin. Though the coming interview kept his nerves stretched taut, it was still easier to breathe in the open air.

Gregory took an abrupt left turn down Sidney Street, skirting the pile of horse offal that, as always, accented the stone-cobbled streets. Kit thought for a moment he must have lost all sense of direction. A man in the service of Sir Francis Walsingham and Queen Elizabeth would never deliberately take him in the direction they were now walking. But even if he had not gone this way hundreds of times before, he would have recognized the signs that proved the accuracy of his judgment. The way the buildings began to lean in over the road, heavy wooden signs and rough-shingled awnings deepening the shadows until the once-bright thoroughfare was no wider than an out-of-the-way alley. The pooling of fetid water in the gutters, sending a smell of decay and musty algae to mix with the musk of whole hogs' heads leering at passersby in the butcher's window. The alms-

beggar, replacing the stately home as a regular installation on each corner.

“Are you lost, sir?” Kit ventured at last, as a woman in an arrestingly low-cut dress whistled at Gregory from an open shop window.

“Do I look it?” Gregory gave the whore a rude gesture with one hand. “Try not to be stupid.” *If everyone in the Queen’s service feels the need to remind me not to be stupid, I might start taking it personally.* “Here we are.”

He had made the turn Kit had known for several minutes’ walking he was going to make, the gradual drift to the east that carried them around a curve into Magdalene Street, the stagnant smell of the River Cam faint beyond the wall of shabby buildings. It was not yet two o’clock and a Thursday besides, so the district was empty of its traditional phantoms, but Kit could still see them in his mind’s eye, ghosts lurking around the framework of the now-deserted building. The grizzled, grey-bearded drunk who had not had a sip of water since his days in the infantry, now leaning on a walking stick to prevent him staggering into the wake of a carriage. The group of first-formers from King’s College or Trinity, elbowing one another to provoke one into approaching the women who lounged idly in the taproom of bars and the doorways of public houses, rouge standing out in bright circles on their powdered cheeks. The man clearly too well-dressed to live anywhere in the vicinity but too flauntingly confident to have stumbled in by mistake, glancing about to make sure none of his business associates were nearby before ducking through a doorway and spending his day loudly behind closed doors. The White Stag was an interesting choice for a meeting of national importance, but he was not in the position to be asking questions.

At least his distaste for following social customs would come to use.

“Marlowe! It’s been ages since we’ve seen you last, what’s kept you?”

A stout woman with a head of sparse, frizzled gray hair and at least one tooth shy of a full set, beamed as they entered. Brushing aside the feeling that being recognized by the matron of a brothel might not be the best impression he could have made on the close associate of his new royal employer,

he gave her a broad smile. Let Gregory make of that what he will, he thought savagely. I've had enough of being pulled like a dog on a leash for at least one week. This isn't his town. It's mine.

"Mistress Howard!" The old woman flushed at the handsome young man remembering her name. "I swear, you grow more beautiful by the day. You'll put your own ladies out of business if you're not careful."

Gregory's disgust was palpable, but Mistress Howard ignored him. "Oh, Mr. Marlowe, I'll none of your flattery, not when I'm working. But you're moving in new circles now, aren't you? Does that Mr. Watson know you've started taking new company? I'm sure I don't know how you would know Mr. Gregory."

Whatever comfort Mistress Howard's house had lent him disappeared in an instant. If *she* knew who Arthur Gregory was, what else did she know? He had never thought he would be possessive of the mistress of a brothel before, but some things, at least, needed to be kept sacred from the Queen's influence. Yes, he would give his life into her service. That much had been established. But to see the mistress share a knowing look with Gregory like they were business acquaintances from another life, and then to hear Tom's name bandied about in the same breath... Fortunately, the brief extent of Gregory's patience did not allow her to continue.

"Mistress Howard, we are here *on business*. I spoke with you yesterday about securing a private room for some professional intercourse with Marlowe. You assured me we would not be disturbed."

A knowing smile spread across Mistress Howard's semi-toothless mouth, and she tapped the side of her nose conspiratorially. "Right you are then, Arthur, I remember, I do," she said, each syllable sparkling with the verbal equivalent of a wink. "We've a nice private room right here 'round the back, and it's early in the day yet for business. I can promise you that there's no one as will bother you until you've finished your... *intercourse*."

Gregory glared at Kit – a small laugh had slipped out in spite of himself. Ah, well. There were

some things that could not be helped.

Without another word, they turned away from her and entered the small room that Mistress Howard had indicated. The moment they had crossed the threshold, the scowling man slammed the door behind them with enough force to rattle the wood in its frame. Kit focused on rooting his feet firmly to the floor, drawing strength from the ground up. Don't ever let them see that they've frightened you. The better part of courage is being able to stand up straight and lie with a smile. Things he'd learned long before Cambridge, and things he'd hoped not to have to use again so soon.

“Are you always so determined to draw attention to yourself?” Gregory snapped. The imminent presence of Mistress Howard bustling in the main room was the only thing keeping his voice lower than a shout, but his rage did not require volume. “Are you incapable of walking through a room without making the floor a stage?”

“I'm afraid I can't help it, sir,” Kit responded, straight-faced. “It must be my good looks and sparkling personality.”

He knew he shouldn't be taking pleasure in goading Arthur Gregory beyond the point of reason. After all, the man was higher up politically than he was, at least by virtue of seniority, and any ill-will his superiors bore against him would all too easily come back to bite him in the end. But there was a limit to how much agency he could surrender before he had to fight back. If he could not control what was happening to him anymore, and it was becoming increasingly obvious that he could not, at the very least he could make Gregory as miserable as possible during the process. Norgate could attest to his success once he decided to devote himself to being a nuisance, as could years of tense friendship with Nick. His father would be so disappointed that humility was not something he had learned at Cambridge, despite everyone's best efforts.

“I imagine the ‘professional intercourse’ you had in mind was something more than a duel of words, sir,” he said, twisting the title of respect into an insult. “Please. Enlighten me.”

“First,” Gregory said through gritted teeth, “a piece of advice, that I would suggest you take to

heart. The only people who survive doing the job that we do are the people you don't see. Do you know why no one knows we're agents of the Queen? Because in the world, *we don't exist*. No one sees us. We're the kind of people you forget exist even while you're talking to them. In your case, Marlowe, it should be easy, because for all your wit, you are nothing. If not for us, you wouldn't exist. When you enter a room, you should be furniture. Decoration. Empty air. Have I made myself clear?"

You are nothing. If not for us, you wouldn't exist. You are nothing.

"Perfectly, sir."

Gregory grunted in wordless distaste and crossed the room to a dilapidated wooden table, where he motioned for Kit to do the same. He took the chair opposite, feeling more like a swordsman at a duel than a man sitting to have a conversation. Something to remember in the future: never come to a professional appointment unarmed. With a small swish of parchment against parchment, Gregory removed a packet from his doublet and dropped it on the tabletop. Hesitant, Kit looked down at the first page. It did not make sense for him to be afraid to touch it, but it did not need to make sense to be true.

"What's this?"

"Your contract." Gregory produced a pen and ink from the table drawer. "Outlining the terms of your service and the code to which you are expected to adhere. Under penalty for refusal, and under reward for successful completion."

The words coming from the spy's mouth were not his own. There was a metallic formality to them, and the unexpected leap in his rhetorical register made Kit still more uncomfortable. These were terms repeated to each man Walsingham approached with this offer that was not an offer. Gregory was echoing the words uttered to him at the beginning of his own service. It was eerie, hearing a ghost speak his own curse. But maybe that was the great gift of damnation. *Solamen miseris, socios habuisse doloris*. Misery loves company.

Kit took the contract in one hand, but he had momentarily lost the ability to read. *Now is not*

the time to panic. I don't know if there's ever a good time to panic, but it isn't now. He felt his heart beating faster as single, detached phrases leapt at him. “Compliance with all verbal orders.” “Utter confidentiality required.” “Failure to comply resulting in...” “Treason...” “Elimination...” “The articles above-written being inviolate...”

“What’s the matter, Marlowe? Cambridge forgot to teach you how to sign your name?” Gregory pushed the pen and ink across the table, but Kit did not reach to take them. Under the cold, mocking eyes of the Queen’s spy, he fought to stifle the panic building in his throat, trapped between his teeth and tongue.

You're having second thoughts now? It's too late for that. Walsingham already knows you'll do it. And what happens to you if you refuse is worse than if you say yes. At least as a spy you've a fighting chance of staying alive. And if you bring a few men to hell so you can stay on Earth a little longer, what of that? They're traitors, threats to the crown. But signing this makes it final, damns you to a life spent surrounded by people who want the Queen dead and want you dead for not wanting it. And how could you ever stop...

You said you wanted to make something of yourself. You said you wanted to show them what you could do, if given the chance. And it's not like you couldn't use the money. For a cobbler's son, you can't keep walking around with holes in your boots like a beggar. Something has to give. And if you have to bend a few rules to do it, to gain the Queen's protection... You've never been particularly well known for your conscience anyway. You follow her Majesty's orders or you pay the consequences. And it might be enlightening to be on the other side, to see what it feels like to be protected...

“Marlowe?”

Gregory watched him with both disgust and curiosity. It was clear he found his hesitation repulsive, but at the same time morbidly fascinating. The cruelty of the spectator, wondering what he would do next. As far as Kit was concerned, the curiosity was mutual. He gripped the sides of his chair, feeling the grainy wood against his skin. A jutting nail on one side, the result of a carpenter more

invested in drink than adequate construction, pressed hard against the inside of his palm, and a wild image of St. Francis of Assisi flickered by, unbidden. If this was God's sign that he too was destined to suffer, he hardly appreciated the creativity. The least devout stigmata he'd ever heard of.

"What, you wouldn't rather I signed in blood?" Kit said vaguely. "Isn't that how most people sign away their souls?"

"Sign the paper, boy, and we can get on with it."

The pen felt heavy in his hand as he dipped the point into the inkwell and touched the edge against the page. The bottom of the parchment stretched out tantalizingly, begging for his signature.

Don't think. Just do it.

"Christopher Marlowe."

His name stared back at him, a silent witness. There was no way to repent, no way to turn back time. For better or worse, he was a spy in service to the Queen.

Gregory snatched the paper up and quickly rolled it into a long cylinder, tucking the page back into his pocket. It was beyond his power to fathom what could have taken so long. "Right, then. On to more important matters."

Kit had not noticed that the removal of his contract had left exposed another sheet. Now, as he leaned forward, he was surprised to find not a single word written on it. Instead, he found an exquisitely detailed portrait, sketched in charcoal and pencil, of a woman in profile. He reached across the table and picked up the drawing, bringing it closer to his eyes in the smoky light of the room.

He had never seen a woman before who looked anything like her, and he could not help but find her striking. Beautiful, perhaps not, though she might have been so once. She maintained that high forehead, those delicately arching brows, that single curl of hair that had escaped her French hood, accented with tiny pearls. Age had changed her, spread her features with lines and a softness to her profile that felt inhabital, as though she did not yet know how to wear the passage of time. She looked the Queen's age or slightly older, though Her Majesty had always managed to transcend such petty

things as time. But it was her eyes that completed the sketch. Even in pencil, those black-and-white eyes gazed out of the page and straight at him, *through* him he would have said, with the air of someone sharing a private joke. This woman was aware of her surroundings, and whatever she was looking at struck her as worthy only of satire. If Gregory had criticized Kit for attracting too much attention when entering a room, he would have had his work cut out turning this woman into a piece of human furniture.

“Do you know who that is?” Gregory leaned back in his chair.

Kit shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Mary Stuart,” Gregory said, spitting again on the floor, “what calls herself the Queen of Scots. You’ll get to know her in the next few weeks. Better than you might like. But ideally not for long.”

V

The weather turned quickly in the weeks that followed. Even in Cambridge, far from the coast, autumn passed in a fractured second, turning instantly from the hovering haze of late summer to cold, driving rains that constantly threatened to turn to snow. Night fell earlier than expected, and it was not at all unusual to emerge from a building one had entered at midday and find it suddenly black as the darkest midnight. Snow was coming, and quickly. It was the first week of November, and the town was sure that before the second was out, Cambridge would be all but buried.

Kit ran the edge of his cloak through his fingers as he watched Tom pace the length of his dormitory. If anyone had the right to be agitated, he thought, it wasn't Tom Watson. When was the spectator more afraid than the man about to be hanged? Perhaps his thoughts still tended toward melodrama, but he thought it was justified. This was the beginning of something enormous. If he could maintain his outward composure, surely he was allowed a measure of interior hysterics. Tom had always watched in despair as Kit threw caution to the winds, whether deliberately evading an impending examination or departing unannounced from the middle of Mass for more profitable entertainment. How much more so, then, must this have aroused his concern? He ought not, he knew, to have found Tom's reaction so compelling. But it was satisfying, knowing his presence mattered.

"And you don't know when you'll be back?" Tom asked. Kit forced himself to pay attention to the words again. God alone knew the next time he would hear Tom speak. "You're going off, in the middle of the term, just like that?"

"More or less." However his thoughts vacillated from anticipation to panic, he could at least be

proud of how calm his voice remained. “Tom, I’ve already spoken to Norgate about it.” (This was only half a lie. Walsingham knew, and he could tell Norgate whatever he chose.) “Don’t look at me like I’ve killed a man. Something’s come up I need to take care of. You know that my father’s pathologically incapable of handling anything serious on his own. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Kit, the day you stop trying to take responsibility for that man, the better off you’ll be. You’re a hundred miles away, don’t you think it’s time he learned he can’t depend on you forever?”

“I think you’ll find he can,” he answered lightly. This was the kind of lying he was good at, the kind that came easily because the better part of it was truth. And if John Marlowe’s reputation had to suffer for the good of Queen and country, so be it. Everything that could have been said on the subject, Tom had already heard it. “What do you want me to do? Leave him in Westgate? The landlord will be on the house in minutes like flies on a corpse, because if he’s paid rent in the past six months without me there to remind him I’ll eat my own leg. I can’t leave them to that. I’ll be here again before you even notice I’ve left. On my honor, Tom.”

It was a mark of their friendship that Tom did not take the opportunity, as Nick would have done, to inquire how much the honor of Christopher Marlowe was actually worth. “You actually think you can talk him out of jail?”

“You underestimate me, my friend,” Kit said with a grin. “Maybe you should get yourself arrested, so you can see me work my magic from the inside. It’s a spectacle and a half, I can promise you that.”

Tom colored slightly – perhaps the shift in tone on the words “work my magic from the inside” had caught his attention. “I’m sure it is,” he said. “I just don’t like... I don’t like it. Can’t you wait until the morning? I can’t imagine you riding post in *that*.” He gestured at the rain lashing the window of Kit’s room, the drops tapping against the glass sounding ice-cold even from inside. Kit shivered. It would be an unpleasant ride. He had never expected anything else. But standing in his dormitory with Tom next to him, he realized powerfully how much he did not want to leave. The warmth and comfort

of Tom's presence pulled him to stay, like the invisible forces constantly urging a compass back north. But he had no choice. He was late as it was.

"I'll give my father hell when I get back to Canterbury, don't worry about that," he said at last, turning his back on the window. Maybe if he didn't see the storm, he wouldn't have to think about it, and by the time he made it to where the horses were waiting the sun would be out and it would be the pleasantest pilgrimage anyone had imagined since Chaucer. It certainly didn't hurt to dream. But turning away from the window meant he had to look Tom straight in the eye, and that proved no easier. "Take care of yourself while I'm gone, won't you? And take the piss out of Nick every so often. Don't let his head get too big while I'm not here to deflate that charming ego of his."

"Come back when you can, all right," Tom went on. "I don't know what it is, but I don't want you to leave. You belong here, with..." *With me*. Kit could hear the unspoken words, or he thought he could. He knew that he ought not to say anything. His exit was clear. He could walk straight out the door and into the rain without anyone being the wiser. There was so much waiting out there, so much that had consumed his thoughts for days. But he was leaving, for how long he had no idea. If he didn't say anything now, he'd spend the rest of his life wondering what would have happened if he had.

"Tom, be honest with me." Kit said. Tom waited hesitantly for the completion of the thought he both anticipated and feared. He might have known what was coming. He might have imagined. How could he not have? "Do you think for a minute I'd rather be in Canterbury with my family than here with you? Do you think there's anything in the world I'd rather do than *this*?"

Tom now stood only about two feet away from Kit, who now stepped forward to close the gap. It was a practiced motion, like the steps of a dance in which each figure was carefully premeditated and gracefully executed, except in this case the high-ceilinged manor hall had been reduced to a bare-bones university dormitory, the whole of a royal court to two young men, the music of the viols to Tom's quiet, quick breathing. A music that stopped very suddenly as Kit lay one hand on his shoulder and brushed his lips gently against Tom's.

It was a moment neither of them had words for, nor thoughts. It was a moment detached from all those surrounding it, a day, a year, a lifetime unto itself. The kiss itself was gentle, with the quiet hesitation of a virgin blush personified. Kit pulled away, and his hand slid down from Tom's shoulder, tracing a thin line down his arm until his fingers closed lightly around his hand. He looked into Tom's eyes with some hesitation, gauging a response from what he could read there. That look was surprised, speechless, but not in horror, nor, he thought, in distaste.

"My God, Tom, you look like you've seen the Virgin Mary appear in the foam of a beer stein. Don't tell me I've shocked your Puritanical nature."

Tom's face flushed red to the tips of his ears. "You're mad," he whispered. "This is madness."

"Did you honestly never suspect?" He realized he had left the door open, as two second-form students passed in the hall outside, whispering to each other about something mundane, a rugby match, a conversation they had had in town days before, nothing that mattered. Not like this mattered. Tom flinched at the voices and took a nervous step back. The distance between them increased to a degree others might not look twice at. He did not let go of Kit's hand. "It's not as if it's the worst of all the deadly sins, is it? Love Thy Neighbor and all that. Even Jesus traveled around with twelve other men."

"You're going to get us both hanged, you are," Tom said, "you keep going on like that."

"Have I never told you my motto?" Kit quipped. "Any man who doesn't love tobacco and boys is a fool. And you know I never go back on a motto." There it was, all on the metaphorical table. Let him make of it what he would. Years of unspoken thoughts and silent conversations hung between them, and if Tom chose he could tear the entire apparatus to pieces. He would be left with nothing, then. Not even the friendship that had always served as a screen for something more. Everything he held close was now subject to the caprice of Tom Watson's reaction to that reckless, mad, impulsive kiss. His life hung in the blank space between a flinch back and a smile.

And there it was. Unsure, more full of self-doubt than of unrestrained pleasure, but there, and everything he needed. A smile. A nod. An agreement. A surge of warmth banished the shiver from the

anticipation of the rain, and he pulled Tom into a quick embrace that felt more natural than it had any right to, with the door to his room still open and all their activities exposed to the hall beyond. Let them see. He would be gone in five minutes. Let this waking dream last a moment longer. Tom had not run. He had not called him a sin against nature, a monster, an abomination. He had stayed.

“I’m already late,” he said finally. He turned to his bed and picked up the bag he had haphazardly packed that morning, trying without much success to hide his expression, whatever it was. He could not be liable for what his emotions were doing to his face. “But I’ll be back as soon as I can. A few weeks at most. Once everything’s sorted. I’ll write if anything unexpected comes up.”

“No, you won’t. You never do.”

“You’re right,” he agreed. “I probably won’t.”

There were a hundred thousand things to be said, questions to be asked, but no time, and no words. He had to go, before his words got the better of him. Kit swung his bag over his shoulder, looked back at the still-stunned Tom, and swept out the door.

Orpheus in the Underworld. You can't look back without being damned.

His mind was still humming as he made his way to the White Stag, his head bent against the rain. Why do a stupid thing halfway, really? If he was going to throw his life away on this mad voyage across England, he might as well bare his soul for Tom to stamp into the earth while he was at it. Still, it didn’t feel like a mistake. He had done enough idiotic things in his life to know what they felt like, and this one sat differently. University didn’t count for most young men, when it came to romantic escapades. You were shut up in a building with two hundred other boys your age and the only time you saw a piece of skirt was when it charged five shillings a glimpse. What did you expect? Everyone knew what went on behind the doors of Corpus Christi, King’s College, Trinity, Oxford. Boys needed companionship, something warmer and more comforting than Aristotle or Plato to take to bed. If Walsingham or Gregory were to find out, they might have their own private laugh about it, but it wouldn’t last long in their minds.

Not, in any case, as long as it would last in Kit's.

Any man who had seen him walking that evening, the rain coursing into his eyes from his soaked hair and an irrepressible grin on his face, would have taken him for a madman. But this was the first time Kit had felt sane in weeks, at least since his unexpected interview with the spymaster. Ever since then, he had been saying one thing and thinking another. Every other day, Gregory would yank him out of class and bring him down to the back parlor of the White Stag, pouring over documents and sketches, testing him on names and titles until long after sunset. Trying to return to Corpus afterwards and struggle through Greek translations, algebraic calculations, St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, had been all but impossible, and yet somehow he had managed to detach his hands from his mind and his preoccupations with politics, travel, deceit, death. Here, at last, he had said something he had meant. Madness, Tom had said. But what was madness, really, if not a will to love against all odds? Let them try to cover that with a false identity if they dared.

He amused himself for several minutes of his cold, sodden walk by imagining what John Marlowe would have had to say about his son now, had he known. The scene's dramatic potential was tantalizing: bringing Tom into his father's dark workshop, rank with the smell of tanned leather, presenting him to his parents as if nothing could be more natural.

Tom, this is John Marlowe, proud member of the shoemaker's guild of Lower Canterbury. Father, meet Thomas Watson, of the London Watsons. Also my lover. I'll leave the two of you to get acquainted.

That would go over well. But pretending this was a university phase, one he would leave behind him with the hallowed halls of Cambridge, was nauseating. Lying in the name of the Queen in the name of his new profession was one thing. Lying about Tom was another. Kit Marlowe was not entirely insensible to honor, at least in the sense of pledging oneself heart and soul to another. Maybe that was fidelity. His vocabulary in the domain of knightly virtues had never been particularly well exercised. He had meant what he said, and they would have no choice but to see where the cards fell

when he returned. But thinking of Tom's face when he kissed him, and of the embrace that followed, he thought with some assurance that he need not worry. Tom had not lied any more than he had.

He pushed the door to the White Stag open and burst into the taproom, feeling like a summoned demon blown in on a cold gust of wind and rain. The main room of the house was more crowded than when he and Gregory held conference here, but he was not surprised. They had habitually chosen the least likely times for a public house to be populated – mid-afternoon, at inconsistent days mid-week. Now, on a Friday evening, it was only to be expected that at least three-quarters of the tables and chairs were full, and that a smattering of their occupants looked up and tipped their heads in his direction when he entered. He was known in the neighborhood enough to run into an acquaintance or two in each of the taverns from Magdalene Street to Sidgwick. But there was one face he did not see. There was no shortage of men there who gave him a general feeling of discomfort, but Arthur Gregory was not one of them.

“Mistress Howard.” He stopped the matron with a hand as she bustled past with a small leather purse, recently obtained from a paying customer. “Has there been anyone here waiting for me?”

“Your friend was here twenty minutes past,” she answered, “but he'd no intention of waiting. He left the horses out back in the stable, and there's a groom with them who's to show you the way. He told me to remind you,” she added quietly, tucking the purse into the bosom of her dress, “of the advice he gave you the first day you met, and that if you decide to make an idiot of yourself there'll be hell to pay.” Mistress Howard proudly relayed the words like a brightly colored parrot, mimicking sound without sense. But Kit, forced to confront the meaning, merely nodded curtly and passed through the room towards the stables.

The only people who survive doing the job that we do are the people you don't see.

Well then, from the first, he would have to make a special effort not to be seen. At the very least, the driving rain should help.

The stable was dark and damp, with straw dyed a dingy brown from a leak either from the roof

or the horses. At the far end, two saddled horses and one shabbily dressed man waited impatiently for him. The man wore a dark traveling cloak of indeterminate color, holding the reins to both horses in one hand and tapping the fingers of the other against the post of the stall. He looked up when Kit came within earshot of him and gave him a scowl worthy of a greater man.

“You’re late,” he said testily.

“I’m aware.” Kit decided this would have to serve in lieu of an apology. He wouldn’t have traded those last moments in his room with Tom for a hundred thousand days of being perfectly on time. England’s national security could wait half an hour. “Shall we go?”

“I’ve no cause to wait longer,” the groom snapped. “The sooner we leave, the sooner we can get out of this God-cursed storm.”

“Well then,” he said brightly, entering the stall in which his horse waited for him, “the road awaits.” The horse beneath him, blissfully unaware of the November storm raging outside the stable walls, stomped its foot against the straw, impatient to stretch its legs. Without waiting for the groom to give the word, Kit dug in his heels and set off at a brisk trot into the flooding streets.

It was a long ride to Sheffield, nearly one hundred and fifty miles from the center of Cambridge, somewhat less than that if Kit had his way of shortcuts. Which was just as well, he thought, as the rain splattered against his face and stung the exposed skin of his hands. Trying to balance two parallel lives within the halls of Corpus Christi, there was little time to sit back and think thoughts that did not originate in someone else’s head, whether the interloper be Greek, Roman, or Londoner of origin. And whatever Nick Skeres, Master Norgate, or anyone else who thought they understood Christopher Marlowe might have believed, he was perfectly capable of sustaining a train of thought for over a hundred miles’ hard riding. They would have been equally surprised at the content, but that was not something he could share with them for risk of losing his head.

Mary, Queen of Scots.

It sounded almost fictitious, as he played the words through his head. Would a mortal woman

ever merit a title as ostentatious as that? Walsingham must have been genuine in his expressed need for agents: he had flung his newest servant headlong into the thick of things. He'd hardly had time to catch his balance in this world of doubled speech and multiplied identity, a world he had heard rumors of but had never considered seriously. This was his chance, to make his life a story worth the telling. Maybe he would have something in common with Mary Stuart after all, besides a distaste for organized Protestantism and an inability to feign modesty. Aspirations beyond what fortune made of you, he could understand that. The day he gave up putting as much distance as possible between himself and Canterbury would be the day that Mary Stuart ceased referring to herself in the royal plural.

But none of this mattered, he reminded himself, as his horse covered mile after mile, leaving the sodden and sullen groom some way behind. He was an agent of the Queen. Discretion and anonymity were the only things keeping him from an untimely grave. Two days after his arrival, no one would remember a time when he had not been present. But he could become a faceless shadow without sacrificing his usefulness in the bargain. He could read a face from a mile away. Hadn't he done that with Tom, who out of fear for his immortal soul had taken as many precautions as possible to keep the thing hidden? What was to say, then, that he couldn't tell when Her Scottish Majesty had something to say that shouldn't have been said? If there was one thing he was good at, it was getting himself into places where he was not wanted. The Queen of Scots had no idea what kind of man she was to be dealing with.

If he had spoken his thoughts aloud, they would have sounded laughably self-absorbed, even to him. But he knew that this was not pride, but truth. Walsingham had not made a mistake, choosing Christopher Marlowe from the halls of Corpus Christi College.

Mary Stuart, on the other hand, was poised on the knife's-edge of an irreparable error.

VI

“Your Grace, is there anything more miserable than an English November?”

No matter how many times William Cooper heard her speak, it never failed to surprise him that the Lady Mary sounded so perfectly, so wholly French. Like any red-blooded young Englishman, he carried in his bones a deep distaste for all things Parisian, from the new fashion of hoods favored some forty years ago by that whore Boleyn his father and grandfather had been forced to call queen, to the songs of the troubadours that the court musicians insisted on playing around Christmas. Her Ladyship had been educated in the courts of France, brought up under the irritatingly Continental oversight of none other than Henry II. She had been married to the dauphin, before his death, though she had not borne him children. He knew all this. Her strange way of pronouncing R or U was only to be expected. Still, it seemed wrong to hear the Lady Mary remark on the Sheffield weather in that slippery frog-language voice. He said nothing, of course. His post for the evening was doorman, not commentator. That role was restricted to those who had a country estate for a surname instead of a profession, a Northumberland instead of a Cooper.

“I cannot think there is, Your Ladyship,” Norfolk agreed from his place at the writing desk beneath the parlor’s large arched window. In his two years at Sheffield, William had never heard Lord Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk say anything to contradict even the lady’s most trivial remark. Whether this was an adaptive strategy or a genuine lack of spine William was uncertain, but there again, of course, was not his place. “I am told that the rain should break tomorrow, and we should see all the glories of autumn in Yorkshire.” All the while he was speaking, the duke did not look up from

his half-finished letter. His words were perfectly proper, but his mind was elsewhere.

“Ah yes, the glories of an English autumn,” Lady Mary sneered, or perhaps it was merely the accent that turned the word “autumn” into a down-the-nose remark of disgust. “Have I ever told you of the season in Linlithgow, Your Grace?”

The tapping raindrops against the manor roof strengthened the exiled lady’s dreamy nostalgia. It had been raining hard since Friday morning, and the sun was now setting on Sunday night. The stable’s horses were becoming anxious with pent-up energy, but the groomsman hesitated to exercise the animals during such a tempest. William could hardly blame him – he looked out the windows at the Sheffield grounds and thanked God his position was largely indoors. A man from Sheffield proper could expect no better, and certainly much worse had Her Majesty not taken it upon herself to appoint members to her cousin’s household by geographic proximity rather than any aptitude for the task. Not that any particular aptitude was required to hold a sword and open a door, but William digressed. He was a quick learner, in any case.

Mary turned from the diligent figure of Norfolk and wandered to the couch in the middle of the parlor, where she took up a pack of cards from an end table and began absently to shuffle them. Her private parlor was comfortable, well-furnished, done in a pleasing alternation of dark wood and royal blue upholstery, but no luxury could counterbalance the boredom laying siege to Mary’s mind. William could see the signs: toying with idle objects, that natural return to storytelling about the windswept Scottish highlands, the increased rate of sighs per day. He could sympathize with her, to an extent: though he would occasionally be permitted out-of-doors after the rain and she would not, he understood how a manor house could feel like prison. Confinement was confinement, however regal the circumstances. He shifted his weight from one foot to another. Soon it would be time for supper, and the lady would move into the banquet hall, seated at one end of a table meant for forty and occupied by four. When the remnants of the meal had been cleared from the sideboard, he would be allowed to retreat to his own room, curl up under the blankets thrown on his own bed, and stare at the

tracks of raindrops running along the glass until he awoke again on the other side of night. One was entitled to dream of home, certainly, even if the home in question varied by the dreamer.

William jerked his head back from where it had slipped, his chin brushing against his collarbone during his near-doze. Norfolk lay down his letter at last and swiveled in his chair to face Mary, who remained on the dark-blue couch dealing a one-person hand of *alouette* on the end table. “My Lady,” he said deferentially, “I think someone is approaching.”

Someone approaching? God’s blood, who in the devil’s name comes to visit an exiled queen?

“Yes, Your Grace, I am expecting someone today.”

The Lady Mary was unfazed by the sound of approaching footsteps, but William knew that her ease was not an invitation to ignore the oncoming stranger. Without anyone noticing his exit, he ducked out of the hall door and into the foyer.

It wasn’t difficult to locate him. The hall outside Mary’s parlor was elegant, Castilian marble floors and great wooden panels lining the walls, in another sphere entirely than the village, with its permanent smell of pigs and straw. A manor fit for a queen, even a displaced queen without subjects or a court. So the young man dripping head to toe with mud and rainwater was something of an anomaly. Etheridge, Sheffield’s irrepressible butler, was beside the stranger, leading him towards the parlor. When he saw William, he cut his escort short with a brief “I’ll leave you here, then,” and disappeared again to one of his innumerable duties. William and the stranger were left alone. He enjoyed a small thrill of superiority at the prospect, an emotion close to *schadenfreude* had he known the German word for what he felt. He might not be dangling his legs off the highest rung of the social ladder, but at the very least his clothes were clean and his feet were dry.

“What brings you to Sheffield Castle, sir?” William put as much authority as he could manage into the seven words. It felt so *good* to lord his position over someone else. He finally understood why it was such a popular pastime.

“Oh, wonderful, this *is* Sheffield.” The man shook the water from his close-cropped brown hair

like a dog let in from the rain. “It’s near impossible to tell where you’re going in a downpour like this. I was worried I’d ended up in Southampton.”

William watched the stranger in disbelief. With the instinctive precision of the working-class that had survived by being able to make such distinctions and adapt one’s behavior accordingly, he could tell the young man did not come from nobility. There was an air, a way of standing, a habit of dress that automatically marked you as a member of the titled class, and this man did not have it. If he had come to pay court to Mary Stuart, as occasionally gentlemen did, he was to be sorely disappointed by his reception. Far from giving her a sense of identification with the disenfranchised, exile had only reinforced Mary’s notions of social standing. The stranger had to have known, or guessed, this. Anyone with the name of Stuart had some inherited right to snobbishness, and a man wearing boots with unmended soles in the midst of a downpour was not likely to pass muster. And yet he appeared unabashed at his presence. It wasn’t the arrogance of the gentry, but it was a kind of arrogance nonetheless, as though he knew himself to be an outsider but had no great desire to belong. William instantly decided he did not like him.

“What brings you to Sheffield Castle?” William repeated, deliberately dropping the “sir.”

“This is the residence of the Lady Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, is it not?” the newcomer asked. William nodded curtly. His initial mistrust only deepened with this habit of answering questions with another question. “Then she is what brings me here. I’ve been sent to be a gentleman-in-waiting to Her Ladyship. I believe she is expecting me?”

As a rule, William ignored most things said about the comings and goings of the Sheffield household. If it did not impact the day-to-day duties of William Cooper, William Cooper was not interested. One did not live comfortably by inserting oneself into other people’s affairs. But if he was to work with this madcap, Sheffield’s affairs were his affairs. He nodded and gestured at the door as if pointing out a sewage pit on the side of the road.

“If you’ll follow me, then...” He trailed off pointedly.

“Watson,” the man said promptly, pulling an ironic bow. “James Watson. Entirely at your service, I’m sure.”

William grunted and turned his back on his charge, opening the door and standing with a militarily straight back on the threshold. He had little enough pride in his occupation for working days, but when he was required to appear better than someone else, a little dramatic flair might be in order, for comparison’s sake. Lady Mary ceased her idle card-shuffling as they entered, and Norfolk stood from the writing desk. A newcomer, to a court in exile, was still an event of interest, even suspicion.

“My Lady,” William said, “James Watson.” He bowed perfunctorily and stepped aside, again melting into the woodwork. Let the interloper cope with his alleged new employers as best he could. At the least, it would be entertaining to watch the lady tear him to pieces.

James Watson advanced carefully into the parlor, though he tactfully stopped some feet short so as not to leave a puddle of mud on the Turkish carpet. He had been slouching casually in the foyer, unconcerned with the propriety of entering a manor that did not belong to you, but when he stepped in front of his new mistress his atmosphere had shifted. Every step spoke deference, every breath an apology, a willingness to serve. William, despite himself, was impressed. There was an innate capacity for dishonesty in this James Watson that impressed him, even if the respect was grudging. Anyone who could show so much humility while not feeling a shred of it had some agenda of his own.

“My Lady.” Watson bowed like one who was accustomed to doing it well. “I apologize for my lateness and for my state. I regret that I could not make myself more presentable.”

“You may rise, Watson,” Mary said with amusement, as she lay the deck face-up on the table, leaving the nine of diamonds exposed. “I hold neither your lateness nor your wetness against you. You have had a long ride to Yorkshire, I presume?” William watched in mute surprise. Mary rarely displayed the like level of concern in conversation with common people in general, and English common people in particular. Perhaps this was another symptom of living in France, a general resentment of all things not *comme il faut*. Certainly there was nothing proper about the sodden and

threadbare James Watson, but somehow she did not seem uncomfortable. The ultimate skill of a servant: to make your mistress perfectly at ease, to turn even your shortcomings into your virtues.

“No worse than I have made before, or will make again, My Lady” Watson replied.

“I am glad to hear it,” Mary said. “You may retire to the servant’s quarters, and we will arrange for a warm bath to remove the chill of your ride. You will report to Mr. Etheridge in the morning.”

“Thank you, My Lady,” he said with another bow made as if he were born to do nothing else.

“I will do my best not to disappoint you.”

“I am sure you shall do splendidly,” Mary commented. A small smile passed across her lips. “I have a son named James, Watson. He will be near your age, unless I misjudge myself.”

“It is an honor to share a name with so noble a gentleman.” It was as if Watson had anticipated the remark, had prepared his response in advance. “With your permission, My Lady, I take my leave.”

Mary waved a hand, agreeing to his dismissal. The new serving-man inclined his head in the direction of the duke, who had not stopped watching him critically since his entrance. William could not say James walked away. What he did was not walking. It was as if his feet did not touch the parlor floor as he left, though the muddy footprints on the wood belied the impression. He simply disappeared, like a mist over the Sheffield moors with the rising sun. It was as if he had never been there at all.

The moment he was on the other side of the parlor door, Kit Marlowe’s bearing changed. His straight posture collapsed into an easy slouch, and a quick, wicked grin replaced the look of quiet subservience. She had taken the bait. From beginning to end, she had swallowed it whole. And now it was time for the real work to begin.

VII

November 10, 1585

Tom,

You'll never read this letter. Not only is it harder than you'd imagine to get a piece of post from Sheffield to Cambridge when you're masquerading as a person who can't read, but even if I could manage it, I wouldn't dare to. The people I work for guard their information closer than the Pope guards the holy tiara. And I've probably put my own life in jeopardy just by writing the word "Pope." God forbid someone along the route pick up my papers and read them. I'm not the only one who would suffer for it, and neither are you. But this makes no sense to you. There's so much I haven't told you.

Sheffield is a hellhole if ever I saw one. A very comfortable, nearly royal hellhole, but a hellhole nonetheless. I can imagine Dante wandering through its halls, sorting each person and object into their respective circles. The tension here is suffocating, like we're all biding our time until our fortunes soar or the sky comes crashing down. Maybe that's exactly what we're doing. I don't know what the lady and her band of misfits have in mind. As for myself, I've nothing to do but wait for somebody to make a mistake, and hope I recognize it when I see it.

I miss Cambridge, Tom. I didn't think I would, and I can almost hear your surprise. I spent more time there biting my thumb at the church than crossing myself, and there wasn't a day that went by I didn't try perfecting my impression of Master Wyndham's drawl behind his back. The masters mistrusted me, and I returned the favor. This was supposed to be my chance to escape the sneers and judgments thrown at the poor scholar. But I loved those halls more than I realized. Compared with

home, it was Elysium. Every wall lined with books, men who knew things I had never considered who were there only to teach me their secrets... I could know everything, say anything, become anyone. And of course, you were there.

I entertain myself sometimes by imagining what my father would have to say if I could tell him how I'm managing Sir Francis' commission. This is exactly what we knew you would amount to, Christopher, he'd say. A servant in someone else's house, licking their boots and coming at all hours of the night when they ring. But it's not so different from another term at Corpus. I work, I'm sneered at on occasion and ignored with regularity, and in the evenings I sit down to write after the household has gone to bed. The progress I've made on Tamburlaine is stunning, particularly if you keep in mind the limitations of poor illiterate James Watson having to work under cover of darkness. I hope you don't mind I borrowed your name, come to that. It's common enough. I doubt anyone will extend the shame of having a footman for a cousin to the respectable Watsons of Fleet Street, so you should be safe from me.

November 16

It's been nearly a week since I arrived, and I still feel as though I've been turned loose on a mission with no instructions. I understand the theory well enough. Get yourself a place at Sheffield, discover Mary Stuart's every move, keep Whitehall continually informed. Sleep with one eye open. Wait until she makes a mistake. Imagine the nature of my report thus far. My own midnight verses of regicide and rebellion are more interesting than reality. What does the Lady do? The closest she got to a display of potential violence was a shouting match with Norfolk over a delay in the delivery of the post, a flash of ill-humor that spread to anyone unfortunate enough to be in her way. Hardly worth writing home over.

It doesn't surprise me that Mary's becoming desperate for communication. I feel the walls of the castle closing in, and I'm not to be beheaded if I leave the grounds. (At least, I don't believe I am. Sir Francis was unclear on that point.) I think it has something to do with the silence – this castle was

designed for a court easily four times this size. It's as if we're the last living creatures on earth. A fear of enclosed spaces is circumstantial.

The Lady Mary does her best to forget that Yorkshire, though cold and unpleasant enough that you might forgive the error, is not Scotland. She plays the harpsichord and sings Highland songs with that absurd French accent. She reads, writes letters I would sacrifice an arm and a leg to read, calls Norfolk to her and discusses art and medicine and politics. Not religion. At least, never around me. What else would you expect a stately queen in exile to do? I haven't seen her sharpening knives at her dressing table, though Gregory warned me not to rule anything out, that whispers of succession can drive a woman to madness and a Catholic twice as quickly.

And so I listen, constantly, for whispers of sedition, plots of citizen mobs or uprisings, anything to suggest that Mary intends to do away with the Tudor scarlet and gold in Whitehall's upholstery. I listen, and I hear nothing. A blind man in a hall of mirrors. A man writing letters that will never be read.

November 20

William caught me writing last night. Never before have I been so grateful that barely one in four Englishmen can read. I pushed the letter under my mattress, to be safe. Even the least lettered man can recognize the three characters of the most common name in the country when he sees them, and then start to wonder about so regular a correspondent. If your mother had named you Ignatius, I needn't have worried. But the ink ran so badly beneath the mattress I can hardly make out a word anymore. My secret remains safe. And so I begin again.

He asked if I were writing to a sweetheart back home. Can you imagine how hard I had to work not to laugh when I told him yes? He fancies you a fetching young thing in lace petticoats, the Laura to my Petrarch, the poor fool. I imagine my carefully modulated friendship with Will would take a different turn if he knew I prefer my goddesses in breeches.

I've convinced him to take a liking to me, though I could tell from the beginning he'd have

preferred that Norfolk throw my head to the dogs. People are not difficult to figure out, Tom. An occasional favor here, a well-placed question about his family there, a smile at the right time and the most sullen man in the world will start confiding his secrets in you. I can't explain why I like him in return. I think it's because he's so different from anyone else I've met since Sir Francis arrived. He says everything he means, and means everything he says. I don't know anyone else who does that, excepting only you, and even then not until I moved first.

I know I can't send these letters, Tom. But I like to imagine that you know I'm writing to you. It helps more than you would think. You're the only person I can talk to honestly, who even knows my real name. I dreamt of you last night, you know.

Don't be absurd, I'm not giving more details than that. I couldn't abide it if you developed an ego like Nick's.

November 25

In case you believe working as a double agent in the household of a banished queen is in any way glamorous, let me correct your perspective. It involves much laundering of linen, much scouring of pans, and much nodding and bowing at decisions in which your opinion was not solicited. If I didn't know better, I'd say this whole production was an elaborate ruse on Norgate's part to teach me some humility. Don't worry, Tom, he's scarcely succeeded. I was afraid of what would happen when anything came to light, but now I think I'd welcome an assassination plot, if only for variety.

My eyes are constantly open, but I have no way of knowing what I'm looking for. Mary occasionally sings Spanish songs over the harpsichord. Is this a sign of a secret alliance with King Philip? She looks at the clouds and comments to Norfolk that it looks as if a storm is coming. An oblique threat of an imminent attack against the Queen? I doubt this last, as within five minutes the walls of the castle shook with thunder. But one can never be sure. Everything could portend something. Or nothing. Or both.

Matthew the groom, bless his soul, actually seems to be trying to help me. We were talking last

night around the fire in our quarters, sharing my pipe five ways along with William, Simon, and Martha, the scullery maid whose underskirts Simon is increasingly determined to explore. She's a hardy girl, takes her tobacco with more finesse than her poor suitor. More suited to do the wooing than be wooed, especially not by someone as scared of anything that speaks in soprano as Sim Harrison.

But I distract myself. Matthew. Between turns on the pipe, he mentions the Lady Mary has been sending more and more letters all the way to Shrewsbury, and that his poor horses can hardly continue to make the journey without rest. Why would Mary be writing so many letters to one place in particular, I wonder? And then he mentions that some of her envelopes must be feeling the pinch of her captivity, as he could nearly see through to the paper inside. A terrible treatment of such a mistress, he concluded. Her poverty brought shame to the crown.

None of them attributed my shiver to anything but the cold. Could he see what Her Ladyship was writing, I asked. Maybe she's got a secret lover in Shrewsbury that she's sending sonnets to? But Matthew hardly seemed to notice – is there any intrigue in the life of a servant? I swear, they observe nothing so long as it doesn't affect their handful of silver at the end of the month. He told me he could see it, right enough, but he couldn't read a word of it. At first, I could have kicked myself – of course he couldn't read it, where did I think I was – but then he added it didn't look like any English letters he'd ever seen. Maybe the Scots or the French used a different alphabet?

This might be what I've waited for, Tom. This might be her mistake. Unless the Scots have developed a new language in the past month, Mary Stuart is writing in cipher to Shrewsbury. What's she saying that needs to be hidden from outside eyes, even those of her illiterate groomsman? Watch your step, My Lady. There's something here. I plan to uncover what it is.

November 29

I think the Duke has taken a dislike to me. Yes, Tom, I can sense your complete lack of surprise. God knows there are precious few men over the age of forty who haven't taken a dislike to me.

Including God, most likely, for the number of times I take His name in vain. But sometimes I think he sees there's more to me than I let on. (Norfolk, I mean. Not God.) No matter how hard I try, I can't do what Gregory tells me should come naturally, make everyone around me forget I exist. Not for lack of trying.

I don't understand how these people are so incapable of listening, when I can't seem to do anything else. Now instead of feigning interest in the lecture hall, I find myself feigning disinterest in the banquet hall. I'll probably end up confusing the two once I'm back in Cambridge, which will be complicated to explain to the Masters.

I don't know when that will be. I can't tear myself away from this. It almost feels like a game, if one where the rules are unspoken and every step leads to the ruin of one of the players. Every action, every word around me could be the key, and there's always the chance that closing my eyes for a moment will cause me to miss it. But at night, when I manage to escape the mayhem of the lady and her staff, I daydream about returning to life the way it was. When nothing was more complicated than where I would manage to steal tobacco from next or how I was going to stitch together a dissertation on Ovid in four hours. And, of course, I think of you.

If and when I do return, it is not to escape my role here. Here I have a purpose, a chance to write history instead of reading it, and not for nothing do I remind myself that I'm well paid for it. But I need to see you, to feel you, to speak to you. I can't write about that here. I've tried, but the letters looked up at me accusingly and I felt myself a fool. I've burned those. I wonder if you think of me. How much were you humoring me in my apparent madness? But I hope I know better than that.

Enough of this for one night. Thinking this way will drive me mad, and if there is one thing I cannot afford to be here, it is mad. I will sign this unsendable letter. I'll have to burn it afterwards if I do. But I can't write about you under a false name. I need to see your name with mine, if only on the page, if only in my mind. Think about me sometimes, Tom, and imagine that I write to you, never as James but always as your own,

Kit Marlowe

November 30

*If all the pens that poets ever held
Had fed the feeling of their masters' thoughts,
And every sweetness that inspired their hearts,
Their minds and muses on admired themes;
If these had made one poem's period,
And all combined in beauty's worthiness,
Yet should there hover in their restless heads,
One thought, one grace, one wonder at the least,
Which into words virtue cannot digest.
And that virtue, my love, should be your name,
That emblem of divine quintessent fire,
That all the rest outstrips, and all the rest consumes.*

Dear God. I hope you're happy, Tom. You've made me ridiculous. For once I'm grateful I can't send these letters, and that no one here can read them. The secret of my pathetic poetry, like a lovesick shepherd whining on the riverbank, may die with me. To be put to any use, I'd have to conceal the lines in something dripping with swords and battles and everything else the public passes the time with. At least they would then be good for a laugh. I wonder how Tamburlaine would hold up with the addition of a love story.

Christ, to think of that barbarian in love. Pity the children that have him for a father.

December 1

Today marks the first Sunday of Advent. Mary has been at prayer for hours, which gives me time to tend to my own affairs. Even Norfolk, staunch and loyal recusant that he is, cannot keep pace with her piety, and instead retires to his chamber to drink and write more letters. For my part, I mean to find a way to ask Matthew to copy Mary's correspondences for me, so that I might try my hand at amateur cryptography. How to do this without attracting suspicion remains to be seen. You know I don't naturally incline toward the subtle. A taste for the dramatic is as much a hindrance as a help to me here. Walsingham should have thought twice before enlisting a poet as his spy.

I wonder that Mary dares to worship her idolatrous Virgin so flagrantly. Perhaps she ascribes

her safety to the widespread plague of selective servile blindness. In any case, it doesn't matter to me. She can say her rosary to a golden calf for all I care, so long as she lifts no finger against Her Majesty or the crown. Religion is nothing to me. It's transgressions in this world that interest me, not the next.

Gregory claimed the most likely outcome of Mary's Stuart-propelled ambition was a plot against the Queen's life. Tom, after three weeks in her service I fear a sudden outpouring of psalters more than assassins. Maybe she intends to use the piety of another Mary to her advantage and usurp Elizabeth's title of the Virgin Queen. (Which, on my own head the risk for saying it, is a misnomer and a half.) But no, Mary already has a son, that James, whose name I play for all the sympathy I dare. And which son, I might add, we hear nothing of here. Not a word to his dear imprisoned mother. I probably think of my mother more often than he does, and you know how I feel about her.

The horror Gregory tried to instill in me of the Catholic menace makes me laugh, from this vantage point. To think my own "unnatural perversion," as Saint Paul would put it, is less offensive to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth than a piece of bread, a gulp of wine, and an unnatural attraction to Saint Sebastian. I wonder how well versed Walsingham and his lot are in Scriptural punishment for what I think of in relation to you. I can't believe I deserve anything worse than a slap on the ecclesiastical wrist, if they follow their scriptures as closely as they claim to. After all, think of David and Jonathan. Think of Jesus and Saint John.

Put your eyeballs back in your head, Tom. I'll stop blaspheming for the evening. At least with the pen and page. I make no promises for my thoughts.

"Watson!"

Kit leapt to his feet from where he had been lying, flat on his stomach on the cold floor of the servants' bedroom, scratching his pen against the paper. Apparently it had not been as late as he'd thought. The sun had been down for hours, but the work of a servant was never over. It was not as if the Lady Mary ceased having needs while she slept. If there was one thing gentility had no shortage of, it was needs.

“Yes, Master Etheridge?” Kit said. Without taking his eyes off the butler in the doorway, he carefully kicked the pen and paper into the corner, camouflaged by the traveling cloak he had worn on his journey to Sheffield. *Out of sight, out of mind. And he’s speaking to you, remember. Your name is Watson. James Watson. Wear it like a second skin.*

Etheridge, a corpulent man who habitually seemed on the verge of an implosion from stress, did not enter the room fully. “Her Ladyship has requested that we begin preparations for tomorrow. There is much to do and little time to do it. This house is in no state to receive visitors.”

“Visitors, sir?” Kit echoed. The Masters of Cambridge would have put him to the rod for an inane, unoriginal question such as that, but for a servant anything beyond base repetition was a waste of time.

“Her Ladyship is receiving the young Earl of Shrewsbury tomorrow night, James,” he replied, with the clipped tone of a servant absorbing his master’s status by proxy.

“Ah. Of course. What does Her Ladyship require that I do?”

Etheridge went on to outline a perfectly banal series of duties, largely centered in the kitchens where Kit’s propensity for talking more than working could not be held against him. But none of this mattered. He would be positioned in front of a pile of dishes or a crackling fire and directed down to the last movement, whether it was turning meat on a spit or pulling feathers out of slaughtered poultry. There was no need for critical thinking in servitude. And mindless activity was exactly what was wanted to consider what he had just been told without interruption.

So. Once-Queen Mary expected a visit from the Earl of Shrewsbury. Perhaps some of those innumerable ciphered letters would make the journey along with him. What could be so pressing that it could not wait the few days it took Matthew to ride between the two estates, especially since he had already confessed to making the pilgrimage at least once every ten days? This thought relied on Etheridge’s honesty, but Kit doubted the butler’s fragile grip on calm could bear the added pressure of maintaining a convincing falsehood. Lies were like small children: delicate, stressful, and requiring

constant attention. They had to speak in person, then. And dialogue spoken aloud could not be concealed behind a cipher or an envelope. This, to a spy, was Christmas come early.

“What is that, Watson?” Etheridge pointed at Kit’s hands with a scowl. He glanced down, startled out of his silent plotting, and silently cursed. Of course. Your average servant did not wander about with ink stains on his fingers. It would be fitting, he thought, if his letter to Tom were to incriminate him without anyone ever seeing it. The spy revealed by the poet. Two sides of the same counterfeit coin.

“Ash, sir,” he said vaguely. “I was stoking the fire in Her Ladyship’s parlor and took the wrong end of the poker.”

Etheridge grunted but made no further comment. “Well, come along, then,” he said. “We have more work to do than I like to think about, and we’ll need every man we have.”

True enough. The real work was set to begin.

~*~

December 1, 1585

Kit,

Writing this is laughably delusional. How I would find a messenger to carry this note all the way to Canterbury from here, I have no idea. But humor me. It makes me feel better even to pretend you might be listening.

When you told me you were leaving to settle your father’s debts, I wasn’t happy, but I didn’t say much against it. It wasn’t my place to forbid you from involving yourself in his affairs. And you were right. You should have gone. I can hardly rebuke you for familial loyalty, however much writing of familial loyalty and you in the same phrase amuses me. I didn’t understand it then, but without you I see my own selfishness, and my own misplaced anger. I wanted you to remain here. With me. I should have said that then, but I say it now.

Even writing about this makes me feel afraid, as if I were scrawling satanic symbols across

Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians. (Which, as an aside, I can't believe you haven't thought to do yet. It's not like you to let me be the first to come up with a blasphemous idea.) I shouldn't think about you this way – don't get excited, I won't tell you in what way I think about you. My thoughts are all sins, leave it there. I've been to Mass enough times to know that. And yet in my prayers I ask forgiveness for my shortcomings, my slanders, my jealousies, my flashes of anger. I have never asked forgiveness for you. Is this because, as I claim, I'm afraid to speak the words, or because, as I believe, loving you is not a sin? I know what sin feels like in my heart, and while writing those words does strange things in that area, none of them make me repent. I do love you, Kit, I think. Perhaps the more times I write it, the better I will understand it.

Where are you, really? It can't take three weeks to settle an argument with your father's creditors. I can't help remembering how different you seemed after Norgate pulled you aside, all that time ago. You never explained yourself, never told me what exactly had changed. Did you mean for me to guess? Because I do. I guess constantly, and each conjecture becomes more and more absurd. You've done strange things to my imagination, my friend. If you can't confide in me, what am I supposed to think? Even the masters begin to talk, though Norgate brushes aside your absence with an obscure reference to your "prior obligations." And there I'm back where I began, that visit in October, and no wiser than before. What are you about, when even Master Norgate takes your part?

Please stop playing games with me, Kit. Not like this. Not with me.

"Are you in here studying still?"

Nick swaggered into the room with a flourish, his voice louder than was necessary in the close space of Tom's dormitory. It was evening, and a Friday. Clearly Nick had not waited for company to draw his first cup. Tom flinched in his chair and hastily stuffed the piece of paper beneath an illustrated volume of Galenic medicine in defiance of the still-wet ink. It was a letter to no one, what did it matter if the ink ran? A faint flush rose in his face, and the intensity with which he focused on the open diagram of the choleric humor and its effects was hardly convincing.

“Some of us recognize the value of scholarship,” he said tightly.

“For God’s sake, get out of your room and come into town with me.” Nick reached over Tom’s shoulder and closed the book petulantly. “You can’t stay here all the time staring at the works of dead scholars, you’ll turn into a monk.”

Tom laughed. “Little enough chance of that. But if you insist.” He stood up with a sigh and spread his arms wide. “It couldn’t hurt.”

“That’s the spirit!” Nick ushered Tom grandly into the hall. The door shut behind the two young men, and from the other side of the wood the scraping of a key in the lock could be heard before their footsteps began to retreat toward town. There were some things that ought to remain private at all costs, even if their ink had already smeared.

VIII

“They’re here? They can’t be here, they’re early!”

“Early or not, they’re here. Come on, do you think they’ll hold the banquet for you?”

The servants’ shared bedroom erupted into a flurry of nervous activity at Simon’s news. Kit swore and abandoned all hope of making his hair look presentable, while William sprung up from his bed and began pulling on his shoes. An earl, of course, was never early. His hosts were simply unprepared. But this felt dangerously like being ahead of schedule. Moments later, not ready but doing a moderately good impersonation of it, Kit vaulted the last three steps of the staircase leading from the servants’ quarters to the hall, with Matthew, William, and Simon only half a step behind. He landed with a dangerous skid on the marble floor and barely managed to catch his balance. It was as if they had descended into preparations for war. Etheridge was everywhere and nowhere at once, integrating himself into the ranks of the six or seven servants arrayed in the hall, passing beyond them, finding the breath to shout at everyone at once. He was like a permanently flustered hydra, continually sprouting new heads to berate someone else for trivial offenses.

“Cooper, stand up straight! God’s bones, Harrison, what have you done with your hair? Never mind, it’s too late, but if you do it again I’ll see you never work a day here again. You’re a footman, not an Eastcheap dandy. Watson, straighten your shirt, did you just get dressed on your way down?”

Kit would not admit that the answer was “yes.” He had waited weeks for this moment, when something at last was bound to happen. And yet the earl and his retinue had caught him in a rare moment of reverie, reclined on his bed and daydreaming with closed eyes about the proper way for

Tamburlaine to lay siege to Damascus in the fifth act. *Pay attention. This is your chance. No time for mistakes.* He stood between Simon and William with his hands clasped behind his back, a statue in that high-ceilinged hall of marble and stone. Not so long ago, he had been the newcomer here, had been the one abashed by the manor's high style, the severe profiles of the iron-latticed windows. And now here he was, inside and outside the household at once. It had taken a month or more, but at last his initial discomfort would be worth something.

“Remember, your behavior this evening reflects not only upon the house of Sheffield. You reflect upon your families, you reflect upon the Lady Mary, and not least of all,” Etheridge went on with the look of a cornered bear in the pit, pacing up and down, “you reflect upon *me*. Any unflattering shadow you cast will come home to roost with you, and you'll find it an uncomfortable bedfellow. Am I clear?” He pointed one thick finger at each of the boys in turn.

“Sir,” the fleet of servants agreed, as one. Kit, off to the side, hoped the butler would not notice the ink stains on his fingers. Vigorous scrubbing after the evening's hour spent writing had faded the spots, but the shadow of his secret remained. The butler had already expressed apprehension at the figure his men could cut, and evidence of unauthorized villanelles to a handsome young scholar would have surfeited his worst fears. God forbid the butler search Kit's room for contraband. Between the letters, the half-written play, and the tobacco, he would not live to see the morning.

Simon's warning, as it happened, had not been exaggerated. Etheridge had not left them alone in the hall for more than five minutes before the sound of horses' hooves thundered against the pavement outside. Kit glanced briefly at the soldier-straight figure of William next to him. Will's expression was devoid of nerves, for that matter of any emotion at all. He was the ideal candidate to stare down a line of approaching cannons, straight into their gaping black mouths, and hold formation. It unnerved him that the line between a banquet and a war was so difficult to pin down.

The sound of jingling harnesses and the low rumble of men's voices replaced the hoofbeats. Matthew, the most senior servant and therefore the natural choice to move first, stepped forward and

opened the great double-doors, admitting a sudden blast of December snow. Kit felt his heart beat faster as two richly dressed men stepped forward, their finery apparent through their sodden cloaks, followed by serving men and miscellaneous baggage. So this was the ruling elite of Shrewsbury. So this was the hand that wrote such fascinating letters.

Two of the Sheffield boys hurried through the open door to take the reins of the horses still standing outside in the wet, sloppy snow. The servants who remained kept their eyes on the polished marble floor, awaiting orders. It was all Kit could do not to stand up straight and look the men in the face, not only look at them but laugh outright. It was ridiculous how safe they must have felt, laughable the extent to which they thought four walls and a title made them invincible. There are enemies everywhere, my friends. You may be indoors, but you have not escaped the storm.

Kit, already known for his ability to tune his tongue to elegance, broke the silence. “Welcome, my lords,” he said politely, “to Sheffield. On behalf of my mistress, the lady Mary Stuart, we extend our warmest greetings.”

“Mm.” Evidently the cloaked and travel-worn earl was not known for his scintillating repartee. “Show me somewhere I can change, boy. This kind of weather’s not fit for rats to move in.”

Boy. That was rich, coming from an earl whose voice had barely left off breaking. “If Your Lordship will follow me, I will show you to your lodgings. I will inform my lady that you have arrived and will meet her in the hall.”

The earl nodded and followed Kit’s lead, trailing his attendants behind him. As they ascended a flight of stairs toward the manor’s guest chambers, he chanced a look back over his shoulder. Even through the dim light of intermittent candles stationed along the stone passage, he could see that the reports had not lied: Shrewsbury was surprisingly young. They might have been within a month of one another, though you would never have known it from the haughty expression the earl kept between himself and the servants like a shield. His was a face meant for viewing by candlelight, Kit thought, momentarily allowing the poet to usurp the spy. It gave him the look of a young martyr, flowing hair

and melancholy hooded eyes. Besides Greek, Latin, and French, Kit considered himself a scholar of men's faces. Rarely was he proved wrong by a first impression. From Tom Watson to Sir Francis Walsingham, he had a stunning record of sorting men appropriately within moments of a first meeting. It was helpful, especially when you never knew which man on the street would be happy to have your right hand as collateral for your father's debts. And yet he had some trouble placing Sir Anthony Babington. His first impression had been unequivocally negative, thanks in part to that "not fit for rats" comment while expecting that two of Sheffield's servants would take his horses to the stables. And yet this feeling of ambition, of recklessness, of the martyr who had been persuaded there were worse things than hellfire, it complicated matters. Babington was a painting done in perspective, showing a different image from the left and from the right. Nothing to do, then, but to look him head-on.

As it happened, Kit need not have torn himself away from his Tamburlaine so quickly. Forty-five minutes had elapsed since he had shown Shrewsbury and his companion to their rooms, and still they had not reappeared in the hall. He remembered wryly his own first audience with Mary Stuart, when he had stood freezing cold and dripping mud in her private parlor. One of the innumerable privileges that accompanied a title: you were allowed to keep other titled individuals waiting. If James Watson had tried the like, he'd more than likely have lost both his audience and his head. But Kit's thinly veiled distaste for the guests of honor went unnoticed. As Gregory had advised, he was nothing more than a candelabrum, a chair, a tapestry on the wall. He was there to serve the scene's real players, a pawn to their king and queen and bishop. But unlike a pawn, he was blessed with both eyes and ears.

"You say Babington has arrived?" From his place at Mary's left, Norfolk glared at Kit as if the earl's absence were his own fault.

"Yes, sir." Kit bowed again. "He wished to wash and change after a difficult journey, I think."

Norfolk continued tapping the handle of his fork against the tabletop, a rhythm that was clearly as grating on Lady Mary's nerves as it was Kit's. "Your Grace, please, be patient," she said curtly. "The matters the earl has to discuss with us will be worth your wait."

“No matter if not,” Norfolk muttered. “After all, we have nothing if not an excess of time.”

“No one is as conscious of the passage of time as I, Your Grace,” Mary snapped. “Wait five minutes more, and perhaps time will at last move in our favor.” She stopped speaking abruptly and looked with interest at the opposite end of the hall, where the slight creaking of uncoiled hinges indicated the opening of the door. “Sir Anthony! And not a moment too soon.”

“Several moments too late,” Norfolk added under his breath, but only Kit heard.

“My apologies for the delay, my sovereign lady,” Babington said, as if it had been moments and not three-quarters of an hour. Kit suppressed a shiver at his choice of title. *My sovereign lady. The game, Sir Francis, is afoot.* “The snow in Yorkshire is inhumane. It is inconceivable such a lady as you should be forced to endure such repulsive conditions.”

“As you know well, Sir Anthony, we abide with the lot that God gives us,” Mary said. “Job endured far worse tribulations than a wet winter, and I daresay I shall thrive under the circumstances. God has blessed me with a sturdy house filled with dear friends, and I can think of nowhere else I should rather be than England at this time.”

“Why should you be anywhere but England?” Babington’s gentleman companion asked. The two men had taken their seats at the too-large table, the earl to Mary’s right, the second man beside the duke. “With your son in firm possession of the Scottish throne, what good does it do the Stuart family to return to land already gained? You are much more prized in England, held up as a foil to those who rule this unhappy land. The English rabble cannot but compare your royalty, your breeding, your kindness, your —”

“My ability to realize when I am being flattered, Master Paget,” Mary cut in. Kit had to bite his tongue to keep from smiling. Here was a woman who knew all the tricks men used, and could use them better than any. Even here, in a castle far from home surrounded by men barely removed from strangers, she could still command a room merely by sitting in it. But the feeling troubled him only for a moment. A game was only worth playing if the opponents were well matched, after all.

“Not beyond reason, on the contrary,” the flatterer, Paget, protested. Nerves made his bearing almost laughable. For an invited guest, he seemed to hold a surprising fear of the manor’s inhabitants sentencing him to death.

Norfolk’s inability to suffer fools had appeared again with a vengeance. “Charles, please,” he snapped. “Your forced wit will not hide your foolishness any more than your remaining silent.” Paget fell silent, a scowl on his brow. Was this what politics looked like? If Kit had wanted more practice in the art of statesmanship, he should have spent more time in the alehouses.

“That will do, Your Grace,” Mary said sharply. Norfolk inclined his head in deference to her decree, though not without a parting roll of his eyes in Paget’s direction. “We have more to discuss than these pleasantries. I hope your journey has not tired you too severely, Sir Anthony, Charles.”

“Not at all, Your Highness.” Babington smiled his sad-eyed martyr’s smile. “The matter at hand energizes me. I think you and His Grace the Duke will be pleased with what we have to discuss.” He reached into the pocket of his doublet and unearthed a small sheaf of paper, which he laid on the table in front of Mary. “What is written here could not be trusted to post. I think I need not mention that anything I say here does not leave Sheffield’s walls,” he added, looking pointedly at Norfolk.

“Sir,” Norfolk said, “if you insinuate that my loyalties are anything other than what I profess, you overreach yourself. You may be the Earl of Shrewsbury, but my dukedom and my word are valued at no less a price.”

It seemed for a moment that Norfolk and Babington were to come to blows over their injured honor, but a single raised finger on Mary’s part brought silence back to the room. She leaned forward, examining the writing with a furrowed brow.

Kit dug his fingernails into his palms almost to the point of blood. Never before had feigned servility been so infuriating. If he could inch around the table to see what was written, if he could read the matter that was so “energizing”... But watching a servant creeping across the room would all but guarantee a dagger-point through his eye to prevent him seeing anything else he shouldn’t. The

blessing and curse of invisibility.

After a moment, Mary lifted her head from the page. “And you think that this letter is written in good faith, Sir Anthony?”

“His Most Catholic Majesty is nothing if not faithful,” Babington said with conviction.

Norfolk narrowed his eyes. Perhaps he had heard the swift gasp Kit had been unable to stifle. “You must be hungry, sirs, after your journey,” he said pointedly. “Dinner will be served presently.”

If subtlety was not the Duke’s strongest suit, being obeyed was. William and Matthew turned and exited the room toward the kitchens. *How can I stay, can I listen at the keyhole like a common thief, anything...* As Kit passed from the room, his frustration boiled over into anger. *Not now. Not when they’re just beginning. Goddamn servitude, goddamn Norfolk, goddamn everything. His Most Catholic Majesty?* That was Spain, of course. It had to be Spain. No one else wore the recusant’s badge as proudly as Philip. Mary Stuart was receiving letters from King Philip of Spain. Catholic Philip of Spain. The likely claimant to the throne was writing to the ruler of the nation both hating and hated by the English with unparalleled fervor. It didn’t require a Cambridge education to put the pieces together.

A cloud of heat from the ovens and the odor of drippings from a lamb still turning on the spit made the kitchen air seem heavy. Out of the way of power and politics, business continued as usual. There was food to be prepared, people to be served, work to be done. What did any of the rest matter? Kit swallowed hard and forced his attention to the platter heaped high with roasted meat that one of the kitchen boys shoved in his hands. *Only the physical. That’s all you can think about. You’re not interested in what they’re saying. You wouldn’t understand them even if you did hear.*

William and Matthew joked with one another, engaged in a lively contest of who could pelt the cook in the back of the head with more stale breadcrumbs before one of them was caught. Martha watched their antics from her station at the sink, up to her elbows in brackish water, and Matthew, noticing, threw her his best wink and a smile. With a nervous giggle, she vanished behind a partition

where urgent whispers and gossip could be heard from her companions over the washbasin. Their stifled laughter sounded distant and unfamiliar. Were they younger than he was? Not by much, if at all. And nineteen or twenty was hardly too old and wise for a little shameless flirting. But he felt as detached from their idle games as they were from the tenor of his thoughts. Names and maps kept displacing the kitchen: Mary Stuart, Anthony Babington, England, Scotland, Spain. Would there always be a miniature demon on his shoulder, urging him away from easy ignorance into the intrigues that baffled and fascinated him?

No, Kit. Focus. You can't think about this now. You don't get second chances. Just walk. One foot after another. A blank page catches the most ink.

But by the time he returned to the hall and began to serve the meal, the papers had been secreted away again. Paget had not yet managed to don the mask of indifference (he would make a dreadful spy, Kit thought drily), but his three companions were as composed as if they had been discussing the weather. Which, as it happened, they now were.

When Walsingham heard about this missed opportunity, he would have no patience for explanations. He could hardly have hidden himself under the table to eavesdrop, obviously, but that would not matter to the spymaster. He'd missed his chance. *Come on. Be calm. If you give yourself away now, you'll expose yourself. You're still working. You're always working.* He could not look at Mary, not without the hot mist of frustration clouding his eyes. Instead, he fixed his gaze on the glittering silver knife her hand rested upon, waiting for the proper time to leave its mark on her meat.

Keep a close eye on that knife, My Lady. It cuts deeper than you think. Especially when you don't know who's holding it.

"Shall we not say Grace before we eat?" Mary asked pointedly. She looked darkly at Babington, who replaced the silverware on the edge of his plate with an appropriately guilty motion. A small smirk appeared at the corner of Norfolk's mouth. Kit had not missed the periodic irritated glances Norfolk had been giving the visitors from Shrewsbury. It was the same distasteful, superior

look that Master Wyndham gave Nick and him when he came upon them drawing lewd illustrations in the margins of their copies of Livy's history of Rome. However useful Babington and his papers might be, the duke knew his position as Mary's confidante remained unchallenged. His usefulness came in large part from his ability to behave himself in public. Every enterprise needed a man like that.

The four around the table bowed their heads in prayer, and the servants followed suit out of habit. But Kit kept his head up and his eyes on Mary. He had been thwarted once by bowing to propriety. Not again. *Keep both eyes open. You never know when your target will move.*

"Bless us, O Lord, for these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive, by Thy bounty through Christ, our Lord. Amen."

The three men had already raised their hands to cross themselves, but Mary had not finished. "And O Mary, pray for us who enjoy thy blessing, and for those who do not, especially the enemies of Thy Holy Church, its Holy Father the Pope, and your only son Jesus Christ, Right Hand of the Father, Amen."

"Amen." Babington, Paget, and Norfolk made the sign of the cross. The servants again followed the example they were set before retreating to the sides of the room, waiting until their services were needed. Kit realized that he was staring, and he quietly slipped into his place at William's left. "The enemies of Thy Holy Church and its Holy Father the Pope." She might as well have said, "Mary, have mercy on the soul of Queen Elizabeth, that black-hearted Protestant." None of the other servants had noticed – in fact, he doubted they had heard a word. There was a reason they were referred to as the "serving-class," not the "listening-class." Politics and religious dissension bounced off their ears like beams of light off a mirror.

But Kit had heard. "Enemies of Thy Holy Church and its Holy Father the Pope."

IX

Babington and Paget did not stay long. Perhaps the dismal Yorkshire climate was too much to bear, or perhaps Norfolk's continual silent threats of dismemberment were beginning to wear on the earl and his man. In any case, they had remained at Sheffield for the night, and before the sun had fully risen they had taken to horse. The servants again let down their guard and relaxed, as much as they were able to with a displaced monarch and her irritable right-hand councilor breathing down their necks. The weather, on the other hand, was not so welcoming, and an impressive snowfall buried the last traces of moldering autumn leaves under six inches of powder and ice. Winter, it seemed, had come home to stay.

Too much time penned up in the same six-foot stall had taken its toll on the nerves of the manor's horses. When Norfolk attempted to saddle his mare to ride the twenty miles to Derbyshire, she nearly kicked him to the ground in an attempt to break free into the pastures. Unwilling to sacrifice her right-hand man to the vengeance of an unruly horse, Mary sent three serving-men to walk the castle horses around the county's farms to the village. "I would ride myself," she added, "but..." She did not need to finish the sentence. It seemed strange that the horses were allowed to stretch their legs in the sunshine and the former Queen of Scotland was not, but it was not a servant's place to voice such opinions. Or even, strictly, to have them.

Kit might have felt a small flash of pity for his mistress that afternoon, but the joy he took in stepping outside the manor walls far overshadowed it. He rode along with William and Matthew in an uneven V across the snow-buried pasturelands. Matthew, whose touch with horses was almost eerily

adept, had cantered ahead, reveling in the opportunity to actually ride the animals he spent so much labor tending to. William and Kit allowed the horses to choose their own pace, leaving twin paths of prints in the snow.

“Do you think this is what a king feels like?” William asked. “Prancing about on horseback through peasants’ fields?”

“I think when kings ride in triumph through the country, they have a better train than a handful of stray goats. Would you stop it? Go home!” This was directed at three bedraggled goats that had wandered out of their wintry pasture some way back and begun nipping at the horses’ tails. Kit had always hated goats. Their slitted pupils reminded him of snakes, and snakes with cloven hooves and horns did not portend anything good, as far as he could tell. “But who knows,” he added. “Royalty seems to have fallen a bit in worth lately.” There was no harm in tossing out a leading question to someone who spent his whole life being led.

“You mean the Lady Mary.” For the sake of keeping the peace, Kit decided not to suggest that in fact, he meant the doge of Venice. “It’s strange, to be sure. A lady with a household of twenty and never more than three advisors by her side. Are we still to call her Queen?”

“Depends on who you’re with,” he replied. “If you’re around anyone from London, not if you like your bowels inside your body.”

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate the job,” William said, apropos of almost nothing. His horse had found a small tuft of grass protruding from beneath the snow and had set about its impoverished grazing. Kit reined in his own mount to keep pace. “I mean to say, for someone born in the village, you either raise sheep or you slaughter them, and I could never abide the sight of blood.” *You’ve chosen the wrong household to serve, my friend,* Kit thought, but said nothing. “The Lady Mary is a fine mistress, and she pays well. I’m able to send some silver back to my mother, so I’ve no grounds to complain, really.”

At the mention of sending money home, Kit felt a strange tightness in his chest that had nothing

to do with the cold December air. The line he had fed Tom about his father's circumstances back in Canterbury weighed heavily on his mind; he could never be certain if it was a lie or a prophecy. Ought he to have sent Walsingham's advance payment home to Kent? How long had it been since he had heard from them? "Listen, Will," Kit said, indulging the sudden flash of sympathy. "We might not have grounds to complain, but we ought to have the right to."

William looked at him askance, evidently awaiting some heretical notion to follow. It wouldn't have been the first time. He still remembered Will's horror when he'd forgotten where he was and mentioned over a shared pipe that the Eucharist would be more effectively smoked than eaten. But when he made no further reference to engulfing the Body of Christ in flames, William appeared reassured.

"I wish Etheridge and the Duke would stop looking at us as if they expected us to run off with the silver, that's all. Do they think that because I was born in the village I don't understand what honor is? You can be a good man without a title to your name."

Kit shrugged. "Sometimes I think you can't be a good man with one."

"You're going to get yourself hanged, and sometimes I wonder who's going to come to the scaffold to mourn you." Will's tone reminded him suddenly of Tom's voice, warning him against the consequences of poorly timed blasphemy, but he shoved the memory aside. Tom did not belong in his daylight thoughts. He could not trust his presence to remain subtle there. Those memories would be kept safe until after midnight.

"You wouldn't be there to spread flowers on my grave? Cooper, imagine my disappointment," Kit teased, as if he'd thought of nothing else. "And here I was, thinking I was on your side."

"You're a dangerous person to have on anyone's side." Kit had to stifle a laugh. He didn't know the half of it. "Listen, James, can I ask you a favor?" William looked around, the age-old habit of avoiding attention difficult to shake, but the only sign of life in the fields was a single steer ambling within its pasture. "I haven't been back to visit my family in months. My mother's had another child, and, well, if I were to take the horse and drop in on them for an hour, to make sure they're all right, do

you think you could keep a secret?" The words poured out in a rush, enveloped in a cloud of breath turned opaque in the cold.

"Can I keep a secret?" he repeated. Did he ever do anything else? "Meet me back at the oak near the gate in about an hour, and we'll ride back in together. Norfolk will never know a thing."

William smiled, a burden visibly lifted from him. "I was wrong about you, James," he said. "I'll be back in an hour, I swear. I won't forget this."

"Go on, before you start crying tears of joy," Kit said drily. William grinned and kicked his heels into his horse, which leapt into motion across the pasture. He rode over the slope and in the direction of the snow-dusted wood-and-thatch cottages in the village, where no doubt a close-knit family was waiting for him around a crackling fire, the evening's supper already set to cooking. The father would put down his knife and pause in his carving to welcome home his firstborn son on this unexpected but welcome visit, and the mother would rush to the door, wiping her hands on her apron and throwing her arms around him. Inside the house, small and smelling of wet thatch but still proudly clean, William's younger brothers and sisters would welcome him home and pester him for stories of the great manor house. They would sit together as the sun went down and talk of everything and nothing until his hour was up. And then he would leave, with the golden sun reflecting off the snow piled on the thatch, crowning the house in a veil of diamonds. No matter what intricacies of politics, what religious and schismatic intrigue raged within the walls, in the village of Sheffield life could continue as God had intended. He watched William until the horse vanished out of sight. It wasn't the advancement Kit dreamed of, but there was something to be said for having someone always waiting for you to return.

"Thank the Lord, I thought he'd never leave."

Kit nearly fell off his horse. The voice had come from directly behind him. He wheeled his horse around so violently that the animal let out a whinny of pain. He panned his surroundings, but all he could see was a handful of stray goats and a clump of bushes and trees on the edge of the commons,

spreading out into a longer stretch of woods farther down the hill. Had too long listening for unspoken words caused him to hear things that were not there? But then it dawned on him that trees did not generally speak. And what was more, he'd heard that voice before.

"Gregory?" His fingers brushed the handle of the knife kept in his boot for occasions like this.

"No, it's Saint Peter," Arthur Gregory said drily. He stepped fully out from behind the leafless elm, brushing the snow from the shoulders of his cloak. "For God's sake, Marlowe, don't be stupid."

"Will you keep your voice down?" Kit hissed, looking over his shoulder. "I thought you were supposed to be a *professional*." William was safely out of earshot, but Sheffield was hardly an abandoned village, and the farmer whose goats had been tormenting him all afternoon could not be far off. The presence of a loudmouthed Londoner in a Yorkshire field speaking with a footman would be difficult to explain, particularly if he was meant to keep a low profile.

"Who do you think's going to hear, the goats?" Gregory asked. One of the goats sniffing at a nearby bush let out a dispirited bleat, as if it had understood.

Kit felt his anger rising. "Get back in the woods," he snapped. He swung his legs over the horse's flank and landed lightly on the powdery snow. Without waiting for his unannounced and unwelcome companion to respond, he led the horse by the reins into the wooded commons. The horse carefully picked its way over fallen branches and rabbit holes, sniffing the unfamiliar surroundings with bland curiosity. It did not mind this unexpected deviation from its path. Kit, on the other hand, was fuming. Had he not been worried about attracting attention, he would have happily turned around and given Gregory a punch to the face. Who did he think he was, to sidle into Sheffield without a moment's warning, when anybody could follow his footprints and see where he had gone? Did he realize this wasn't a game, that his presence here was a matter of life and death? Maybe Kit's life was not important to Gregory, but considering his own level of personal investment, he would much rather not be strung up as a traitor.

Once the dark tree trunks, dappled with pale shots of snow, hid them from potential prying

eyes, Kit's pulse slowed enough for him to draw a calming breath. He looped the horse's reins around a low-hanging branch, loose enough so that the mare could graze on the few patches of moss and grass the snow had not managed to cover. Arms folded, he turned and glowered at Gregory. Walsingham's man seemed deliberately unfazed, an indifference that only made him angrier.

"What do you think you're doing here?" he demanded. "Was the fact that if I'm caught I'll be drawn and quartered too difficult for you? You might be a gutless whoremonger, but I'm not keen on watching my entrails burnt, myself."

He had forgotten how much his pride detested being laughed at. "I see a month of the job's given you more courage than a lifetime as a scholar," he commented. "Maybe a bit too much for your place. How would you rather I contacted you? By letter? 'To Christopher Marlowe, covert agent of Her Majesty: I will be arriving on Thursday the fourth of December, at around four in the afternoon, to gauge your progress in the profession of espionage and attempted murder. Please plan your social engagements accordingly. Yours, Arthur Gregory.'"

"For the love of God, will you keep your voice down? Walsingham won't thank you for getting me thrown out, not now."

"So you've found something useful? Marlowe, you've exceeded my expectations. I expected to find your corpse on the side of the road when I got here."

"I've a few more skills up my sleeve than you'd think," Kit said drily. "And stop using my name." He could not discount the possibility of a local farmer strolling through the commons to feed his swine and stumbling upon the two conspirators whispering of treason and murder. "I don't see how your showing up unannounced behind a tree will help Walsingham, unless you're planning on writing my information out in a letter and praying you don't get stopped on the road."

"Marlowe, Marlowe, Marlowe." Gregory shook his head. Kit bit his tongue hard to press himself into silence. "Stop using my name," apparently, could be interpreted as "please repeat my name as often as you can." "You make it seem as if I've never done anything like this before."

“You plot to indict a monarch-in-exile regularly, then.”

“Shut up,” Gregory said without much conviction. “There are ways of delivering a message without spelling the words out in the Queen’s English. Unless you’re still worried that the bloody rabbits are spying on you, tell me what you’ve learned and I’ll see that Sir Francis is kept informed.”

Kit had been his own man these past weeks. In servitude, yes, but with more power over his own life and others’ than he had ever known. He was the only one able to think two steps ahead of the game. Everyone was playing into his hand. And Gregory thought he could come and take everything in hand as if nothing had changed. Well, Kit Marlowe had heard and seen too much to be treated like a child anymore.

“Mary Stuart and her counselors, through the Earl of Shrewsbury, are in communication with King Philip of Spain. She’s receiving encrypted letters from him, the last one delivered by Babington in person. Not to mention her constant tendency of kissing the ass of the Pope and damning the Protestants black every chance she gets.”

Gregory looked at him, stunned. “King Philip,” he repeated stupidly. “The Queen of Scots is writing letters to the King of Spain.”

“Was I not expressing myself clearly? Next time I’ll use smaller words.” Kit felt his blood thrill at the mention of the plot, though he kept his voice disinterested. Somehow subjugation by the armies of Spain felt less serious than it might have. He was the one to have uncovered it. This was his information, not Walsingham’s. If it took a Spanish invasion to prove to the court at Whitehall that he was not a waste of space, the Armada could not float down the Thames quickly enough.

“Do you have the letter?” Gregory demanded. Kit took perverse pleasure in noting that at last the Queen’s man was bothering to keep his voice down. “Did you write down what it said?”

“I’m working as a servant, for Christ’s sake, it’s not that easy. Do you think I can just wander into her bedchamber and rifle through her drawers? I need more time.”

“Time?” Gregory repeated. His voice was urgent but barely audible now. “If I’m hearing you

correctly, time is the one thing we don't have. We need to know what the papist whore is planning, where Spain fits in, and what we need to do about it. And we need to know these things as soon as we can. You need to come to court with me."

Kit stared at him as if he had grown an extra head. Come back to court? "You're joking. Come back with you? Now? What good am I in London? Not when I've..."

"You've just told me that Stuart's planning her next move through letters," Gregory cut him off impatiently, "and that while you're working here you'll never get the chance to read them. What good are you *here*?" Kit opened his mouth to protest that he'd been more good than Gregory so far, but he was not given a chance. "It's not that we don't appreciate the intelligence, but let your own ambition get in the way and Walsingham will have your head. You'll come to London and tell him what you've heard, exactly what you've heard, letter for letter. And when you've finished with your report, you will return to Cambridge and work through these encryptions until we call for you again. We cannot risk you being caught. Understood?"

"...No." Kit felt his head spinning; he wanted to reach both hands up to steady it. This was not happening. He was so close to putting his finger on the key, and just when he had managed to reveal something of value, they were pulling him out? Who was Arthur Gregory to decide what Kit was capable of handling and what he wasn't? He could do this, he knew he could, but only from the inside. "Have you lost your mind? You need me here, she trusts me, I can..."

"You can get yourself killed trying to poke your nose somewhere it isn't wanted, is what you can do." Gregory refused to allow Kit to finish a sentence – if they had been in Canterbury, Kit would have given him a black eye to teach him not to interrupt. He might even have done it here, if not for the nagging fear of discovery. "Sir Francis has been running these operations for years longer than you've known they existed. And I'm acting on his orders. If the situation gets dangerous and you can better serve us from the outside, I'm to bring you out before you ruin your cover. If you think you know better than Sir Francis Walsingham how to run an intelligence operation, I suggest you come to

London and tell him that yourself. I'm sure the conversation will go well."

There was nothing he could do. Ambition, confidence, all his best-laid plans fell away to nothing. All this time feigning servitude, he had forgotten his life was directed by a different master.

"How do you propose I leave without attracting suspicion?" he said at last, feeling suddenly more tired than even his irregularly snatched hours of sleep warranted. "It's not as if I can go up to the Duke of Norfolk and ask for a few months' leave to report back to Queen Elizabeth."

Gregory shrugged, plainly indicating the preservation of Kit's servile integrity was the very least of his concerns. "I don't care what you tell them, only tell them something. You're a poet, don't you spend half your time spinning lies? Tell them you've received an inheritance from a rich relative, tell them you're getting married, tell them your mother's at home on her deathbed. It doesn't matter. Just make your exit gracefully and start for London. Oh, and on that note." Gregory, as an afterthought, reached into his pocket and unearthed a single, folded piece of paper, which he handed to Kit with thinly masked disdain. Kit felt his stomach lurch as he took it. From his admittedly limited experience, Arthur Gregory handing him pieces of paper rarely boded anything good.

"Looks like a woman's handwriting," Gregory added, an insolent teasing note entering his voice. "It was sent to Cambridge a few days ago, and Sir Francis had me bring it on my way. What, do you have a secret lover in Canterbury you've been keeping us all in the dark about? For some reason, I can't imagine you sighing and moaning to a shepherd girl."

"Hardly." Kit held the letter in both hands. He knew that handwriting, the clumsy copybook lettering, the way the lowercase s's were all written backwards. Besides, there was only one woman he knew who could and would write to him, addressed not to "Christopher Marlowe," but simply "Kit." "This is from my sister."

Gregory wolf-whistled lewdly, and Kit gripped the letter in anger. *Do it once again. I'd love an excuse.* "Christopher Marlowe's got himself a sister? God help us if she's anything as pretty as you, or we'll be losing boys from the seminary in droves."

Long years of hearing his family disparaged at every turn, from his own lips as well as those of strangers, let Kit maintain a level head at the kind of slur that sent most other men grasping for their swords. Not only did he have a sister, he had four, plus a brother barely old enough to hold his own head up unaided when he had left. Good solid Christians, he often joked, keeping the Church in business. Baptisms charged by the head. Still, in a family with six children to feed, the pull of stagnation was strong. Before his escape to Cambridge, when he had still been studying at King's College in the city, he had taught Meg the basics of the alphabet. He still remembered sitting in his father's workshop with her in the evenings, huddled over a page in the dim candlelight and helping her to form the lines and curves that made up her name.

Without his wanting it, they were all there with him, there in the commons of Sheffield. John, bottle in one hand and hobnail in the other, bending over his workbench and profanely berating the leather patterns. Katherine in the house's only bed, the throne from which she ruled, some child or another suckling at her tired breast. Thomas, or Dorothy, or Anne, it hardly mattered which. Since he had left for school, the younger children had blurred together into one nameless, generic infant, a human Cerberus with one head at a time. Jane embroidering needlepoint into handkerchiefs in the shape of the cross, to pawn for a few pence to slow-witted pilgrims on the cathedral steps. And he and Meg, heads together over her spelling book, whispering to avoid waking the children. These thoughts did not belong here. But they had come, reminding him of his true name, demanding attention.

Meg wouldn't make the effort to write to him at Cambridge for good news. But he could not pretend their problems did not touch him. Could he? If his father were in prison again, what was he to do about it? He was an agent of the Queen. The troubles of a cobbler's family meant nothing to him. But Meg's handwriting glared up at him, each stroke of the pen an accusation.

"Jane dead. Childbirth. Baby dead as well. Please come. Mother needs you here. I need you here. M."

Gregory looked at him for a few long moments, waiting for Kit to say something. But no words

would come. The letter had stolen his voice.

“Well, come on, then.” Gregory had expended the last vestiges of his patience. “Make your excuses to the heathen queen. We expect you in London by week’s end. Don’t keep us waiting.”

Jane dead. Please come.

Drifting through a fog without an original thought in his brain, Kit untied the horse’s reins from the tree limb and slowly mounted again. Gregory turned down the path deeper into the woods, while Kit rode slowly back into the open air, allowing the horse to make its own way without any guidance from its rider. Silently, he allowed himself to be led back under the imposing shadow of Sheffield’s walls, shadows that lengthened at the close of another dark winter’s day.

X

What are you doing. What in the devil's name are you doing. You must have lost your mind.

Kit led his horse by the reins through the city gate, feeling the weight of strangers' eyes on him as he passed. Did they recognize him, after all this time, or were they staring because he looked so clearly alien? He had arrived too late the night before, and the gates had already been shut and locked until morning. Not so much as a night watchman had seen him pound against the wood with his fist and demand entry. The consequence of living in a walled city: curfew was absolute. He had kicked the gate in unobserved rage until his toes ached, then made a sullen camp in a nearby barn some half a mile from the city gates, shutting his mount in an empty stall and curling up himself beneath a riding blanket. Doubtless he still smelled of animals, and a few stray pieces of hay would continue to fall from his hair as he moved. Maybe the less well kept he appeared, the less attention he would attract. The scrupulously well groomed were not the norm in this town.

The sunrise's thin light gave Canterbury's streets the feel of linen washed one too many times, soft and worn and fading to a dull grey. He was home, then. And Sir Francis would have his head on a pike when he found out. It was not as if he were deliberately avoiding court, he rationalized, as he led the horse through the center of High Street and continuing to ignore strangers' stares. If Gregory had only listened, he would have explained that he needed only a week to return and set things in order. William would make his excuses at Sheffield. Will Cooper was the only man in the manor he could trust, the only one with the capacity to feel a scrap of sympathy for someone other than himself. If friendship was a willingness to lie for one another, he had made a true friend under his assumed name.

Sir Francis would have to understand. One week would make no difference. But he could not banish the insidious voice in his mind, repeating its litany of doubt. *What are you doing? You've lost your mind. You're mad.*

The horse settled at the nearest inn, Kit took back to the street, walking with his hands in his pockets. He had ridden all Thursday and Friday, and now the Saturday morning inhabitants of Canterbury were beginning to wake and go about their business. He deliberately skirted Greyfriars at the west end of the city, though the most direct route to his father's house would have taken him straight through the monastery's garden. In his current state of mind, the very last person he wanted to stumble across was a priest murmuring a Latin benediction. Try as he might, he could not banish the specter of Jane from his thoughts, or the echoes of the mass for the burial of the dead that he had not been there to hear.

Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower.

The city only conjured up more phantoms. Here she had collected clothes from passing ladies to mend for loose silver. Here he had raced her from the Griffin tavern to the priory, his long legs leaving her trailing behind, though in an indulgent mood he had let her win. Here, there, everywhere, she had been and now was not.

She had been thirteen. Married off before you could so much as see her breasts. He could have picked her up and put her on the top shelf without trying, she was so small. And Jane was expected to carry a child to term? He could understand the theory. He wasn't naïve. In an ideal world, perhaps girls could wait for a prince to sweep them off their feet, but a family with more children than it could feed had to make do somehow. Sons were sent to work for their living, or shipped off to school to be someone else's burden. If a daughter could be pushed gently out of the nest into the arms of a husband whose responsibility she then became, it was the way of the world. Many a strapping man had set his eyes on a fragile nymph of a girl. Look at Jove and Io. But Jane. It had not been theory for her.

The ornate figures of kings and saviors set into the cathedral's west tower leaned over him as he walked, visible from every part of town. The bells had just rung seven in the morning, summoning priests, monks, and the faithful to matins, but Kit could hear no beauty in the sound. He felt the need to shout, scream, swear, something. You pilgrims, you fools, what good does it do you to pray to the dust of a dead and moldering bishop? Have the bones ever risen up to answer your calls? If your God has ever given you a sign to show he listens to you, ask him from me how he plans to answer for my sister.

Never a devout family, the Marlowes had at least trained Kit to doff his cap for a cassock and echo an "amen" at the appropriate times. But his pennyworth of catechism had not prepared him for the resounding silence at the other end of prayer. Mary Stuart and Elizabeth Tudor might believe there were spirits with their ears bent earthwards, but for the ordinary person in the streets, God did not seem to expend much energy responding to His charges. If there was a spirit dwelling within Canterbury Cathedral, Kit wanted nothing to do with it. Had he been close to Jane? Maybe not, certainly not as much as Meg. But she was family. She had not deserved this, not in any world with heavenly justice. Narrowing his eyes at the church's silhouette, he spat into the gutter.

So much for that. Let their false god follow him home if he dared.

When he opened the door to the house in which he had grown up, he was convinced for a moment he had arrived at the wrong place. The building felt the same, still wedged too tightly between the tinsmith's forge and the Bell and Crown. He was assaulted by home's irrepressible smell, tanned leather and stale beer, which despite his long absence had never truly left him. The doorknob felt the same in his palm. But he could find no place in his memory for the broad-shouldered man with the pale blue eyes that currently barred his entrance.

"Who are you, then?" The man narrowed his eyes. Kit felt his discomfort growing, but he had ridden too long and too far to let two hundred pounds' worth of stranger stand in his way.

"I might ask the same of you," he replied coldly. "Has John Marlowe started hiring mercenaries to guard the door?"

“As well he might, if scum like you keeps turning up uninvited while he’s away,” the man growled. “If you’re looking for money, you can clear out of here before I make you. We’ll pay when we can, and not a moment before.”

“For God’s sake,” Kit muttered under his breath. As if he didn’t have enough to contend with without his father’s habitual business of running up debts he could never hope to pay. “Just let me in, would you? And watch who you’re calling scum.”

‘I’ll call you what I like. Can’t you understand English? Clear out of here.’”

Not thirty minutes back in Canterbury and already he was bracing himself for a brawl. This stranger’s apparition in his house didn’t make sense, but he felt no desire to reason through it. Reason was a luxury not afforded to these streets. He thought of the knife stowed for safety in his boot, but he knew that he would not use it, not against a man like this. Larger than he was, maybe, and with a temper to be reckoned with, but Kit had taken larger men without coming off the worse. If there was a fight, he needed nothing more than his own hands.

“I’ve more right to be here than you. And if you want me to leave,” he added darkly, “I suggest you make yourself more convincing.” The man’s fist came suddenly at the side of his head, but as he had suspected from the first, Kit was by far the faster. His arm shot up and grabbed the man by the wrist, freezing the blow several inches away from its target. He grinned, enjoying the effect. “And you’ll have to do better than that.”

“Who’s there, Bill?” a woman’s voice asked from inside the house, somewhere out of sight. Kit hesitated, his breath caught suddenly. He knew that voice.

“A whoreson trying to give us hell,” the man snarled, shaking his hand free from Kit’s grip.

“Well, tell him to leave, then, or what good are you doing – sweet Jesus, Kit!”

He stood there a moment, bewildered, as the young woman of twenty appeared behind the man’s shoulder, wearing a look of surprise. Five years, he thought, was a long time. He knew how much could change in five years. Still, he had never imagined that Margaret Marlowe could have

transformed so suddenly and so completely, from a flat-chested girl of fifteen to this woman, flanked by the hulk of a man whose function he was now beginning to understand.

“You know him?” The man looked at her in disbelief. Perhaps he was noticing, as Kit was re-discovering, the uncanny resemblance between the two. Their thick dark hair, quick eyes, the way they cocked their heads slightly to the left when thinking.

“Know him?” Meg repeated. “Of course I know him, Bill. This is my brother.”

“Meg,” Kit managed. “God, look at you.”

“You came back,” Meg said, more to herself, as if attempting to convince a stranger.

“Did you ever doubt me? As soon as I got your letter, I left. I’m only sorry I couldn’t be faster. And you still make your S’s the wrong way round.”

She laughed softly and wrapped Kit in her arms, though her chin ended at about his breastbone. He felt the warmth of her skin against his own, which had not had a chance to thaw since before his night in the barn and still felt icy beneath her touch. Her husband’s disapproving glance burned into the back of Kit’s head, which instead of making him uneasy gave him a sudden thrill of pleasure. Let him disapprove of Meg’s whoreson brother. This was Kit’s home, not his.

“So you’ve married,” he said finally, pulling back to look at her more closely. “You might’ve told me, you know.”

“And how would I do that? You’ve no idea how hard it was to find a messenger willing to go to Cambridge for me. Besides, would you have come back?” He had to admit that he wouldn’t have. More likely, he would have sat in his room at Cambridge, silently fuming at his parents’ tendency to marry his sisters to men he despised, as he had done when he had learned of Jane’s marriage to John Moore. He had been so bitter then Tom had expressed his worry that he would assassinate one of the masters, just to give his rage some vent. Meg thought to smooth the awkwardness of his homecoming over with a far-too-late introduction. “Kit, this is William Bradley. Bill, my brother, Christopher.”

Kit inclined his head barely an inch. Bradley said nothing, plainly remembering the undelivered

promise of a blow he still intended to make good on. Was it resentment, this feeling of distaste at another man standing in the house that had once been home? He had always railed against his responsibility to the dingy house in Canterbury. The least they could have done was to tell him he was no longer necessary. And to be replaced by a man like this, who thought with his fists?

“Come in,” Meg said, breaking the silence that had fallen over the uncomfortable introduction. “Mother’s been waiting for you since she learned I wrote you.”

Kit gripped Meg’s hand harder, knowing that she sensed his apprehension and knew, or at least guessed, at the cause. It was not that he did not love his mother. A man was only granted one in a lifetime; he might well appreciate the one he had. But for all the gratitude he bore Katherine Marlowe for the night’s work that brought him into the world, she was by no means an easy woman to deal with. Of all the aspects of home he had thought of with nostalgia at Cambridge, finding himself before his mother had never been one of them.

“How is she?” Kit asked, stalling for time.

“As you might expect,” Meg said, “all things considered. She always treated Jane like a saint, you remember, since she was always at home to take care of her and the younger children. You can imagine the row when Father sent her off with that John Moore, who she didn’t know beyond a name.”

“I don’t see how you can blame the husband,” Bradley said, though they were not paying him any attention. “It was hardly his fault she wasn’t strong enough to carry the child. She ought to have been more careful, shouldn’t she?”

Meg hastily reached out a hand to Kit’s chest to stop him. She had seen that mood come over him at the words “It was hardly his fault,” and knew him well enough to imagine the itching in his fingers that longed to take Bradley by the throat. Not his fault? Who else would you blame for trying to force a child on his sister, barely more than a child herself? *Not his fault. Should have been more careful.*

“You’ll come in and see her, then.” Meg pulled him back to the matter at hand. Bradley, after a

moment's glowering silence, stepped backward into the house, allowing Kit to enter. John's workshop, taking up the whole of the first floor, remained exactly as he remembered. He walked slowly past the shoemaker's workbench, trailing his fingers across the cut patterns of beaten leather, brushing his palm across an abandoned awl. It was unnerving, seeing the space appear as it had his last day living under the roof, five years before. It was not clear whether John had completed a single pair of shoes during that time. This might well have been the same pattern he had set on the bench to wave a single hand at his departing eldest son, replacing what in other circumstances might have been a touching farewell with a curt, "Get on, then, before they leave you." There was certainly no sign of him now. Not that there had often been; the workshop remained a testament to work that might have been done and rarely was. He averted his eyes from the bench, feeling a faint sickness in his stomach. If he had not needed to return, he would have done anything to avoid it. *Jane*, he thought, *think of Jane*.

He took the stairs to the upper floor two at a time, hearing Meg's footsteps against the wood behind him. Bradley, it seemed, had no intention of following, for which he was grateful. It was early yet, but Kit suspected not too early for Meg's husband to go in search of a drink, and in such matters, he was rarely wrong. In any case, he preferred it this way. That brute, he thought, did not belong in the same room as his mother or the children. The room opened before him, and he was instantly met with a wail pitched halfway between joy and misery.

"Christopher!"

"Mother," he said softly, stepping fully into the room. There she was, propped up in the room's single bed and visible from the waist up from beneath the worn coverlet. She leaned her back against the wooden headboard, though she was taller than it and ended up resting her head against the cold wall. When she saw her son enter the room, a look of sudden wildness came over her. The violence of the reaction made Kit itch to take a step back, but he forced himself to approach the bed. He had expected this, after all.

Katherine Marlowe had not yet dressed, still in a white cotton shift with her long dark hair

messily plaited to keep it from her face. She looked even paler than he remembered. He wondered if she had taken ill since the news of Jane's death. If she had not taken ill yet, she would within the next several days. This was the way of things. It was as if an evil spirit hovered around her bed, waiting for another moment of weakness to strike and forbid her leaving it. In the sixteen years Kit had lived in this house, the time his mother had been in bed likely outweighed the time she had been out of it. Certainly the death of a daughter was as good an excuse as any to indulge the habit.

"You've come back," she said, reaching one pale hand in his direction. Unbidden, the image of a drowned man he had seen in the River Cam his first year at university drifted before his eyes, the corpse damp and bloated as a hooked fish. When he sat on the edge of his mother's bed and took her hand in both of his, it felt as cold and limp as he had expected, as he had imagined the dead man's hand would. He repressed a shudder. Perhaps there had been more than one death in the family. "I knew you would come back."

"Of course, Mother," he said. "As soon as I heard about Jane. I'm so sorry."

At the sound of Jane's name, Katherine let out another wail. She thrust her arms around his shoulders, and it was all he could do not to cry out. It was as if the drowned corpse had come to life and tried to drag him under. He patted her on the back as she cried, murmuring noises that weren't words in an attempt to calm her. Always susceptible to the turning of emotions as crops to the first frost, his mother looked at risk of being torn apart by tears.

"My Jane," she managed between gasps. "My little Jane..."

"I know, Mother," Kit said softly. "It's not fair."

"So many." For a moment Kit was bewildered. "So many. Mary, and Thomas, and Stephen, and now Jane... What kind of mother doesn't deserve to keep her children?"

Mary. Kit's older sister, dead of the fever before his second birthday. Thomas, a little squalling thing, lived barely long enough to make it to and from the baptismal font. Stephen, Katherine's name for the unbaptized boy she had held in her arms for two days as the breath slowly left his body. Jane,

dead in childbirth. Christopher, gone who knew where without a look back. What kind of mother indeed.

“It’s not your fault, Mother,” he murmured in her ear, as she continued to wet his shoulder with her weeping. “Of course it’s not your fault. What did you always tell me? The Lord works in mysterious ways. Jane’s with God now. Can you be angry for that?” Not angry with Jane, certainly not. Angry with God... If Meg had not hurried forward and sat on the other side of the bed, adding her calming presence to the scale, he did not know what unhelpful blasphemy he might have said. The lie of God’s benevolence and Katherine’s cold drowned hands left him torn between cursing and crying.

“Mother, give him room to breathe,” Meg whispered, rubbing Katherine’s shoulders comfortingly. “He’s ridden all day and night. Try to get some sleep. I’ll take care of him, and we’ll be back soon.”

Slowly, tiredly, Katherine released her hold on her son. She lay back against the headboard, all her energy drained away in those two minutes of action. Tears stained her face, but they coursed down her cheeks silently, as if accompanying them with sound was too much effort. Kit smiled at her, but he could not be sure if she saw it, or if she did if she understood it. She could have been asleep already.

“Come on,” Meg whispered, taking Kit by the hand. “I’ll get you some breakfast. The others are about to eat.”

The others. Of course. They retreated quietly from Katherine’s bed into one of the floor’s two other rooms. Anne, Dorothy, Thomas. How old were they now? He could hardly remember them as distinct from one another when he had left, in the way that all children looked the same and cried the same and constantly needed to be fed. But he suddenly found himself face-to-face with two girls and a boy of seven that he realized he did not know from a stranger on the street. The girls had grown up to be pretty, one (Anne, he assumed, she being older) a hand’s-width taller than the other, and though their clothes were of cheap cloth they looked well taken care of, clean and respectable. Little Thomas peered up at him, interrupted in his previous pastime of tossing a leather tennis ball up in the air and

catching it clumsily with both hands. The mistrust in his face took Kit aback, and he thought with some discomfort that the boy had only been four years old when he had last been in his father's house. He could hardly be expected to remember he had an older brother, much less what he looked like. And if all male strangers entering the house were anything like William Bradley, the fear was understandable. The girls regarded him with a faint nervous interest, as he remembered doing as a child to his father's partners when they appeared at the house to discuss profits and trade. They recognized him, but from afar, his reflection distorted by time.

He sat cross-legged on the floor near his younger siblings. "You remember me, don't you, Anne?" he asked, addressing the taller girl with a faint smile.

"I'm Dorothy," the girl said without resentment, pointing at her shorter sister. "That's Anne." Fantastic. Five years away from home and he was already an outsider among his own sisters. He thought of Bradley's face, his domineering posture in the doorway. He owned the house now, and he, Kit, only an afterthought, if that. Was there anywhere he was actually expected? The question struck him more deeply than he had thought, and again he pushed it away.

"You remember Kit, don't you, Dot?" Meg said quickly. She hurried over to sit beside her older brother, ever alert to save a situation from ruin. "Your big brother Christopher? The one studying away at Cambridge?"

Dorothy's brow furrowed as she considered. "He's been gone a long time, hasn't he," she said seriously, as though she had taken much effort to arrive at this conclusion.

"It's been a while," Kit agreed. "It's hard to get away at university."

"Why didn't you go to Cambridge, Meg?" Anne asked. "You're smart." Clearly she had inherited John Marlowe's tendency to speak her thoughts word for word, regardless of tact. Kit shifted uncomfortably at this, but Meg brushed it off with a smile and ruffled the girl's hair.

"Kit's a boy, silly," she said, "and he's smarter even than me. He's a poet, you know, they gave him a scholarship for it. Besides, I have to stay here and make sure you don't get into too much

trouble.” This explanation seemed to please Anne, as she turned to her newly appeared breakfast. Dorothy continued to ignore Kit, deciding that the best way of coping with something new and unusual was to pretend it did not exist. Thomas chanced one look at his older brother before turning away bashfully and doing his best to make himself invisible behind Dorothy’s back. Kit sighed. Blood is thicker than water, they said, but time overpowered both.

They ate quickly, Kit still on edge listening for the sound of Bradley moving downstairs, or Katherine stirring in the other room. It was only a matter of time before her restless sleep gave way to another torrent of realization that Jane was gone, and though it was selfish he did not want to be there when she awoke. Meg noticed how often he glanced over his shoulder at the slightest movement.

“Why don’t you go play, you all,” she said to the three younger children, directing the quasi-command mostly at Anne. “Go down to the gardens for a while. Enjoy being outside before it starts to snow again, but be sure to dress warmly. Kit and I have somewhere to go.”

Even before she told him, he knew where that was. It was hardly a premonition, rather a trained sense that knew he was not going to slip in and out of Canterbury that easily. There were only two options, two members of his family he had not yet seen. It was what he had come for, and it was the last thing he wanted to do. Two visits still had to be made, and those before sunset.

XI

“Westgate?”

Meg sighed. The sun had fully risen by now, replacing the mist that had hung over the streets with a faint glimmering against the dirty, mud-coated snow. The church bells sounded half past the hour as they left Blackfriars Road, Kit half a step ahead though she had not yet confirmed the destination. His feet knew the way well.

“I wish Father wasn’t so predictable,” she said by way of assent. “Wouldn’t it be charming if once you and I went to find him praying at the cathedral?”

“Doesn’t the devil burst into flames in a church?” Kit asked wryly, earning a glare from Meg for his trouble. “I’m joking, for God’s sake.” Somehow his total disregard for the fourth commandment did not reassure her. “How long has it been?”

“He went out the night we heard about Jane and never came back. I gave him a day, in case he slept it off and came stumbling back, but we heard nothing. I tried the jail five days ago. They wouldn’t let me in to see him. They wouldn’t let me speak to anyone.” Meg looked coldly ahead as she spoke, fixing her gaze on an overturned cart on the side of the road rather than her brother. A stray dog nosed about its wheels, sniffing a head of cabbage with the resigned distaste of the beggar who can’t afford to be discriminating. She wrapped her cloak closer about her and shivered. The sun was up, but it was still bitterly cold.

“Someday we ought to just leave him there, to see how he likes imprisonment when it’s not temporary.” Even as he said it, Kit didn’t believe it. That was how the world worked. Sons existed to

serve their fathers, in whatever way necessary. Financially. Spiritually. In the vast majority of cases, legally. As if he had the time. There were more important things to worry about. Jane, for instance. Or the stream of treasonous letters between Spain and Yorkshire. John Marlowe spending a week in a cell felt peripheral. At least when his father was safely enclosed in the four walls of Westgate, he could not get into any more trouble.

When the prison appeared in sight at the end of the street, Kit was not sure whether or not he was really awake. So many times he had dreamed of this exact scene in his Cambridge dormitory. They loomed over him, the two cylindrical towers, notched at the summit to allow archers to station themselves in times of siege. Tiny, narrow windows pockmarked the surface, more than ample room for an arrow or a bullet to pass through but barely enough to give the prisoners light to see. Between the two towers, the tall city gates stood at attention, thrust open for citizens and travelers to pass through. The towers melded seamlessly to the city walls on either side. Westgate, a prison built into the gate to the outside world. The bitter irony could not have been lost on its residents.

Kit walked briskly past Meg and pounded against the side door of the prison. There were an infinite number of things he would rather have done than this, but Fortune was an uncompromising mistress. He straightened his shoulders and stood up to his full height, feeling Meg watching with some surprise behind him. This was hardly their first turn in the lists. Biannual trips to Westgate to sneak in petty bribes for John's release or better treatment had peppered their childhood with the regularity of the solstices. But she had never seen Kit approach the prison with this much confidence. It was as if he already knew the jailers would give him exactly what he asked, and the actual asking was a mere formality. Her brother had changed in the time he had been away, and that beyond growing taller. She had never truly considered him a child, always older than her and as protective as a father, but now he was a man. A man, and almost a stranger.

It was a few moments before the shutter behind the barred window pulled back, and the narrow, pointed features of the porter appeared in the opening. "What do you want?" he asked, before turning

his head to spit into the corner. Meg wrinkled her nose in distaste. Not that the jail called for a flourish of trumpets and a royal welcome, but still, there was no reason to be vulgar.

“I’m here to see a prisoner,” Kit said. It was not a request. “John Marlowe.”

“Are you now? Do you have permission from the provost?” The porter was clearly aware that the answer was ‘no,’ and he was enjoying it. When one’s only authority came from opening and closing a door, the thrill of denying entrance had to equal a king’s pleasure in declaring war. A show of power, simply because you could.

Kit smiled. It was a perfectly ordinary, friendly smile, which made the contrast all the more unnerving as he reached into his boot and drew his long-handled knife, letting the silver blade shine through the grates on the window. “If I told you that if you don’t open the door this moment, I will break it down myself, cut out your tongue, and give it to the provost as an early Christmas gift, would that do for permission?”

Meg’s eyebrows raised to match the porter’s. She had never heard his voice sound like that, had known that he seldom left the house without a knife but had never seen him prepared to use it. Even when he’d been moments away from striking her husband, she had never actually been afraid of him. Not until now.

They heard the porter rustling through his pockets hastily. “That will do just fine, sir, no need for any of that,” he stammered, and the door swung open towards them. “If you’ll come right in this way, I’ll take you where you need to go.” Kit grinned at Meg and stepped into the dark prison, though when she followed it was not without misgiving. The porter closed the door behind them and drew the bolt across.

“*Sir,*” Kit whispered in her ear. “That’s the first time anyone’s ever called me sir. I could get used to it.” *Let me point out, brother mine, that you’ve made him think you’ll cut him open from cock to crown if he neglects to.* That, she decided, was better remarked upon silently.

She wished the brother she remembered would return, the one with a quick and easy smile. The

one who would bring her home tiny cakes lifted from the kitchens of King's College, small sugared parcels wrapped in brown paper she would crumble into her mouth as she listened to the stories he would spin for her about Arthur and Guinevere, the tortoise and the hare. That Kit was there somewhere, had to be. This man had not been part of her childhood. Or had he? Maybe awareness was all, heightened by distance. But there were notes of authority in Kit now that did not belong in Blackfriars. It was as if her brother had transformed into a magistrate. Or a mercenary.

They had stopped walking near the end of the hall, in front of a wooden cell door identical to those on either side. "This one, then?" Kit asked the porter with a disinterested gesture.

"Aye, sir. John Marlowe, you said, sir. I can only give you ten minutes inside. Protocols, you understand." The porter cringed, afraid that any displeasure, however momentary, would give the tall stranger cause enough to carve him a second mouth.

Kit nodded. "I understand. Thank you for your cooperation." He reached into his pocket and produced a silver shilling, which he flipped in a neat arc to the stunned porter. In a moment it had changed possession, slipped away again out of sight. Meg looked at him with another raised eyebrow. Unexpected confidence was one thing, unexpected capital quite another. But Kit did not address it, as the porter inserted one of his many keys into the heavy brass lock and opened the door.

Despite the narrow windows that looked out on the street below, the room was so dark that Meg could make out only its most basic features. Left with memories of these cells from previous experience, she retained a clear sense of place: the four brick-and-mortar walls, the wooden board that served for a bed, the shallow dirt pit that filled the office of privy, its contents dusted with sand to help neutralize the smell. As always, she felt the bile rise in her throat at the scent. Even one visit to a room smelling so strongly of another man's shit would be enough of a deterrent for her never to commit another crime. The feeling, however, was apparently not universal.

"Father." Her voice filled the space with a displeasing echo. "Father, it's us. It's Meg and Christopher. We've come to see you."

“Come over so I can see you.”

Meg could tell from the way Kit stiffened his shoulders he would rather have walked right back through the door, but he stepped forward toward the shaft of light filtered through the window. As her eyes adjusted to the shadows and the far side of the room began to shift into focus, the figure of John Marlowe became clearer, seated in the corner with his arms looped loosely around his shins. Kit bent down into a crouch so that they were eye-to-eye, like a hunter inspecting the cleanness of a kill.

“Hello, Father.” Was this the face that had haunted his dreams since childhood? The specter with the booming voice, the temper that sent the earth to quaking when he cursed, the powerful arms and hands and eyes that ruled the house he was born in? Kit thought of the emperor of his imagination, a violent and proud presence that had given him two patriarchal legacies: a bruised, beer-tainted fear and shoes too large to fill. Now he saw nothing but a prisoner of war, taken captive during a conflict he did not understand. Perspective did that. Hardly a Tamburlaine now, only a broken old man in a cage. What a difference five years could make.

“What are you doing here?” John Marlowe looked at his eldest son with skepticism. “Aren’t you too good for us now with your priests and your Latin?”

“I can leave again, if you like,” Kit shrugged. He knew he ought to feel something, speaking to his father in a jail cell. Anything. But all he felt was tired. “What have you done this time? Drink again?”

“And am I not allowed a drink or two after the death of my daughter?” A trace of his father’s old capacity to overpower returned, and Meg took a single step back. *A drink or seven*, she corrected silently. If he were sober even now, she would be surprised. “If I had a pension like the governor, I could drink myself to sleep and stab half my servants, and no one would blink an eye.”

Kit sighed. He did not have the energy for this. The prison, the half-formulated excuses, the dull, stale, old routine, any of it. What did it matter? Without waiting for his father to finish his sentence, he straightened up and put his hands in his pockets, the very picture of indifference. “Well,

Father,” he said, “it’s been charming having this conversation. I wish we could’ve met somewhere more comfortable, but I understand that we’re working with some restrictions on movement.”

John blinked. “What, are you leaving?” he asked bluntly. Meg looked at Kit in surprise. What did he think he was playing at? No matter how much disdain he had for the prisoner (and he was taking precious few pains to hide it), John was their father. It was his shop they lived above, his work that kept them there. She reached out a hand to his shoulder, one that would have said, “what the hell do you think you’re doing” if hands could speak, but he did not respond.

“Unless you were going to make us an offer to spend the night,” he said lightly, “I think we should be going. There doesn’t seem to be much we can do for you here.”

John stood up angrily, and Meg saw with some surprise that he was now some inches shorter than Kit. He had to look up to meet his son’s eyes. “Who do you think you are? Whenever it gets hard, you skip out to your books and leave your mother and I to our ruin, you forget you ever had anything to do with us. But we’re still here, and we’ll be here long after we decide to have nothing more to do with you. I gave you your name! And you’ll waste it drinking and preaching in Greek and filling the world with a litter from any slut who’ll sit still long enough for you to plow her diseased field.”

Meg felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. There was little she could do and less space for her to do it in, but somehow she had to get between her father and her brother before one of them murdered the other. John had never been scrupulous about where and how he dealt his fists, but now that she had seen Kit threaten a stranger with a knife she didn’t know who she feared more. So she almost couldn’t believe it when Kit erupted into laughter. Seemingly unable to help himself, he laughed and laughed until she was convinced he had lost his mind at last.

“Let me tell you something, Father,” he managed at last. “A hundred years from now, people will hear the name of Marlowe, and I can assure you not a one of them will be thinking of *you*.”

He strode past Meg to the door and knocked three times on the wood, despite her halfhearted protests for him to wait. “Porter? We’re done here.”

The door opened again, and they walked out into the hall, leaving her squinting in the sudden light. “Take your cue from Jonah,” Kit tossed nastily over his shoulder into the cell. “Perhaps the whale might vomit you out yet.”

The heavy slam of wood on brick and the scraping of the bolt in the lock rendered John’s response inaudible. Meg didn’t quite know what she was saying, but they could not leave without Kit doing what she had brought him there to do. His pride was one thing, but if he let it destroy his family she would personally find a way to release the Furies on his soul. Before she could finish, Kit had produced a small leather purse and pressed it with a clink of metal against metal into the porter’s hand.

“See to it that John Marlowe is released at nine o’clock tomorrow morning.” His voice sounded like one who had practice being obeyed, though the grin absent from his mouth still played in his eyes. “I’d like him to have a few hours to think things over first.”

The sudden appearance of a small fortune had eroded what remained of the porter’s attention to protocol. “Of course, sir. As you say, sir.”

“Well, Meg,” he said, turning to his sister with a small smile, either at the long-delayed gratification of finally letting his father know how he felt about him or the look on her face like she had accidentally swallowed the bones of a fish, “shall we? There’s one more person I need to see before I leave.”

She didn’t need to ask him whom he meant. The person for whose sake he had arrived in the first place was quietly waiting for him. Jane could do nothing else.

~*~

Jane Elizabeth Moore. 28 January 1572 – 26 November 1585. Requiescat in pace.

“That’s all they had to say about her.” Kit crouched quietly before the small white stone, paying no mind to the snow soaking through his boots. “A name and three words of Latin. It’s not even her own name.”

The churchyard behind Holy Cross felt as though it were transplanted from another world. The

high hedges surrounding the claustrophobic plot of land made an unnerving barrier against the bustle and sounds of St. Peter's Street. Kit felt as though he were underwater, hearing voices muffled as though from a great distance. The white graves, barely distinct from the snow, stretched in nearly even rows across the yard, but there was no sign of movement. No one but he and Meg had entered the hedged-in space, only a single sparrow that perched carelessly on the head of a white marble angel, watching the two siblings with disinterested beady eyes. It had seen hundreds of brothers and sisters, wives and mothers and husbands come through these gates, and if it lived another year it would see hundreds more. Mourning was as natural as breathing.

"We're lucky we managed a headstone," Meg reminded him. She stood silently behind him, holding her cloak close. December had come full-force, and the snow dusting the grave rendered the newly tilled earth identical to the ground around it. Jane had been gone for days. It looked like years. "Monuments don't come cheaply."

"How did you manage it?" Kit asked. He was not particularly interested in where the headstone had come from. It was there, and it bore his younger sister's name. Little else mattered. But he sensed that Meg needed to speak, that the underwater silence was weighing heavily on her. The question cost him little.

"Father Gregson donated the money from the church," she explained. "Said that he always remembered Jane fondly, and it was the least the congregation could do."

"It was. God spent less time in that church than she did."

"Kit," Meg hissed through her teeth, "do you think you can refrain from blaspheming while we're still *in the churchyard*?" He turned to look at her, and she pulled back slightly at the emptiness in his eyes. One more reminder that she no longer knew her brother as well as she once had. She was not religious, or at least no more religious than custom required, but the name of God had never inspired a look in her of... there was no other word for it, *disgust*. The sparrow, at the sound of his reply, fluttered its discomfited feathers and took to wing, a small speck against the clouds.

“Can I refrain? Look at where we are, Meg. Look at this.” He gestured at the headstone in front of him, the knuckle of his first finger brushing against the soft curve of the capital *J*, releasing a small flurry of snow. “If there’s a gracious, all-seeing God, how do you think he allows this to happen? He’s all for fathers and mothers killing their children in his name, isn’t he? It’s been done in the Bible before now. But this time he didn’t offer up a last-moment alternative. And for what? What have we gotten now that she’s dead?”

Meg placed one hand on her brother’s shoulder, a calming gesture that he roughly shrugged off at once. “Kit, please,” she whispered. “You’re shouting. People will hear.”

“I hope they do,” he snapped. “I hope the world hears.” He didn’t point out that they were alone in the churchyard, that if anyone could hear him it would be the dead. “I can’t believe you married him.”

It connected to nothing, and he knew it. It had slipped out before he knew he had committed to saying it. By the time he realized this was not the kind of thing he could say at such a time, it was too late. Meg looked at him with the disdain usually reserved for something unpleasant discovered in a horse’s stall. “And why shouldn’t I marry? Was I supposed to wait for your approval?”

He straightened up, fumbling for words. “Meg, of course you can marry. I want you to be happy, don’t you know that? You deserve that and more. But this, this William Bradley –” the name took on a sneer he had neither intended nor attempted to conceal “– you know as well as I do the last thing on his mind is how to make you happy.”

“And you think you know what makes me happy. You, who I haven’t seen for five years, while I make do how I can.”

Kit began to protest, to enumerate Bradley’s faults from head to toe: his arrogance, his crudeness, his quickness to anger, his empathetic capacity of a joint-stool. His willingness to punch unknown visitors on sight, even when they proved to be his brother-in-law. He could have talked until the day passed into night. But he was never given the chance.

“I know you don’t like Bill,” Meg said sharply, cutting him off mid-tirade. “It’s not hard to see why. I live with him. I know how he is. He drinks. He has a temper. He... he thinks of me as he does his horse,” she added coldly – once she had begun, she might as well finish. “Pretty, useful, and good for a ride now and again. He wants me to give him a son while I can, but I hate even the thought of lying with him. It hurts when he takes me. It hurts until I think I’ll break.” Kit had to bite his tongue to keep from responding. The thought of that beast and his sister, his Meg, was almost too much to bear in silence. If she had told him everything that she might have, if she had rolled up her sleeves to show him the hand-shaped bruises up her arm, if she had confessed how their arguments were rarely, if ever, confined to words, she knew exactly what would have happened. The Kit who pulled knives on prison doorkeepers could not be trusted with information like that, he would run through the churchyard gate and give Bradley every blow that he had ever dealt, and twice over. Too much rested on keeping William Bradley both happy and present. She could take care of herself in silence, better than her brother ever could.

“But he’s here. He brings money we need to feed and clothe the little ones, and thanks to him I have a warm place to sleep. He helped me take care of Mother after Jane. He can take care of me, Kit,” she finished. “He can take care of us. I’m doing what I must for the rest of us.”

The rest of us. A group of which he was no longer a part.

But what had she expected him to do? Stay in Canterbury and become what the city’s walls had always wanted him to be? He saw himself as he might have been, a man stooped decades before his time, graying hair and a hunched back from bending over the shoemaker’s bench, smelling of leather and his fingers cramped from gripping the hammer. And the sound of screaming babies from the apartments above, for there would be more children, there would always be more, and the sharp pangs of hunger in his belly. Or sitting in the corner of John’s cell at Westgate, tracking the days of his imprisonment with scratched tally-marks on the wall, the only sound from outside the bells in the cathedral steeple, calling the faithful to the bones of a martyred saint, while he quietly rotted in a

different crypt, not so far away, where no one would ever know he had disappeared...

“Meg,” he began, “I had to leave. There are things... things I need to see done.”

“Heaven forbid we stand in the way of your *things*.” Now it was Meg’s turn to be on the verge of shouting. An old man, dressed for mourning and bearing two white lilies in his withered hands, turned from the grave he tended to the two siblings, but they paid as much attention to him as to the sparrow. “For God’s sake, Kit, don’t you think we knew from the moment you stepped out the door you’d never come back except to bury us?”

“What did you expect me to do?” Anger and shame brought on the same rush of violent defensiveness with which he had nearly tackled Bradley in the doorway. “I’ve... so much has changed, Meg. I can’t explain, but it’s different now.”

He knew he was rambling but could not stop. The accusation of negligence had struck deeper than he had meant to let it. Had he abandoned his family? Perhaps. Meg was married to a man she had every reason to hate, and all because of him. But would he have done any differently, given a second chance? “Now I can make something of myself, and I mean to do it. Do you know what it means for me to leave, to go into the world? Everything can be mine, Meg. Everything. I can change myself, become someone with a name, a scholar, a gentleman, a god. You can’t expect me to stay here and rot in Father’s workroom.”

Had he actually said “a god”? He almost wanted to laugh, but there was nothing funny about it. Why had he accepted the scholarship to Cambridge, if not to undergo some alchemic transfiguration of the soul? Why had he embraced Walsingham’s schemes so fully at Sheffield, to the point where he had nearly refused to leave? There was a world outside these walls, waiting for him. It had taken Jane’s death to realize how desperately he wanted to attain it, but he had never been more sure. He could not stay here to die nameless. Even if he was only allowed to use it half the time, the name of Christopher Marlowe was going to mean something.

“Please,” Meg said harshly, “can you refrain from shouting at me on your sister’s grave? Don’t

let her hear you sounding like an idiot.”

Kit looked at the gravestone behind them, tracing the letters and numbers with his eyes. *Jane Elizabeth Moore. 1 December 1585.* “She can’t hear us.” His voice was cold and toneless. A churchyard voice. “Spirits and the afterlife and resurrection, it’s all a pack of lies. And even if she could return to Earth, Jane was smart enough to know that the last place she should ever be is *here.*”

“So you’re leaving again?” Meg demanded, her hands on her hips now. “Just like that?”

He shrugged. “As you see.” There was more to be said, but no words with which to formulate it. He left it at that.

“Can you answer me one question, if it’s not too much trouble for a learned scholar of divinity like yourself?” He inclined his head at her ironically, inviting her to continue. “Where did you get the purse you gave to the jailer? Did you rob a convent on your way here?”

Kit couldn’t help it. Despite everything, he laughed. “You can think that, if you like,” he said equivocally. “Whatever helps you sleep at night. I suppose if you think it’s money stolen from the brides of Christ, you won’t want anything for yourself?” Meg caught the second leather purse he tossed at her, feeling wide-eyed the heavy weight of gold coins in her palm. Had she known the twelve gold crowns within had come from under the auspices of Sir Francis Walsingham, she might not have been so quick to accept it, but money was money without a story to qualify it. “Take care of yourself,” he said. “Don’t let Bradley win. You’re stronger than that. And tell Mother I’ll write her.”

“She can’t *read.*” Meg felt tears pricking the corners of her eyes even as she fought them back.

“No,” Kit agreed. “But you can.”

~*~

“Something wrong, Master Gregory?” Mrs. Poole, the irrepressible tavern-keeper of the Bull and Boar, moved between two tables in the taproom with a concerned glance at her regular patron. The question was unnecessary. Gregory had been rifling through his pockets for the better part of five minutes, ever since he had been given the scrap of paper bearing the reckoning for the four pints of

sack on his table. The man cursed violently, coining new oaths even the worldly Mrs. Poole had never heard before.

“Goddamn him,” he shouted, “he’s cut my purse!”

XII

Sir Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, felt a damp mist of sweat trickle down his chest as he dove to the left after the incoming ball. His racquet connected with a satisfying *thwack*, and he sent his opponent scrambling across the court against losing a point to the touch. The groomsman was younger and lighter on his feet, but Norfolk had the advantage of two decades' worth of perfecting his form and a strong distaste for losing. Each stroke of his arm was the directing gesture of a general in battle, controlling each move, perfecting his position. Norfolk's heart thudded in his ears, his breath hard but measured, and despite the exertion he smiled. Sheffield had never felt so small, but for a moment he could almost forget his status of gentleman-in-exile.

With one more sweep of his arm, he shot the ball at Matthew so hard the servant abandoned all hope of a return and ducked out of the way in self-defense. The ball bounced once, twice, then with smaller and smaller arcs until at last it came to rest against the court floor. The duke grinned at Matthew, who was bent double with his head between his knees, breathing in pained gasps.

"That'll be the match, then, Draper," Norfolk said pleasantly, wiping one hand against his damp brow.

"Aye, sir," Matthew panted, "it goes to you."

Norfolk did not waste the energy required to cross and shake his opponent's hand. Draper was a servant, roped into the engagement simply because there was no one of rank to challenge to a game besides the Lady Mary, and a tennis match against a groomsman raised fewer eyebrows than a tennis match against an exiled queen. Norfolk took up his shirt, which he had left dangling from the net's

pole like a misleading token of surrender, and slipped it over his head. It felt so good to move his body again, if in a space even more constrained than the manor itself. In the deep recesses of the tennis court, he could almost pretend that life was not absurd. Almost.

Leaving Matthew to attend to himself, Norfolk leaned his racquet against the wall and stepped out into the corridor. The dying light filtered weakly through the latticed windows, dappling a barred pattern of shadow across the floor that made Norfolk think instantly of prison as he made his way to his private chambers. Shrewsbury had no idea how easy he had it. Simple enough to work with all the comforts of living and the freedom to gallivant across the countryside whenever the mood struck. It was entirely another to live within the same four walls for seven full months. Never seeing the sun save through glass or in a walled courtyard. Never stretching one's legs except in a long hallway, cold no matter the weather. No company but servants unless you counted the Lady Mary, who in her present state was not much company at all. He did not regret pledging his cause to her, but he wished he could have done it from a greater distance, or with more space to roam.

He sighed and entered his study, reaching for a damp cloth from the washbasin to wipe the back of his neck. Mary was a clever woman, and a shrewd one too, but it was difficult to have a conversation with her that did not end either in a prayer or a curse. Not exactly what one had in mind for the ideal after-dinner chat. When he had followed her on her pilgrimage south from Scotland, he had sworn that there was nothing he would not do for his mistress. Now, he was beginning to run against the limits of his patience.

Norfolk splashed a few drops of perfumed water on the back of his neck and pulled on a fresh shirt. His fingers fastened the silver buttons of his black doublet with his back to the window. If only he could spend his entire life in the tennis courts, the library, the stables. But his service was far from over. Much as this court-away-from-court exhausted him, he could not hide forever. He poured himself a much-needed glass of wine and settled himself at his desk to peer at the topmost of his letters. It was another message from those avaricious barbarians in London, demanding that he present a full record

of Mary's expenditures to budget her household. As if they had nothing better to do with their time than deprive the lady of her few remaining comforts. English wolves. All of them the same.

He had no sooner given the document the scathing once-over it deserved than a knock at the door drove him from the letter in despair. How the castle could be so empty and yet never leave him a moment's peace, he would never understand. Norfolk had not even responded before the door opened, and in stepped the lady herself. She had taken special pains in her dress that morning, it appeared, though he could not fathom why. It was not as if they ever expected visitors. In any case, he had to admit that she looked well. Her hair was elegantly gathered into a simple knot at the nape of her neck, drawing his attention unwillingly to her fine cheekbones and dark brown eyes. Mary wore two small pearl drops in her ears, and against the neck of her gown hung the perennial golden crucifix. She looked like a woman out of a sketch, and Norfolk rose automatically at the sight of her. A queen in exile, but a queen nonetheless.

Mary closed the door silently behind her, then waved a hand at Norfolk to indicate that he should keep his seat. A shudder ran through his spine as he realized that he could not look at her without taking in the ornament on desk in the same glance. Her hands rested inches away from the skull of a Barbary ape he had received as a gift from a visiting Venetian ambassador in the years before exile. Norfolk reached forward and took the cold skull from its resting place in one palm, shifting it from the desk to the windowsill behind him. He was no stranger to death. It was not that. It was as though the hollow eyes of the leering monkey had been staring at her, watching her every move. She did not belong in a room with such an object. But then, he had not expected her.

"Have you heard from Sir Anthony, Your Grace?" Mary asked without preamble. Her eyes remained fixed on the spot where the skull had been moments before. "I expected a response days ago, but I have not yet seen his messenger."

Norfolk hastily shuffled through the stack of paper in search of Babington's handwriting. But he recognized the seals and the penmanship of the documents, and Anthony Babington's barely

legible, blotted scrawl was not among them. He hated having to break the news to Lady Mary, and he hated Babington still more for forcing him to it. She deserved better than that self-satisfied dandy. But there was no hope for it. In their circumstances, Mary Stuart and those who cared for her would have to survive like birds – with what they could get.

“Not yet, My Lady. But I am sure the message will arrive any day now.”

He had known the delay frustrated Mary, but Norfolk was not prepared for the noise she made at this announcement. It was the anguished groan of an animal caught in a trap, of someone who knew time was running out. “Does he think I have nothing better to do than to sit here embroidering handkerchiefs and wait for the axe to fall?” she snarled. “The Tudor *putain* wants me dead. I do not have the luxury of waiting for the earl’s leisure to tell me where I stand.”

Norfolk paused for a moment, weighing the best manner in which to respond. These conversations were not new: Mary had never taken much trouble to hide her wholly justifiable fear of persecution. Still, she had never yet stormed into his study and proclaimed apropos of nothing that she feared her own murder. Perhaps she, too, could feel the walls closing tighter.

“You know exactly where you stand, My Lady,” Norfolk said gently. “In the eyes of God, as you always have.”

“And too soon for comfort in his presence,” Mary finished drily. “I want you to write to him directly. Take this down. Encipher it, and send it with the groom the moment the ink dries.”

Norfolk nearly upended his inkwell in his haste to take down Mary’s dictation. If she was so concerned about the passage of time, perhaps she had somehow heard something of developments in London that he had not. Now would likely not be the best time to inform her that Matthew might require several minutes’ rest before setting out.

“Sir Anthony,” Mary dictated, accompanied by the sound of his hasty scribbling. “We have waited as long as we may for confirmation of your resolve. We can wait no longer. The storm grows to the south. If your messenger does not appear before the feast of Holy Innocents, we will know where

your loyalties lie. Remember that the beast goes by many names, not least among which is traitor. Do not fail us.”

Mary narrowed her eyes at Norfolk, who was still regarding the paper before him. The word “traitor” seemed to leap from the page. Traitor? There were traitors everywhere. In their position, they could trust no one. Every look, every word hid a death warrant.

“Do you think there is a reason to fear him, My Lady?” he asked. A dull question. Of course there was. Proximity bred suspicion and mistrust from nothing, like maggots emerging from a corpse.

“Your Grace,” Mary said, “when you have been in my position, you will come to see that there is reason to fear everything.”

She stood up briskly, and he rose in turn, watching her as she crossed to the door. “Oh, and Your Grace?” she added as an afterthought, already halfway through the doorway. “You might leave this ‘My Lady’ nonsense. I believe the correct title is ‘Your Majesty.’”

~*~

“Grant, O Lord my God, that I may never fall away in success or in failure. May I strive to please no one or fear to displease anyone except Yourself. May I see always the things that are eternal and never those that are only temporal. May I shun any joy that is without You and never seek any that is beside You.”

“Tom, don’t you dare read that ass Aquinas out loud. For Christ’s sake, I leave for a few weeks and you decide to join the seminary.”

The heavy *Summa Theologica* dropped to the floor with a *thud*, and Tom wheeled around in his chair. He was hearing things. It was late, and his mind was weary, and it would not have been the first time he thought he had heard that voice when he was alone. The line between dreams and reality was ill defined enough already without it being past midnight, and the shadows stretching from the corners of his dormitory made things seem so that were not. But if he was undergoing hallucinations, they were sensible to sight as well as sound. There the figure stood in the doorway, with his traveling cloak

still muddied from the journey. He looked exhausted, as though he had ridden hard and without pause for at least a day, perhaps two. Dark circles stood out underneath his eyes, and Tom did not think it entirely in his imagination that he was thinner than he remembered. But he was there. It was real. It was Kit, standing half-in and half-out of his room, wearing that teasing smile that had haunted so many evenings with its own ghost.

“I can’t leave you alone anymore, can I? God forbid I leave for a month and when I get back you’re Pope.”

He’d known Kit would come back, would have to come back, eventually. But now that they were standing face-to-face, he couldn’t hide any longer. The doubts he had entertained for weeks poured from every corner, the faceless questions of where, and why, and to what end. He would not ask, of course. If he couldn’t even formulate the question “where have you been,” there was no way he could ask “did you mean it, then, what you told me before you left, and what we did?”

“Not only is Aquinas a bore, but everything you’ve just said is nonsense.” Kit seemed unperturbed by Tom’s silence. Though the hall outside was empty at this hour, he had closed the door behind him. “What’s that you were just saying, about resisting temporal pleasures?”

Tom felt his face flush hot. “Something like that.”

“Well, let me tell you something. I’ve been resisting temporal pleasures for longer than I care to admit” – Tom coughed on a mouthful of air, eliciting a laugh from Kit – “and I’m more than tired of it. I’ve missed you more than you know.”

With Sir Thomas Aquinas lying facedown on the floor, unable to see the blasphemous horror taking place over his spine, Tom grinned. He was nervous, of course, but after seven weeks alone, turning the same thoughts over and over as though they would look any different from another angle, “caution” was not the foremost word in his vocabulary. Let him worry about his soul in the morning. For this evening, Kit was back, and that was all that mattered.

“No,” Tom said, taking Kit by the hand and pulling him to the other side of the room, “I think I

know more than you might expect.”

The smile that shone across Kit’s face both thrilled and surprised Tom. Had he really found it within himself to doubt? He kicked off his shoes, stripped off his cloak, and climbed onto the bed with a broad smile, still keeping Tom’s hand in his. “I’m finally back.” His voice almost broke with the pleasure rising in his throat; he wanted to laugh. “Give me a proper welcome?”

Now was not a time to think. This was the only moment that mattered. Only now. Only this.

Tom leaned over and blew out the candle.

~*~

Kit sighed and laid his head against Tom’s chest. The warmth of his skin against the cold mid-December air made him smile, though Tom couldn’t see it through the darkness. He didn’t need him to, in any case. He was sure that the warm, slow feeling of satisfaction spreading from his chest heated the room despite the dark. He was by no means inexperienced, as Mistress Howard and her horde of ladies downtown could attest to. He’d thought he knew what it was to give and receive pleasure. But he had not known what it was like to lie back in bed against a man and know that there was nowhere else in the world he would rather be. Pleasure as he had known it had been deliberate, mechanical, gone in an instant. He had never dreamed his body could feel the way it did, so at peace, so exactly itself, so entirely satisfied. For the first time, he finally felt that he belonged where he was.

“I can’t believe that just happened,” Tom murmured. His fingers were intertwined in Kit’s hair, and he could feel Tom’s touch, warm and gentle, against his scalp. The other hand rested beneath his head, bent easily at the elbow, as he looked up at the ceiling, as if the plaster would reveal some mystery. “I can’t believe we just did that.”

“Believe.” Kit laughed quietly; he could not help it. Everything seemed funnier now. The permanent strain in his muscles that had haunted him for the better part of two months had melted away, leaving him hovering above his own body, looking down. The feeling of release was glorious. “I’m going to write sonnets in honor of your cock.”

“For God’s sake,” Tom groaned. “If the world finds out about this because you’re distributing sonnet cycles to the student body over dinner, I’m going to eviscerate you.”

“Oh, go on, don’t you want all of England to know about our amorous dance between the sheets?” Kit teased. He adopted a grandiose tone, tracing a one-armed arc before them in the dark, as if illustrating an as-yet unpublished frontispiece. “Watson and Marlowe, inheritors of the cult of Venus and Adonis, or more accurately Adonis and Adonis...”

“Stop it.”

Kit felt the bottom fall out of his warm contentment. “Stop what?”

“You know.” Tom, no longer relaxed, had turned very serious. He rolled over onto one side to look directly at Kit, who had not moved. He had removed his fingers from Kit’s hair. “You know what would happen if anyone found out. This is serious, Kit. We’re doing more than flaunting Corpus custom. I won’t see you hanged for this. No one can know.”

It was only reasonable. The law was very clear on this point. Though he could not remember an instance of its ever having been enforced, he was no budding lawyer. Punishable by death, in keeping with a whole brood of other sins against the minor details of Leviticus. So why did it make him feel so ill? It wasn’t the logic, but the sickening dishonesty of it. For someone who had not spoken more than three truthful sentences in the past month and a half, he found the idea of lying about this, the nourishing warmth of their bodies intertwined on Tom’s bed, unbearable. This was more than changing his name, this was denying the one thing that made him feel human, let alone himself. But Tom had made it very clear that the subject was closed. There would be more time for this discussion later. He could bring him around to understanding that nature’s laws were more important than God’s and the Queen’s. He knew he could.

“And besides,” Tom went on, “I don’t think you’ll have much time for poetry in the near future, about me or anything else. How did Norgate take your return?”

The change of subject was clumsy and heavy-handed, pulling Kit into a frame of mind he

wanted to avoid as much as possible. “Are you really going to bring Norgate into this bed, Tom?” Kit sighed. “If there’s one thing I don’t want to think about now, it’s the headmaster. And I assure you, he doesn’t want us to invoke him here either. He was good enough about it,” he finished evasively. Now was not the time to explain to Tom how that meeting had gone: something out of a nightmare, if he were being honest. Trying to justify himself to a room full of university masters without being sure how much Norgate knew, how much Walsingham had let on and how much he had lied, had been as difficult as trying to embroider a tapestry with a broadsword. Norgate had conducted the whole interview through narrowed eyes and pursed lips, and only with luck had Kit managed to escape from his office without much more than a wag of the finger. The whole thing bore the stamp of Walsingham’s interference. The average scholar could not pack his bags and vanish until early December without so much as a warning. More than that he could not say.

“I’m to make up everything I’ve missed, which is no more than I expected. Disappearing without warning has its consequences. If I sleep again from now until the New Year I’ll be doing something horribly wrong.”

Tom grinned; Kit could feel the movement through the dark. “How about this,” he said, “I’ll help you catch up as I can. And if you start to fall asleep...” Kit felt Tom’s lips graze against his ear, and the thrill shot straight downward through his nerves, like plunging from a cliff into icy water below. Names did not matter. What others knew and thought and said didn’t matter. What was, was. “I think I know a way or two to keep you awake.”

XIII

“Visitor to see you, Marlowe.”

The library was deserted. Otherwise, dozens of studious eyes would have risen from their manuscripts and thrust the full extent of their displeasure on the visitor. But the room’s long, pew-like tables were all but empty, the walls of cloth-covered books untouched on their respective shelves, muted from their usual gaudy tones in the grey light of dawn. It was entirely too early to be awake, dressed, and surrounded by a foot-high stack of books on the history of ancient Rome, but as Kit had come to discover, in moments of extremity, all things were possible.

He set down his pen and arched his back, attempting to straighten out his spine against the threat of a semi-permanent hunchback. The boy bearing the message was a stranger to him, presumably some years younger than he, but his appearance could not have been more welcome. An interruption from mindless academia was quite in his cards by now. Though Norgate’s leniency had extended to closing his eyes to a seven-week’s absence, it had stopped full short of granting scholastic dispensation. He had not slept for more than three hours over the past four nights, pouring over volumes of Sophocles and Plutarch until he was sure his eyes would fall out of his head. As if there were not more important things he might be doing, ciphered messages between Spain and Yorkshire bearing more immediate relevance than the details of the Roman senate.

It was not until the boy had retreated back into the hall that Kit considered with any seriousness the nature of the diversion. A visitor. There was only one kind of visitor he could fathom entertaining, and on his scant amount of sleep he was not certain he was ready for it. He closed his book and rose

from the chair. The cold grey light filtered through the library's seldom-cleaned windows and reminded him oddly of the nave of the Canterbury cathedral, on the odd morning that his mother had brought him and his sisters to take communion at matins. He could only hope that the mental comparison boded grace, rather than martyrdom.

And there, as he had suspected from the moment of the announcement, entered the black-clad, sober figure of Sir Francis Walsingham. The Secretary closed the door curtly behind him before so much as turning to meet the eyes of his charge. More important than the message, it seemed, was the importance of its not being heard by the wrong ears. The calmness of Walsingham's expression was at war with the storminess of his brows, a lightning strike on a clear morning.

"I see you're up and hard at work betimes today," he said lightly. "An admirable show of diligence from a scholar. I didn't expect to see you with the living before midafternoon." Kit didn't know how to respond to this. The half-minute he had been given to switch between his Cambridge mind and his London one had not been sufficient to formulate conversation. He was an agent for the Queen. Why then did the mere appearance of Sir Francis in the Corpus library strike him mute like a child caught misbehaving?

"Does Norgate know you've come to speak with me?" Kit asked at last.

Sir Francis laughed briefly, more of a bark than a laugh. The distance between them had collapsed until Kit was close enough to count the buttons on his doublet. "I am not the Queen's spymaster for nothing," he said. "Your dear Master Scholar knows that I use you for my purposes, but it is not his business to meddle with details. I come and go as I please. Which is a privilege, I might add, reserved for a select group at court, not given out to the common rank and file."

Kit wished he had managed to keep the heavy reading table between them. A barrier between his guilty conscience and Walsingham's wrath would not have gone amiss. In the wake of all that had happened since, Jane, prison, Tom, the history of the Roman consulate, he had forgotten that he had been expected in London. Or, more importantly, that he had been expected and not received. At least

that settled the question of grace or martyrdom.

“Marlowe. Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then look at me, damn you.” Sir Francis grabbed Kit by the chin and jerked it up, forcing him to meet his eyes. Kit’s blood was pumping hard; he was sure Walsingham could feel his pulse. His grip was cold against his skin, a vise of flesh and bone. No one but the walls of books to witness it.

“Did you think your summons to Whitehall were a request?” The question was cold and quick and level, more terrifying than if he had shouted. “Do you recall me saying you were permitted to take orders as they pleased you and dismiss them when they did not? Do you have any idea how unpleasant it is to have to explain your absence to Her Majesty?” He dropped his hand roughly, but Kit could not look away even if he had wanted to. It was more frightening now to break that gaze than to keep it.

“Her Majesty?”

“Her Majesty Elizabeth, Queen of England, Ireland, and Wales. Maybe you’re familiar. I was forced to explain to the Queen I could not so much as make my own servant appear when I called him. Your excuses to Her Majesty have been made, but do not think I forgive so easily. You were to come directly to London. Was that not clear?”

“Please, sir, I was called home. My sister...”

“What about her.” It was not a question.

“She died, sir.”

“I don’t care if she sprouted wings and flew out of the labyrinth of Minos.” The curt sneer landed hard. He saw again Jane’s face in front of him, and his fingers, with more daring than his brain, curled into fists. Sir Francis and William Bradley blended into one co-existent source for his hatred, a single sneering voice, *I don’t care, it was hardly his fault, she should have been more careful.*

“There are more important things in the world, Marlowe, than your problems. People die every day. But nations endure. A fact that will cease to be true if you continue to compromise our

sovereign's security by throwing reason to the winds. Do you think Her Majesty the Queen went on a self-pitying fugue after the death of her sister?"

Resentment, anger, and a touch of madness form a bitter draught when mixed. "If not, sir, it was because she regretted not having done it herself."

Kit's head rolled with the blow. He closed his eyes against the pain but made no noise, nor did he move, set defensively like a fencer. The pain was sharp, but the humiliation was sharper. Sir Francis had struck him. Like you would kick a dog.

"Your insolence is not endearing, Marlowe. Nor are you so indispensable that I need to humor your childish antics. You belong to me, and you will learn the consequences if you disappoint me a second time." Sir Francis reached into his breast pocket and produced three pieces of paper in thin white envelopes, all unmarked. They landed on the reading table with a soft noise, punctuating Kit's shamed silence. "To my more pressing point. The Earl of Shrewsbury's correspondences to Sheffield. Gregory took the liberty of copying them out for you. I am told you're a dab hand at Greek, so you should have no trouble with the ciphers." Kit could not sort his mind into any semblance of order. He had imagined his return to the world of politics and intelligence since he had left it, but he'd fancied the event itself would feel somewhat different. The purse that Sir Francis pressed into his hand barely registered, though he stowed it in his pocket as securely as if it mattered. It was hardly pay now, rather the bribe you pass a politician to offset the threat you made to cut out his tongue.

"We will be in correspondence, Marlowe," Sir Francis said curtly. He left the letters where they had fallen and retreated again toward the door. His passing cast a long, distorted shadow against the wall of books, darkening the names on their spines. "Remember what I've said." He opened the door, and in a moment Kit was alone again.

Suddenly exhausted, he sank back into the chair and slumped forward, his head in his hands. The blending of Cambridge and London in one enclosed space felt like two continents crashing against one another. This sort of thing could not be done without earthquakes. The book-covered desks of the

Cambridge library, the faint odor of tobacco drifting from the clothes he had not changed since the night before, the bombastic romanticism of *Tamburlaine the Great* open and half-drafted on the bed in his dormitory, what did any of it matter when Queen Elizabeth and her entourage could burst in at any moment and bend him to their will? What was real, Aeneas or assassinations, Seneca or Scotland? And what in God's name was he supposed to do with any of it?

He heard the door open again, and he shot his head up with a swift intake of breath. He was back, he wasn't finished, he'd brought others with him...

"Kit? What in God's name are you doing up? It's not yet seven."

Tom. Standing half-through the door with a volume of Plato under one arm, meaning to return it before anyone noticed it was missing. Of all the people he might have expected to meet at that hour, Kit did not figure among them. He looked helplessly at Tom. What was he supposed to say? Sir Francis had taken his most precious possession: his ability to speak freely, even to Tom. Advancement, renown, status, all was still the substance of fancy, but at what a cost. An honesty barely born before it was gagged.

"I passed a man on the way here I'd never seen before. He looked as if he'd just left. Did you happen to see..." Tom broke off abruptly. He had seen the red hand-shaped mark rising on Kit's face. "Christ. What happened?" He sat in a chair beside Kit, leaving only inches between them, and set the volume of Plato on the table. Tom might have thought that the sudden resulting catch in Kit's throat was from his touch as he laid one hand gently on his thigh. He had not seen the three pieces of paper in unmarked envelopes, now safely hidden from sight beneath the leather covers of long-dead Greek philosophy. "It's all right. You can tell me."

"It's nothing," he said weakly, turning away.

"For God's sake, clearly it's not nothing. Do you think I'm an idiot? It's something to do with that man, isn't it? He's come to see you, and it's upset you."

Kit would have denied it, but hearing these words brought him to the verge of a scream. Tom

had seen Sir Francis. And if he were to guess, what then? His own life was in the balance as it was. Tom could not be brought into it. Not Tom. “Nothing’s upset me. I’m all right. I’m tired, that’s all. You know how I hate being awake in the morning.”

The lie was weak. Almost as weak as his resolve to keep the truth to himself. Tom left one hand on Kit’s leg, but the other tapped its fingers anxiously against the table, counting out the rhythm of a question fighting to be asked. “Just... just tell me one thing, would you?” He faltered. “It’s not... you’re not... you haven’t been going to... to town, have you?”

Kit turned his head to look at him, brow furrowed in disbelief. “Have I been to a whorehouse, do you mean?” he said blankly.

Now it was Tom’s turn to flush and look elsewhere. “If you have, at least have the decency to tell me,” he mumbled. “I know you want to have, well, enough of... *what?*”

He broke off in irritation, and Kit could hardly blame him. He’d have done the same in his position, but he couldn’t help it. The idea of his imminent bruise and distracted demeanor being the result of an overzealous employee of Mistress Howard was so far off the track of his overloaded brain that he could not control his laughter. Prostitutes? Jealousy? Oh God, if it were only that.

“Christ, no! What do you think one of those snag-toothed whores could give me that you couldn’t? If you can’t trust me to be faithful, I don’t know what you want. Do you want me to call in the rector and have him perform the marriage rites this evening? I imagine he’ll have some reservations, but I’m game for trying.” He did his best to laugh through it, as if Tom’s jealousy were the only thing weighing on his mind, but he could tell that he was not as successful as he might have hoped. For all he couldn’t believe Tom cared what happened to him in the way he desperately wanted to be cared about, he could not help but wish that in this case, his well-meaning concern could be less apt. It had taken so long to see those blue eyes, that face, that body, and call it his. And now to put it all in danger, on the provocation of seeing a man leave a library where he did not belong... His stomach turned. He shouldn’t be keeping anything from Tom. But for the sake of the hand that held him, the

body intertwined with his in the dark, the mind that kept his secrets, he would lie, and lie, and lie.

“And that man? Who was he? I don’t suppose he’s about to bring any more news that will keep you away two months for something that ought only to take two weeks?”

Damn it all, Tom, why must you only ask questions about things it’s better you don’t know? He swallowed heavily. Entirely too close to the trail for comfort. “He was one of my father’s creditors,” he said after a pause he knew had been too long even as he broke it. “He brought news from Kent. For once, the news was good. I should be so lucky as to get news like that every day.”

The lie was not entirely enough to satisfy Tom. He had grown up with a lawyer for a father: he could tell when a man was telling the truth and when he perjured for his own purposes. But if his father knew the traits of honesty, he knew the workings of Kit Marlowe even better, and he could tell that he would not get any more satisfaction then. Not that he had any intention of giving up. The longer he was denied, the more certain he was that these silent secrets needed to be spoken. Opportunity was all.

“You’ll let me know if anything happens, won’t you? You can always tell me.” *One of these days, you could even begin by telling me the truth.*

To Tom’s surprise, in a moment he found himself and Kit in a tight embrace, that dark head he had spent weeks missing buried in his shoulder. It took only a moment for his body to catch up from the surprise, though his mind still grappled with this sudden, unexpected vulnerability. Kit? Afraid? It was as likely as Norgate declaring the next day a holiday. But nothing was ever impossible.

“I’m sorry,” Kit said softly after they had pulled apart, the apology unspecific and awkward. *I’m sorry I can’t say more. I’m sorry I said too much.*

Tom smiled and kissed him gently on the cheek, his lips brushing the tender flesh that had already begun to bruise. “Don’t be sorry,” he murmured. “You don’t need to apologize to me.”

He let the conversation hang like that, unfinished. Unsatisfied. Untouchable. The light in the library had begun to shift from a washed-out grey to a pale yellow, on its way to the clear blue of a winter’s morning.

If only Greek were as useful as Sir Francis seemed to believe. He could work his way through the Platonic dialogues with a respectable rate of comprehension, but that did nothing to help him through the monstrosity of Lady Mary's letters. Kit had known she was a viciously intelligent woman. What he had not realized was how that intelligence could mock him even across a distance of hundreds of miles. Half the symbols on the page were only scratched lines, others tiny geometric shapes, with a handful here and there that could have been English or Greek. Most, if he was being honest, looked like scribbles by a child newly equipped with a pen. If Mary's intention were to confound the reader, she would be thrilled to learn of her resounding success.

The candle flame guttered out in a small sigh of smoke, and Kit groaned softly and slumped forward onto the desk, head resting on his forearms. He did not know what time it was, but at the last tolling of the bell he'd heeded, it was two in the morning. He had burned through a full candle, and still he had accomplished nothing. Which seemed to be his principle state of being these days.

Now that the spitting candle had been silenced, the only sound in the darkness was Tom's soft and regular breathing from where he lay fast asleep, burrowed in Kit's bed. He had been of more comfort that evening than he realized, knowing exactly what Kit needed in order to think of nothing. His expertise was such that Kit had to wonder whether he was really as innocent about this kind of love as he claimed. His fear of discovery said one thing, the way he manipulated Kit's vulnerable body into a separate plane of existence said another. But this unsubstantiated jealousy was a pathetic attempt to keep his mind off darker matters. Once Tom had drifted to sleep sometime near midnight, he disentangled himself from the sheets, careful not to wake him, and slit open the letters. That had been hours ago, and as yet he had only succeeded in giving himself a pounding headache.

Tom continued to dream in undisturbed quiet, his breathing soft and regular. It was unnerving, trying to function in a different world than someone mere feet away. But closing the distance would have necessitated explaining what he was thinking about, and he could not take that risk.

He sighed and reached into his drawer for another candle. After a few minutes' hard work – after half past two in the morning, even the most menial tasks increased exponentially in difficulty – he had the flickering light he needed to delve back into the cipher. Maybe he was going about this the wrong way, he thought, and tapped the tip of his pen against his teeth. There had to be a limited number of symbols, that was just how language worked. Each symbol to a sound, or to a set of sounds. Isolate the letters, then judge how often they repeated. Vowel sounds more often than others, s's and m's nearly as often... And searching for repeated letters could only help. He was bound to find some, “queen,” “assassin,” among others.

It was a puzzle, he thought, reaching for another page. It was a puzzle the way Latin was a puzzle, the way the tripartite singularity of the Holy Trinity was a puzzle, the way the secrets of the human heart were a puzzle. And damn it all if he would quit before he found the key. Kit hunched low over the desk and returned to his work, until night was at odds with morning.

XIV

Christmas at Cambridge was a subdued affair. Torn between their zealous adherence to the Son of God as the source of all possible celebration and their mistrust of anything resembling loosening discipline or morality, the masters frowned severely on excessive displays of mirth. Worship of Christ was heightened until the scholars of Corpus were convinced they spent more time in the chapel than out of it. Even for Tom, who held the refrains of *Jesu Sacris Dominum* in as high esteem as any, it was becoming dispiriting. Advent was spent gazing aimlessly out the windows at the drifts of glittering snow piling up on the green and considering the sinfulness of the world.

But even the indomitable university rector could not preach ceaselessly, and when Nick proposed stealing away from campus that evening to seek some better cheer in town, Tom jumped at the chance. He could understand solemnity and self-affliction on Good Friday or during Lent – after all, suffering was the word of the day in those particular passages of Scripture. But if he was meant to mark the birth of the Savior of All Mankind with a tepid boredom verging on despair, something was out of order. He didn't think Kit would need much persuading to join them, even if it did mean a few more hours with Nick than his patience might have liked. But to his surprise, dragging him from his dormitory was as difficult as getting the proverbial rich man into heaven. He had work, he said. A seven-week absence did not come easily. But the papers he stowed away when Tom entered the room didn't look scholastic. Latin hardly merited such secrecy. He almost thought Kit accepted the invitation at last only to stop him asking more questions.

They managed to commandeer their favorite table in the White Stag, in the far corner away

from the door. The roaring fire drained the chill of the walk from them and melted the snow from the tops of their boots, leaving small puddles of dirty water beneath the table. They drew four chairs around the table intended for two, a man to a side with barely enough space for their drinks and Kit's elbows to rest on it at once. It was a relief, the way the room bore the stamp of a more honest holiday than the steadfast piety on the other side of town. A table near the door, already much farther into their cups than the students, reached the climactic notes of a bawdy carol Christ would have blushed to hear his name inserted into. It felt like London, Tom thought: warm and close and transgressive for the fun of it, yet harmless in its raillery. It felt like home.

“Well, you're doing well enough for yourself, aren't you, Morley? Moving up in the world, though I can't guess how you managed it.”

He felt Kit stiffen beside him: clearly his dislike of Nick's acquaintances was not exclusive. “It's *Marlowe*, Stephen,” he said through gritted teeth. Tom nudged him gently with an elbow, reminding him that a tavern at Christmastime was neither the place nor the time for a fight. Kit took a testy drink of sack. Not that alcohol would help matters, but at least the act of drinking kept him quiet.

“He's not wrong, though,” Nick remarked lazily. He leaned his chair onto two legs, so that its back rested against the smoke-stained tavern wall. “Time was we couldn't take you drinking without you holding your empty glass out as a beggar's cup, and now you come along like this?”

“Are we paying our servants gold now, so to dress up the paupers for when people of quality come to visit? Fill the public schools with silk, and let every tradesman's son put on airs.”

It was reassuring to know that there were people less aware of when a joke turned cruel than Nick Skeres. What was less comforting was that he appeared to be friends with all of them. But Tom had noticed that Kit no longer dressed as shabbily as had been his custom. The change had not been ostentatious. It couldn't be, not with the solid grip of respectable Protestantism that choked the happiness out of the college, even at Christmas. A pair of boots without a hole in the heel, trousers that fit properly across the thighs (he would admit to no one why he had noticed this). Yes, the leather of

his new doublet was soft enough for a lady's glove, but what of it? If he had found a way to feed his purse, all the joy in the world to him for it. And yet, there was the question of Norgate's appearance in October, his disappearance, the strange severe man leaving the library at dawn...

"If you're watching my clothes because you'd like to do my portrait, Ramsay," Kit said to Stephen, "you need only ask. I'd be flattered if you kept my figure for posterity." Tom could have cast him a medal for keeping a civil tongue in his head.

"I'd have it hanged in my chamber, on anticipation of the day you follow its lead." Stephen tossed back his response and his cup in one motion.

"Can we go an hour without your being an ass, Ramsay?" Tom asked with a sigh. "It's nearly Christmas, after all."

"Oh, don't talk about Christ while I've something left to drink." Kit rolled his eyes. "As if I preferred meditating on the sufferings of Christ on the cross to all else. If they'd caught sack from his side instead of blood, the Holy Grail might be worth something." Tom made no comment on this. After four years of listening to Kit's increasingly reckless denunciations of God in all His varied forms, such trifles as this were hardly worth noting, especially when he had so clearly been goaded into it. He didn't think it was entirely his imagination that Kit's heresy had become more violent since his return, but there had not yet been a tactful way of bringing this up.

"You'll all be leaving soon for the holiday, then?" Kit asked, steering the subject into more mundane waters. Tom could hear the invitation latent in the question: for what it's worth, Ramsay, you might as well leave now.

"Tomorrow," Stephen replied. "Nick has less to travel, he won't leave for a few days yet."

"I intend to squander my time as effectively as I can before my mother calls me to account for it." Nick grinned and pressed a gold angel into the palm of one of Mistress Howard's girls on her way by, who winked and tucked it into her bosom. Tom rather doubted the advance payment was meant for drink.

“And you, Tom?”

“I’m staying, in fact,” he said. “My father’s to go to France on business.” It was a lie, and a weak one at that, but he had his own reasons for remaining at Cambridge when the better part of its students were scattered throughout the counties. Reasons that Nick Skeres and Stephen Ramsay, at least, did not need to trouble themselves with.

“And you’ll be here as well, Morley? Unless the Master decides to send you to Whitehall for the holiday to play the fool for the Queen. Who knows? Her Majesty might find it amusing to play with you a bit, to watch you dance.” Now Stephen was deliberately being obtuse. Tom began to say something, to point out that he knew Kit’s name perfectly well. Before he could make the remark, Kit had stood up coldly. His chair made the jarring *bang* of a gunshot as it fell to the floor. The loud undertones of drunkards faded at the noise, surprised into silence.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen,” he said, and Tom could hear the shout lurking behind his words, “there’s work I still need to do before morning. You know how it is for those of us who don’t have a county and a coat of arms to live on. Or maybe you don’t.”

“Kit, come on, don’t be so dramatic,” Nick groaned, but Kit had already turned and pushed his way through the tavern and out again into the street.

Mistress Howard, by this time, had bustled over. The sound of falling furniture presaged nothing good for her establishment. “Now, boys, I run a respectable house. I won’t have any commotion here, not under my roof, do you hear me?”

“Not to worry,” Nick said laconically, “our commotion’s just left. Oh, for God’s sake, Tom, not you as well.” For Tom had already risen and was through the door himself, leaving Nick and Stephen alone at the table piled over with half-glasses of sack.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into Tom,” Nick muttered, more to his drink than to Stephen. “You’d think he were a compass and Marlowe his north, he points so to him.”

“Don’t waste your time with them.” Stephen grinned as the recipient of Nick’s angel sauntered

over to their table and took the chair Tom had just vacated. “I reckon I know where my own needle’s going to point tonight. And a merry Christmas to you.”

~*~

The twilight vigil on Christmas Eve scarcely found enough listeners to make its delivery worthwhile. Most of Corpus’ scholars had vacated the city, bound for the comforts of their respective hearths and homes. The rector’s voice echoed off the exposed stone floors and wooden benches, giving the impression of a hundred ghostly fathers preaching Christian love and tolerance from just out of sight. There was hardly a need for the rector to take his place in the pulpit and proclaim the Word of the Lord. The scholars had heard the same passages read as many times as they had seen winters, until the stones themselves seemed to murmur, “Be not afraid: for behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy.” The dusky light that fell through the chapel’s high windows gave the pews a greyish tint, colored by the steadily falling snow.

Kit sat quietly at the very back of the chapel, fenced in on both sides by poor scholars who genuinely seemed to believe that the Word of the Lord could save them. The back pews were closer packed than those in the front, for all that there was a total of twelve students on scholarship in the whole of the college. None of them, of course, had left Cambridge for the holiday. Where were they to go? Jesus called the poor the closest to heaven, but apparently this depended on keeping them to the back of the church. But then, when Christ spoke of the poor, he most likely did not have in mind people who dealt with their poverty the way Christopher Marlowe did.

He let the sermon wash over him, hearing every word and listening to none. Was it all worth it? Was it worth lying and murder so that English schoolboys would sing “Glory be to God in the high heavens,” instead of “Glory to God on high” as they had done under Queen Mary and the old Catholic kings? He had been assured again and again by both sides that the opposing queen was a heathen, a heretic, a nonbeliever and a follower of Satan. But were there any differences in the wording of Scripture that justified what he was working toward with Sir Francis? What God could sit idly by and

watch as men and women schemed and wrote coded letters and planned assassinations in his name?

“And all that had heard it, wondered at the things which were told them of the shepherds. And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God...”

Each empty word from the rector drained away the little that remained of the church schoolboy he had once been, exorcising the child from him and leaving only the wasted, withered cynic. Quite the God, that was born in a stable but restricted the interpretation of his words to those who could pay for their meaning of choice. It was not, he thought bitterly, even as if the Gospels were particularly well written. Every sentence started with a conjunction, and there was no imagination in metaphor, no beauty to the language except the books that were not to be read in polite company. At least the Song of Songs knew that the word “passion” did not always involve nails and a crown of thorns. If he were put to write a new religion, he would at least put some effort into the aesthetic. The whole of the New Testament was as filthily composed as the worst Latin composition of a first-form schoolboy. Any rhetorician worth his salt could do better.

But all this was merely to avoid his true thoughts. Nick and Stephen’s taunts in the White Stag haunted him still, not so much for their content as for how dangerously close they were to landing a hit. But even that, tonight, was secondary. There was another piece of blasphemy on his mind that ordinarily had no business in a house of God, even a defunct, bankrupt deity.

“Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and overthrew those cities, and all their inhabitants.”

Kit started. Surely they had not returned all the way to Genesis. He felt the slick of sweat on his palms, and the back of his neck burned. No. He was only hearing things. The rector continued to paint the same scene of the Nativity, those button-eyed donkeys and placid dumb cows watching the flopping, wailing infant who had somehow colonized their feed trough. There was no way he could have known where Kit’s eyes had been wandering, away from the diagonal slants of twilight on the slate floor and to the pew in the third row where Tom’s gold-blond head was bowed silently in dutiful

prayer. If there was a God, surely he had better things to do than trace the beams of Kit's eyes and thunder when he found something he disapproved of.

In any case, the distance between them was enough to satisfy the most celibate Levite. The chapel was not wide, but it was long, and the difference between their pews was enough to intimidate an unpracticed archer. But how comforting it would be to feel the warmth of his body against his own bare skin, the weight of him against his chest, the smell, the sound of his voice making sounds that were not words as they –

“And looking toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, behold, he saw the smoke of the land mounting up as the smoke of the furnace.”

He heard it, but faintly, as one filters the power out of words one knows to be false. All this from a God whose idea of morality oscillated between drowning the whole world and turning the other cheek, predetermined damnation from the Lutherans and predetermined salvation from the Anabaptists. He must be forgiven for doubting the absoluteness of any moral dogma that could not make up its mind between unjustifiable vengeance and pardoning even the most whole-hearted sinners. At least the Devil was consistent. Consistent as the death of a young girl who deserved nothing more than life. Consistent as an ever-enduring lie, when truth was too quiet to pierce the length of a chapel or the mask of a servant's blank expression. Consistent as a set of written symbols on the page, never changing, always present with that same taunting intangibility. Just outside his reach. Still in the shadows. Seated so far behind the slanted beam of light that made that golden head dimly radiant through the dark. Always present, never turning.

“The word of the Lord.”

“Thanks be to God.”

XV

15 February, 1586

Tom interlaced his fingers and rested his chin on them. “Your move.”

“I know it,” Kit replied, watching the chessboard through narrowed eyes as though he expected the pieces to shift independently. “You can’t rush tactical genius.”

“God help the battalion you were in command of. You’d sit around composing poetry about the thrill of conquest, and in love with the sound of your own voice you’d forget to charge.”

“You don’t reckon I’d storm the field like it was Agincourt and live in legend for centuries?” The corners of the wooden castle pressed against his palm as he plotted his move.

“Not unless there was an alehouse waiting for you on the other side of the wall.”

Kit shifted the piece a few squares to the left, hesitated a moment, then removed his hand. Tom’s queen had been exposed, opening an opportunity for a reckless pawn to surge forward in a romantic suicide mission. But though he and Tom were both seated at opposite ends of the same chessboard, they were playing vastly different games. Since Christmas, or more accurately since he had stormed out on Stephen and Nick in the White Stag, Tom had started looking at him differently. Not only because he had flashed his hand a little too clearly that day, but because he knew his thin patience was turning transparent to the thoughts beneath. Tom had said nothing, but it was clear that he knew, or at least suspected, something. Kit, with uncharacteristic trepidation, had to play to win something other than the game. One’s record of victory, after all, was not the only thing to be guarded.

Besides, the thought of toppling Tom’s white queen held no attraction for him that evening.

Another year had passed, he thought. Soon he would be granted his Master of Arts, assuming that nothing else unexpected leapt out of the woodwork. What was he expected to do then? Where was home, if not here? At least there had been no more surprise visits from Whitehall, he thought, his hand traveling to rest thoughtfully on the pointed figure of his bishop. He could not thank God enough that after delivering the letters, Walsingham had left him largely to his own devices in the matter, though the constant threat of observation loomed large. For God's sake, it was his birthday in less than two weeks. Let the next year take on the responsibilities of a kingdom. The tail end of his twenty-first wanted nothing more than to die quietly and unnoticed.

"What are you thinking about?"

The question took Kit by surprise. "The Exodus," he said spontaneously. That was the beauty of the human mind: always prepared with an idiotic empty remark to serve when the time came. As if there were ever a simple, concise answer to the question, "What are you thinking about?"

"What?" If Tom had been hoping to hear what really caused Kit to take so long to move a single bishop, this was not the answer he had expected. "Moses, you mean, and the burning bush?"

"Think about it, would you? Moses led the Israelites for forty years through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan. Have you ever looked at a map of the Holy Land? Even a man with a drunk's sense of direction might have done the journey in less than a year. So was God turning Moses around in circles for four decades? It's an affront to any man's credulity, that's what it is."

"Speaking of an affront to credulity," Tom muttered. He stroked the carved horse's head of his knight with one finger, though he made no move to play it. "How stupid do you think I am?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Neither do I, and that's the problem." Tom sighed and leaned back in his chair. "You've been strange since you've been back."

"Are you planning on moving today? Or can I call it checkmate?"

"Don't try to change the subject. You know you haven't been yourself."

“I’ve been tired. That’s all. You know how much sleep I haven’t gotten.” Kit could hear how hollow his voice sounded, and based on Tom’s creased brow he wasn’t alone. He could fend off these questions for two months, maybe three, but sooner or later he would run out of answers. It was better not to think about what would happen then. “Would you light a candle? It’s getting dark.”

Anything to get Tom to step away, to give him a few seconds to pull his face and his mind back together. Tom looked at him askance, but then he stood and crossed to the desk, where Kit kept a small store of candles on hand for midnight writing. Out of his line of sight for a brief moment, Kit closed his eyes and allowed himself two deep, slow breaths. *Just stay calm. Rational. In control. He doesn’t know anything. No one does.*

“What in God’s name...” Kit’s eyes flew open in horror. He stood up quickly enough to nearly overturn the chessboard. Tom stood at the desk, an unlit candle in one hand, a paper in the other. A paper covered in hieroglyphic symbols, beneath which lay his scratched attempts at imposing logic. How could he have forgotten the cipher? He always kept it out of sight, always hidden somewhere safe when it was not actually on his person. How could he have been so stupid? “Kit. What is this.”

Under no circumstances will you share this information with anyone. You will not speak of this meeting to anyone. You have never met me, and the Queen’s spies do not exist.

“It’s nothing. Really.” His voice sounded odd in his ears, too high. A few words more and he would give way to hysterics. “Put that away, would you?” He made to grab the letter, but Tom was faster and stepped to the side, turning all his attention to the page. Idiot. Show it’s important and of course he would hold on twice as close. “Tom, let it go, it’s nothing.”

“It’s nothing and I’m the Prince of Parma,” Tom snapped. “God’s blood, what are you doing? You disappear for two months and then start taking visits from strange men, you’re more paranoid than the Queen herself, and now this? What *is* this? Some kind of code? What are you trying to – *what?*”

Kit had abandoned all attempts to reclaim the letter. He had sprinted from the desk to the door opposite and slammed it shut with a snap. Under Tom’s dumbfounded watch, he drew the bolt across.

It might already have been too late. Anyone might have heard in passing, and there had been more than enough said for an educated guess.

“Would you keep your voice down, in the devil’s name?” he hissed. “Do you want to get me killed?”

Tom looked at him, then at the letter, then back again. The cipher. The disappearances. The sudden fear in his eyes as he stood in obvious terror of discovery, in his own room. So many pieces coming together so quickly, inches away from making a complete picture. “Kit, talk to me. What’s happened to you?”

He closed his eyes. So much for safety. So much for keeping the dangers for himself. He had to say it. “You want to know what’s happened?” he repeated. “Would it surprise you to learn that I’ve been working as a spy to thwart an assassination against the crown, and if I don’t break that cipher in your hands by about yesterday, the whole of England is going to collapse into pieces?”

The paper fluttered out of Tom’s suddenly numb hand and landed face-down on the desk. “You’re a what?” Kit sighed. This was going to require an explanation. But it was already too late. The gates had been opened, and the flood could not be turned back.

“You heard me.” He took a few slow steps back away from the door. Tom’s eyes followed his every move. “I work for the royal spymaster. He has me secretly employed by the Queen’s enemies, listening for plots against her life. Do you see why I need you to keep quiet?”

Tom looked at him like the Pharisees must have looked at Lazarus. He said nothing, though his face seemed paler than usual, and it was plain that his mind was working at a desperate pace. What was he expected to say to something like that? “So when you left in November, you were hiding among recusant Catholics and listening at keyholes,” he said at last.

“That’s one way of putting it, though not the most poetic.”

“I don’t believe you.” Tom shook his head, as if that would do anything to change the words. “I don’t believe it. Who in his right mind would hire *you* to spy for the Queen?”

“I asked myself the same question. Apparently my innate gifts for making a nuisance of myself are highly valued in London. Why would I make up a lie this ridiculous, unless it were the truth?”

“Because you’re Kit Marlowe, and you haven’t ever told me a lie that wasn’t twice as mad as it needed to be. You tried to convince Master Williams you hadn’t finished your translation of Musaeus because you’d been visited by the Holy Spirit.”

“I forgot about that. Can you believe he almost took my word for it?”

“Be serious,” Tom snapped. He snatched the letter up from the desk again and thrust it in front of him. “How am I supposed to believe this... this... it doesn’t make sense.” Even as he said it, Kit could hear the conviction inching away from his words. It did, in fact, make sense. It made more sense than he wanted to admit.

Of course this was difficult for Tom to swallow. If their positions had been reversed, he’d have laughed Tom all the way to Cornwall. But it was maddening that for the first time in months he was telling the truth, and it was only now that anyone began to doubt him. The switch from keeping everything secret to making everything understood was abrupt and disorienting, but he could not pretend that there was not some relief to it, at last speaking an honest sentence.

“Have a closer look at that letter in your hand,” he said, the phrase oddly measured now that the initial thrill of discovery had faded. “You see how it’s signed?”

Tom looked at the bottom of the page, beneath the lines of shapes and symbols. There were only two letters in any recognizable alphabet, two thin, spiky letters sketched grandly for a signature.

“M.R. What do you think that stands for?”

“If you think I have any idea what kind of mad people you’re writing to...”

“Mary Regina.” His seriousness sent Tom into silence. “Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, captive under house arrest of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. Do you think there’s a woman in all of England more likely to want the Queen out of the way than Margaret Tudor’s daughter, and the only legitimate child left in the royal line if you count, as many do, that Anne Boleyn was a harlot and her daughter a

half-breed tyrant? Just look at the way she has her men address her. *Mary Regina*. Mary the Queen.”

“Do you need to *shout* these things, for God’s sake?” Tom hissed, suddenly very white. He flung the letter back onto the desk as if he were afraid to touch it.

“So you appreciate how serious this is.”

“Clearly better than you do, if you think it a good idea to proclaim that the Queen’s an illegitimate usurper at the top of your voice.” Kit, of course, had been speaking under his breath, while five minutes ago it had been Tom’s voice that carried, but that did not matter. Anything louder than a thought was too loud. “For God’s sake, what have you gotten yourself into? Are you telling the truth?”

Kit sighed. He had almost forgotten what that meant, telling the truth. “The only truth I have left.” He hadn’t realized, before fear and circumstance drew his confession from him like a prisoner on the rack, how much he needed Tom to understand what he was saying, and to accept it. If he hid his soul from Tom, in all its shades of grey and treachery and half-truths, everything was a lie. He could not continue to live in silence. It frightened him, to think that someone besides Sir Francis now knew his secrets. But at the same time, it was oddly thrilling.

“I don’t know why,” Tom said slowly, shaking his head, “as it’s the maddest thing I’ve heard since you told me that Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest, but I think I do believe you.”

“Am I always the source of the maddest things you hear?” Kit asked. “To be fair, I was drunk when I said that.” Tom had just penetrated the shadows that had surrounded his life for months. In so doing, he had crossed a line that could never be un-crossed. He sat again at the table behind the chessboard, rubbing the pad of his thumb across the rounded top of the queen. It was easier to look at it than at Tom, to imagine what he must think of him now. What kind of man would he take him for?

“So now you know,” he said quietly. “And you know why I can’t tell anyone else, and neither can you. Because if they find out you know, if they know that I’ve told you...” He faltered, feeling all the while Tom watching him intently from across the room. “You’re safe, so long as they think you don’t know anything. If anything were to happen to you, I...” *I’d kill myself for it*, but the words would

not form. The selfishness of the faint comfort he still felt repulsed him. He had put Tom in danger. If he could have snatched the words back, turned back time and undone what he had done...

He would not have done it. He was not so noble as he might have liked to believe. He needed him on his side.

“You know I won’t say anything,” Tom said softly. “How stupid do you think I am? You tell me to keep a secret and I’ll do it. Just, please. Promise me you’ll stop with these surprises. At least for tonight.”

Tom did look somewhat ill, Kit thought, which was understandable. “No more surprises,” he agreed with a faint smile. “How about, in fact, no more words at all.”

~*~

There had been a time when he had cared intimately about each lecture he attended at Corpus Christi. He could not exactly remember when this time had been, but he knew that at least for a period, the masters’ voices as they stood before the recitation hall like a priest before the altar had thrilled him like he had touched on some secret he was not meant to have. But something had changed. Kit had not paid attention to a sentence from beginning to end for ten minutes, and that had been about the Ptolemaic model of celestial calculation. Or something. What did any of it matter? The planets could circle around the earth, or they could form a triangle around Jupiter, or they could all dance a rondo around the Queen for all he cared, and his problems would remain unchanged.

High ceilinged and windowless, the recitation hall was dominated by rows of wooden seats staggered in height thirty deep, the indoor equivalent of a Grecian amphitheater. At the base of this wall of desks, in which a hundred and fifty upper-form students currently scrawled notes on Egyptian astronomy, was a small stage. Here Master Haywood stood and droned endlessly, barely pausing for breath. His Latin monotone was so rapid that his audience could hardly keep pace with their pens.

Among the attentive scholars, as always, the exception underscored the rule. Near the back of the hall, Nick Skeres (who had let an unbecoming beard grow in since the autumn) sketched lewd

pictures of scantily clad women in the margins of his notes, grinning as he shared the ink-and-paper bosoms with Stephen Ramsay to his right. Henry Seymour, thin and sickly-looking, had fallen asleep with his mouth open, and Sidney Mortimer was holding a silent contest to see how many times he could tickle his nose with the feather of his pen before he sneezed or woke. And Kit, surrounded by a sea of intent note-takers, gazed with equal focus at a different set of papers.

It was a risk, bringing the letters into the lecture hall where anyone could see them, but he was running out of time. His time at Sheffield had not improved his less-than-exemplary attendance record. Skipping any more lectures was likely to jeopardize his Master of Arts degree expected that summer. But the snows of February were beginning to fade. March was approaching. Sir Francis could not be put off much longer.

And yet the cipher continued to thwart him at every turn, until it felt as though the pages were laughing at him when he threw them aside. There had to be a key. Some pattern he was overlooking. *Come on, Kit, you're smarter than this. You've got to find it, and find it fast. But don't let it show. You're taking notes on the motion of Jupiter, after all. Nothing too stimulating.*

He sighed and turned his attention again to the scrap of paper to the side of the letters, ready to shield his project at a moment's notice. Beside the odd line of verse that still, despite everything, occurred to him at inappropriate times, he had sketched six potential keys to Babington's cipher, formulated by the prevalence of each symbol in both the code and in English, then organized by probability. If anyone had seen him developing these charts, they would have thought him possessed by some kind of mad spirit that forced him to write in tongues rather than speak them. Fortunately he had kept them from the sight of everyone but Tom, who at this point would have been more surprised if Kit hadn't been up to some kind of unintelligible intrigue.

Under the guise of astronomical curiosity, he had so far applied three of the six possible keys to the first phrase of the letter, eliciting a different string of meaningless gibberish every time. Half his work, worthless. If the other half proved likewise, and the odds were increasingly supportive of this, he

would soon be pleading his excuses to Walsingham from the wrong end of a noose.

“Sic videmus motus orbium claris exemplaribus demonstrari, neque informationes haereticas Copernici...”

The student on Kit’s right looked at him in some surprise, which was understandable. A Latin explanation of the celestial spheres was genuinely not that interesting, and yet Kit had suddenly sat up rigidly straight with a gasp. This, he thought, must be what a condemned man feels like when the sword meant for his beheading instead names him a knight. Moments ago, the page had contained nothing but scribbles and geometric shapes. But under his fourth cipher key, instead of a string of unpronounceable consonants, he was now staring at a very distinct, very legible, very English phrase.

“My trusty and well-beloved servant.”

Words. My God, words.

The light tap on his shoulder made him jump as though someone had broken the silence with a scream. But it was only the student to his right, who looked on with uncomprehending concern.

“Are you all right, Marlowe?” he asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Kit worked furiously to create a blank expression, though his heart beat so fast he was sure his neighbor could hear it. “Fine,” he said vaguely. “Just... just made sense of something, that’s all.”

Let him think he’d had an epiphany about the motion of the universe. This rendered the planets themselves irrelevant. He bent his head low over his paper, breathless. Would the key hold? It had to hold. It must. Thank God the lecture was almost three hours long. He’d never been so grateful for a chance to feign taking notes. He would need it.

“My trusty and well-beloved servant, according to the zeal and entire affection which I have known in you towards the Common Cause of Religion, and mine, having always made account of you as a worthy member to be employed in one and the other...”

Kit squinted at the paragraph. The deciphering was swift, accurate, easy as anything now he had the key. They were all words, perfectly solid and English words. Still, he read the phrase over

three times before he was convinced he had understood it. Mary Stuart was a clever woman, a wise woman, and a crafty. A rhetorician? Not in the least. If this letter was to be her undoing, at the very least she might have put in the effort for a second draft.

“I have long ago showed what the English have done against the king of Spain and to the Catholics here remaining, exposed to all persecutions and cruelty. Now, to ground substantially our enterprise, and to bring it to good success, you must examine duly: what forces you may raise among you, and what captains you shall appoint for them, in case a general cannot be had.”

Captains? Generals? Jesus Christ above. This was not a lone assassin’s dagger concealed in a shirtsleeve. Mary Stuart was raising an army.

“Now, for that there can be no certain day appointed for the accomplishment of our designs, I would that you should take me out of this place before the event, and be well assured to set me in the midst of a good army where I may safely stay till the assembly of your and our foreign forces.”

Kit shook his head with a faint smile. Oh, Mary. If you find an army, it had best be the greatest fighting force since Agincourt. You’d best sit yourself in the middle of the whole Spanish Armada, my dear, and even then, it might not be enough.

“Take heed of spies and false brethren that are amongst you, and in any case keep never a paper about you that may in any sort do harm. From the like errors have come the commendation of many who would do well, against whom nothing otherwise could justly have proved.” It was sickening, it was the end of the lives of two people he had known, one with some intimacy if the other with some disdain. Yet the dark irony of Mary’s message, written in total confidence from her study in Yorkshire, left him no choice but to laugh. Beware of spies and false brethren. Beware of your own shadow. Ignorance, contrary to belief, was seldom ever bliss.

“God Almighty have you in his protection. Fail not to burn this privately and quickly. Your assured friend, Mary Regina.”

Kit set down his pen. His hand was trembling. The translation he had written out gazed up at

him from the page. Generals. Foreign forces. Our enterprise. Jesus Christ. This was it. This was everything.

As if emerging from an extended period underwater, he looked around him slowly. The hall was empty. Haywood had finished his lecture, and the Cambridge scholars had filed out of the hall to prepare for dinner. Two and a half hours had passed, perhaps more. In his rapt attention, no one had dared interrupt him. He stood up, disoriented, the letters still clutched in his hands. It was fitting, he thought, to be alone at this time. He was standing on the brink of something, looking forward into a strange new world.

“Kit?”

Tom stood impatiently half-in and half-out of the hall, his arms crossed over his chest. He had one eyebrow raised at Kit’s total isolation. If Tom had known what he’d just read, he thought, he’d have raised both eyebrows, not just the one.

“Are you coming to dinner, or did you want to stay here for another hour and ponder the mysteries of the universe?” Tom asked drily. “Haywood finished his lecture fifteen minutes ago. Since when are you an amateur astronomer?”

“Not now.” Something dangerously close to hysteria was bubbling within him. He felt a frightening need to laugh, to sing, anything. “It’s finally happened.”

“What’s happened?” Tom recognized the wild excitement in Kit’s expression, and he did not like it. Excitement after a lecture could bode nothing good.

“I’ve done it, Tom. I’ve finally done it.” He took the steps three at a time down to the floor where Tom stood, clapping the bemused man in a full embrace and kissing him shamelessly on the mouth. Tom stood motionless, as uncomprehending as a goldfish, eyes wide. “And now I need to go.”

“Done what? Go where?”

Kit grinned and seized Tom by the wrist, pulling him forward into the hall that led to Corpus Christi’s dormitories. “I’ve got the letters,” he whispered. “I’ve got them. I need to see someone. I

can't afford to send this by post, and there's no time to wait for him to come to me. We're going to London."

"We?" Tom had been reduced to the basest repetition, unable to form new words. But he would have to start understanding, and quickly.

"Of course, *we*. You don't think I have any idea how to get around London, do you? You grew up in its walls, you know your way around. And weren't you the one who wanted me to start being honest with you?"

XVI

If he were forced to abandon Cambridge in the middle of term on a weak excuse, Tom could think of worse traveling companions than Kit, and worse destinations than London. Other than the years spent within Corpus' walls, he had passed his whole life within five miles of the Thames, and the university's restrictive, puritanical bent was beginning to wear on him. Give him the scent of the docks, the turrets of Saint Paul's at sunset surrounded by the hawking cries of booksellers, the constant crush and motion of strangers at every turn. Things you could read about in books, but which were never the same until you breathed them in. Filtered through nostalgia, he had forgotten the desperate push he felt to get out of London's heavy air, to escape his father's endless recitations of the cases he argued before the bar, into Cambridge's sheltered shadows and hushed walls. Perhaps it would return later, the desperate need to be gone, but distance had sharpened his view and made him better understand. London was in his blood, always had been. And it felt even more natural than he had expected, being back.

The ease with which they negotiated their departure had surprised him. He had hardly needed to unleash any of the lies he had fashioned for the occasion. Tom's attendance, for his own part, had been tarnished only for five days during the whole of his tenure at Corpus, and those when he had come down with a brutal fever that left him hallucinating and delirious in bed. The pretense that his sister had taken ill had scarcely raised eyebrows among the masters. Negotiating Kit as his companion should have complicated matters, but Norgate had given his consent almost as soon as it had been requested. Norgate's lack of protest even in the face of disapproving glances from his colleagues did

not sit well. Now that Tom knew what Kit was hiding, he could see the double-edged world he had been navigating since the past October. Did Norgate know where Kit went when he disappeared from Cambridge for weeks and months at a time? Or did he simply think that, because Sir Francis had expressed interest in him, his actions were beyond reproach? What was hidden, what was implicit, what known and what never to be brought to light? It was dizzying, and he was glad it was not his secret to keep. But now, of course, it was.

Tom's familiarity with the city's rhythm permitted his thoughts to tend to other matters, but Kit was quickly realizing how small and isolated his home in Kent truly was. He had never been to London before. A city was a city, and he knew the taverns, brothels, and cathedrals of home like the back of his hand. What could be different in the seat of the monarchy except for scale? When he imagined what would be waiting for him here, when at Sheffield he had permitted himself to dream of the city that housed the Queen herself under its heavy clouds, he conjured up the same cast of characters that filled Canterbury and Cambridge to stagger beneath the London fog. What was a city but a mass of people and buildings, a backdrop for action?

The London he found had a mind of its own.

They had entered from the south to approach Whitehall as close as they could without attracting attention. Beyond that, Tom had reasoned that Kit would feel less threatened by Bankside than by, perhaps, Fleet Street, or the royal hunting grounds in Hyde Park. Aspects of its pomp and circumstance could take even the seasoned Londoner aback. To the uninitiated, it could be paralyzing. He had not thought of the time Kit had passed lately surrounded by royalty of one sort or another, nor of how much the dirty, squalid memories of poverty haunted him. The throng crowding West Square, the heavy brick walls and mock-Grecian columns of Bethlehem Hospital casting shadows over the street, were more than Kit had prepared himself for. Too much like home, and yet more than that, the poverty with which he was acquainted multiplied beyond imagination, even his. The crush of bodies and the smell of urine and destitution that poured from the square were staggering. There were so

many faces, so many bodies, coming in all directions, holding out empty hands.

“Sir, a penny for bread, sir?”

“Sir, my baby, sir, she ain’t eaten in days, money for food, good sir, God be w’you – “

If they’d known his pockets were as empty as theirs, that his existence on Earth was thanks to the charity and discretion of well-placed strangers, would they have swarmed him so closely? Perhaps. Misery did not confine itself to logic, but rather spread out, amorphous and all-encompassing. Sir Francis should have paid his blood money here, where it could be used.

But the difference between himself and this woman clutching the sleeve of his shirt, imploring him to spare the shilling he did not have, was it really just chance? Or was there something more, some trick of fate that allowed him to sleep warm and safe in a house of scholars while she begged in the cold? There must have been, to explain the revulsion that warmed his blood as she now groped at his hand. He felt her as he felt his mother, the grasping hand of the corpse in the River Cam, grinning at him with toothless pleasure as it dragged him down, down, deeper than ever reached sound. She would take him with her, would drown him in this filthy sea...

Kit snatched his hand from her grasp. *Where do you begin, in a city like this? How can you walk and not feel?*

“What?”

Kit started at Tom’s question. Apparently the boundary between his thoughts and his voice was not so clear as he might have liked.

“Nothing,” he said vaguely, and shook his head. “You know where we are?”

Anything to leave this hell of wandering spirits, siphoning energy from those still susceptible enough to human misery to notice their presence. Even the nebulous threat of Whitehall was preferable to this purgatory. Tom had not seen at the woman, nor had he broken step. His eyes seemed to gloss over her, passing from person to paving stone without registering the difference. He had seen her kind before, and would again. Was it normal to push through a crowd like this with the feeling of being

drowned? Was it normal not to? Tom grew up here. Surely familiarity breeds... well, familiarity, in the way that Kit no longer flinched at two-hour lectures in German or at living weeks at a stretch under an invented name. And yet... And yet, when he saw this crowd, what did he think? Tom did not understand hunger, did not understand want. It was better he didn't. Such alienation made it possible to exist. But this callous selective blindness... He had not expected it.

Tom walked the streets with the familiar grace of the Londoner, weaving through side passages and around hitched horses like a courtier in the steps of a French dance. It was all Kit could do to keep up, to think about nothing but the destination, the marble floors of Whitehall. They would be marble, of course. One did not name a palace "Whitehall" for nothing. And the footman would usher him into the hall, where he would be received by a curt, high-strung Sir Francis torn between needing Kit's information and longing to see him make an ass of himself. And would they bring him forward, to kneel before the raised dais with the high-backed armchair of ornate wood, upholstered with the Tudor scarlet and gold...

But no. The woman who occupied that chair would have nothing to do with him. The Queen would not allow it. If she were to look down from atop that dais through narrowed eyes at his poorly dressed, common-as-earth soul laid bare before her... What would she think then, Her Majesty, when presented with Christopher Marlowe, such as he was? Would she not think as he had when the crone gripped his hand, that there were worlds and oceans between her life and his? He looked at his boots, new not so long ago but already caked over with mud, and felt a wave of nausea. What was he doing here?

"Tom." He had to jog the few paces it took to close the distance between them.

Tom stopped and turned. "Nearly there," he said. "We'll be at the gates well before dark. You'll get your audience tonight, if they're to have you."

"Which is all well and good. But is there somewhere I can get a drink beforehand?"

Tom frowned. He'd known Kit was nervous, and that at some level he was his father's son, but

he had to know that in London, business was conducted differently. “You want to get drunk, then storm the palace and demand an audience with the Privy Council. That’s a bit rich, even for you.”

“Not drunk,” Kit qualified. “I like my head where it’s at. Just, you remember when Nick had to deliver a ten-minute speech on the Trojan War in Greek, and we all thought he would go into hysterics and die there on the spot, but after a drink he got up and stunned us all by knowing the difference between Menelaus and the Myrmidons? It’s... it’s a bit like that.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “I should quite like to see you in hysterics, actually. Could be wildly entertaining.” Kit scowled at him, not trusting himself to make a more articulate remark without becoming ill. “You’ve nothing to be nervous about.”

“Very well for you to say, as you aren’t about to stroll into the palace and lie flat on the floor for the Queen of England to knight you or have your neck broken, according to her pleasure,” Kit said drily. This might be Tom’s city, but there was still so much about it he didn’t know.

“Fair enough.” He clapped Kit on the shoulder with a joviality that fooled neither of them. Tom didn’t think the itching at the base of his neck was his alone. “Let’s put off the Day of Judgment for a few minutes longer. Besides, that was a damned long ride to get here. Maybe a drink will help to ease the pain between my legs.”

“I have a hundred separate inappropriate things to say to that,” Kit said with a wicked smile, “but as we’re nearly in public, just know that I’m thinking of them.”

“Is this a tactful silence from Kit Marlowe?” Tom laughed. “I don’t know how to respond. Clearly the city air has changed you. Come on. I know a place that’s not far off.”

True to his word, the tavern crested the horizon after only a few minutes, and Kit felt a surge of relief like a homecoming at the sight of the emblem reading “The Star and Rose.” Every town had a drinking hole exactly like this one, the same heavy wooden sign in the shape of a coat-of-arms hanging gaudily above the street, the same thick-paned windows sturdy enough to withstand a man’s weight for three out of every four brawls. Here, at least, he knew the rules. It troubled him briefly that the only

place in London he felt truly at home was the taproom of a tavern. It didn't require much perusal of his ancestors to come up with another Marlowe thus inclined. But the feeling was transitory, as Tom pulled back a dirty wooden chair from one of the round tables.

The drawer, a nervous boy of barely eighteen with a stammer from being perpetually yelled at to make haste, dropped two pints of ale in front of them and scurried away again. He had been called to the opposite side of the room, where a raucous group of older men had plainly been occupied in their current pursuits for some hours now and had no intention of leaving. Kit sighed and drank deeply, coating the tattered edges of his nerves with a salve of beer. No matter the city, Cambridge or London or Constantinople, the drunks were always the same. It was good to know there was something solid to come back to, when God and family and country faded like smoke-rings into the air.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and closed his eyes. Soon this comforting reality of loud slurred voices and heady air would melt away, replaced by that stiff marble effigy of Whitehall. Six months ago, he and Tom and Nick had sat like this around a table in the White Stag, composing wildly vulgar versions of hymns to mingled laughter and raised eyebrows. What would he have given for that simplicity, that crude innocence, without the phantom swish of the axe out of the darkness, names and faces that were not what they seemed.

“God, let me tell you, there's nothing in the world like having yourself a wife.”

Maybe it was the effect of taking in the scene with closed eyes. One sense removed, the others became more accurate. Maybe he had heard only what he was meant to hear. The individual threads of men's voices had occasionally disentangled themselves from the weave to reach him on their own. But this was no thread. This was a serpent, and its fangs dug into Kit's wrist, releasing its steady poison. He gripped the edge of the table, trying to will the words away. His mind was always full of ghosts. He was listening to the past. Nothing more. But it came again.

“My wench, she's a pretty thing, let me tell you.” He felt Tom's questioning eyes on him, the look that always knew when he was on the verge of doing something he knew in advance was a

mistake. But Tom did not know that voice. He could not understand. “The stupid slut, treats me like I’m the bloody Roman Emperor now. You have to train them that way. Let ‘em know you’ll have what’s yours. A matter of practice.”

“A husband’s apt to take what’s his, eh?” a second voice laughed, anonymous, irrelevant, because it was not his.

“Oh, and don’t I take what belongs to me. She said she didn’t want it, but she did, they always do. They only say no so they can have the pleasure of watching you try harder. Let me tell you, when I mean to have those breasts, that tender ass, that tight new cunt –“

“Kit, don’t.” Tom didn’t know what was happening, but he had known Kit long enough to be sure that when he stood with that look on his face, someone would feel the consequences. For God’s sake, not now, not when they’d made it to London, not over this... But a churning black cloud had swallowed Kit’s self-control, leaving the echo of that voice, that viper’s voice that he had known from the first was William Bradley’s, repeating over and over, *I take what belongs to me. You know she wanted it. They always do.*

Meg. Meg, with this man, pulling away, protesting, aching all over, and Bradley’s rough hand pawing at her breasts, tearing at her clothes, because he knew what was his, he would take it with his voice and his body, because she was his. And he, a hundred miles away, he had left her there, how had he not known this would happen? Of course he had known. How could he not? And suddenly it was not Meg’s face anymore but Jane’s, pale and wispy and lying flat in a tangle of bloodstained sheets clutched between her legs and screaming, forever screaming... *I take what belongs to me.* And he, apart, alone, letting it all happen from across the country, leaving his sisters to pain and blood...

“You know what belongs to you, you son of a bitch?” Kit shoved his chair back roughly against the table, nearly upending them both. “A warm berth in hell, that’s what.”

The tavern fell silent, its mirth stripped away in an instant. Its occupants were not uneducated in the ways of a fight – they had heard the stranger’s response, and they knew what would come next.

Tom stood up and, with a wary look, placed himself on the opposite side of the table between Kit and Bradley. He shook his head once. But Kit was beyond listening. He stepped to the side to approach slowly his sister's husband, who seemed neither surprised nor disappointed at the development.

"Can't say I expected to see you here," Bradley said lightly. There were by now only a few feet between them. "Don't you spend your time holed up in Cambridge pleasuring priests for your keep?"

The insult rolled easily off Kit's back. He had prepared himself for a fight the first time he had heard Bradley's voice. The room was still silent, though half its occupants were on their feet. The mistress of the tavern appeared from a doorway leading to an adjoining room, bearing the same poised posture as Kit had, waiting for something to happen.

"There will be no fighting in this house!" he heard her say, her voice shrill and on the verge of panic, but it did no good. No one paid her any attention except one man, less drunk than the others, who gave her a warning glare not to interrupt.

"You dare to treat my sister like this." The voice he heard come from his mouth was not his. "You can go and fill another room in hell, you ever even speak of her again. She's worth a hundred of you. You don't deserve to think about her –"

"Let alone fuck her every night?" Bradley was drunk, beyond the point where he could hear a thought in his head and decide it ought not to be spoken. "She's my wife, you mongrel bitch. I'll do with her what I like. Not that you'd have an idea what I mean, would you. You're too busy crowing the cock of your pretty little toy there, aren't you?"

Tom made a move to pull Kit away, but it was too late. A man beside him grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back, trapped in the crowd of spectators hungering for a fight as Kit gritted his teeth and threw himself against Bradley. With surprise and sobriety on his side, he sent him down with a grunt, and Bradley's smile melted away as Kit's fist connected with his face again, and again, and again. He felt Bradley's teeth against his knuckles, the bloodied features swimming out of a background of darkness. To hell with honor. He was out for blood.

The fist connected with his temple before he had seen it coming. Lurid colors flashed in front of his eyes. Kit stumbled backwards against the table, limbs heavy and not his own. He had been wrong. Bradley was larger than he was, but that did not make him slower. He caught his footing, sidestepped out of the way, but he had shifted to the defensive now, a dance backwards instead of ahead. A misjudgment he would have to pay for.

“Not in my house! No fighting in this house!” The crowd kept the mistress back with a rough push. The man had dug his own grave. Let him get out of it as he may. Kit was dazed still but alert, quick. He ducked under Bradley’s sudden sidearm. Three blows of his own connected, quick and tight, but again Bradley was faster than he expected. He caught him by the collar in a moment and threw him hard to the floor – there was barely time for him to fling his hands out to catch himself. The kick to his head made him cry out, sent the room spinning. His hands cradled his head to shield it, a desperate defense against those that followed, constantly, repeatedly. He had lost his breath, lost the ability to stand. He could taste blood. This was not a fight. This was a murder.

“Come on, sir. I’m for you.”

Tom, with strength that surprised even him, pushed off the men who had been holding him back, one by each arm. His knife, long enough to serve for a sword if occasion warranted, slid easily from his belt, and the blade shone coldly through the half-light. Somehow, though he could feel his heart pounding in his ears, his hand did not shake. Bradley took a step back. The momentary silence was deafening. Tom could hear only Kit’s breathing, each inhale a barely audible whimper. Bradley’s fists and his boots glistened with blood. Kit’s blood.

“I’ve no quarrel with you, boy,” Bradley said. His hand traveled easily to his belt, giving his words the lie. The blood against his knuckles caught the shifting light.

“But I’ve one with you. Come on, sir. Come.”

Kit’s vision was blurred, his head humming with the blood rushing in his ears. But he could see Bradley take one more look at Tom’s frozen blue eyes before drawing his own blade. The room grew

louder again, silence broken for panic. The landlady was screaming now. Kit tried to rise but his legs would not support him. Tom's blade met Bradley's, quick and flashing with the precision, the flame, the vengeance of a dueler, the surrounding voices drowned out with the clash of metal on metal.

The knife went between his ribs as easily as goring a rabbit after a hunt. It surprised him, how easily steel cut through flesh. It should have been more difficult. The blood stained Bradley's shirt, spreading outward in scarlet ripples. The knife fell to the floor with a clatter, and the echo rang through the silence. Its echoes lasted long after the movement had stopped. Everything had gone deathly quiet. Tom could hear Bradley's breathing, thick and filtered through the blood that blocked the back of his throat. Those eyes looked at him still.

It was said that the dying were able to see the future. They could prophecy the ends of the living and see the realm of the dead. Somehow he had expected that when he killed a man, he would catch half a glimpse of the shadow of the underworld. But William Bradley did not look wise. He did not look inspired. More than anything, as he sank backward onto the tavern floor, his blood staining the blade of Tom's knife, he looked surprised.

And then if he had seen anything to tell, it was too late.

Tom stood slowly. He wiped his bloodied hands across his trousers, but did not feel it. There was nothing there, as the stunned men around him stared, as the landlady screamed something he could not understand. Tom thought that the first man he killed would mean more to him than this. All he wanted was to wash his hands. The smell of blood was intolerable. He knelt quietly beside Kit, who had begun to sit up slowly, testing his head's capacity to remain upright. He felt Tom's hand softly brush the blood from his brow, and though the contact caused him to wince he did not pull back. Kit hardly remembered that he was surrounded by other men, or that the stabbing pain in his side from his fall merited looking to. All he could see was his own blood on Tom's hands, mixing with Bradley's. Tom's face was almost a permanent feature in his mind's eye, years of familiarity making the image faithful. Never had he seen that face flash with anger like that, nor had there ever been blood on those

hands. It was like seeing him for the first time.

“Stop! In the name of Her Majesty the Queen, we command you to halt!”

Tom turned slowly. The voices sounded small, far away, vacant. Three men in uniform, their swords drawn, kept their weapons turned directly at his chest. Behind them, quivering and nearly eclipsed by their broad shoulders, the young drawer stuttered out his declamation to the force. Of course. He would have run for help the moment tables started to fly. No doubt the frightened landlady had sent him. Tom slowly raised his hands in mute surrender.

“What dead man is this?” the nearest soldier demanded. He prodded Tom in the chest with the point of his sword, the pressure forcing him back half a step as the sharp prick of the weapon drew a single drop of blood from between his ribs. *And that made three.* At last his own, added to the blend.

He did not flinch. “A bastard who deserved it.”

“You confess, then, to murder.”

“As you see,” Tom said blankly, spreading his arms wide, “I am not in the position to deny.”

As the soldier came closer, he made no resistance. He was shoved hard in the back until he stumbled forward, losing his footing in the blood slick on the floor. He felt the cold manacles tighten around his wrists, and then the soldier gripped the chain of the cuffs and hauled him to his feet again. Behind him, he heard Kit moan as the third soldier forced him upright onto legs that would barely support him. Each breath was an effort, but he kept his feet, though he stumbled against Tom’s shoulder when the soldier shoved him forward. The crowd parted mutely to let the two men pass.

“You are under arrest, in the name of Her Majesty, for murder in the first degree.” The officer jerked his head toward the door. “Take them to Newgate.”

In a moment, the pair had disappeared. Only the body and two sets of bloodied footprints paid testament to their presence, and both would be removed within the hour.

XVII

“Are you all right?”

It took Kit a few moments to realize that what had woken him was not the sound of Tom’s voice, but a sharp pain across his ribs and a dull ache in his head. It did not stop there; it was as if each part of his body was remembering, at its own pace, that it had been soundly beaten. Having established that this would only get worse with time, he opened his eyes to see, not the plain plaster-cast ceilings of Cambridge, but a dull stone ceiling only about six feet above, made to match the stone-flagged floor on which he lay. And then he realized where he was.

“I’ve been better.” He put a hand to his head and slowly made an effort to sit up. “As you can imagine.”

“You know, oddly enough, I can.” Tom, having ascertained that Kit was perfectly capable of consciousness, if a little worse for the wear, moved back from his anxious crouch to a more comfortable position on his knees. The increased distance between them did not feel accidental. It was dark, too dark for Kit to see anything yet, but the edge in Tom’s words was enough for him to imagine the look directed his way.

He peered as best he could around him, but what he discovered was not reassuring. A tiny cell, only about seven feet wide, without any punctuation from a window. It could have been noon or midnight, for all he could tell. The room’s only light came from a flickering torch on the other side of the door, allowing small tendrils of light to stream through the one-inch slot in the wood. Without the flame, all would be darkness and silence. “How long have we been here?”

“Two days. As best I can tell.” Kit’s eyes gradually adjusted enough to make him out, a pale shape amid the shadows. He had been unconscious for two days. He had not felt the stabbing pain of hunger and the humiliating stench of urine and shit that grew worse with every hour, felt the blood on his hands that there was no way to wash off. Two days in isolation except for the insensible body of his cellmate, which was not much comfort. That reward had been Tom’s alone. It was beginning to take its toll. “I think you owe me something, Kit.”

Kit closed his eyes. He could tell where Tom was going, and he did not want to answer that question. Not because he was ashamed of his explanation, he’d have done it again in a heartbeat, but because he knew the questioner was not going to like it.

“It’s not my business what you do for the Crown, but you need to tell me what happened, because believe it or not I don’t run about killing strangers regularly. Who was that, and how did he know you were here to see the spymaster?”

If there were a good way of explaining this, he could not think of it. Not while his brain still felt loose in his skull. “He... he didn’t,” he said at last. “He was my brother-in-law.”

“*What?*”

Silence had never sounded so deadly. He could feel Tom turning this information over, anger blending with horror until it was only a matter of time before the mixture became volatile. “You mean to say you almost got killed, almost got both of us killed, and put the whole of England at risk, because you can’t help goading your sister’s drunk husband. Do you ever think? Ever?” Tom’s voice rose until by the end he was shouting, but at this stage Kit was lucky the only attack leveled at him was verbal. An act in defense of the Queen, a strategic fight turned awry that Tom had helped to right, could not have an extended sentence. Any arrest made in service of the crown would only be a formality. As soon as appearances were kept up, they would be released. But this, a basic tavern brawl over something that stupid. He had not grown up a lawyer’s son for nothing. He knew what came of this. “And because you wouldn’t know self-restraint if it came up and shook you by the hand, we could

both be hanged for this.” Or at least, he could. Kit had legitimate defenders in high places. And in the eyes of the law, he had done nothing but sit by and allow himself to be thrashed.

“I never asked you to interfere,” Kit began, pricked into defensiveness.

“Did you think that’s what I was doing? Interfering? Next time it falls to me to save your life, I promise you I won’t bother.”

Kit was silent. He was right. If Tom hadn’t done what he’d done, Kit wouldn’t be there to argue the wisdom of it. He’d be lying in a back alley somewhere for rats to pick at, with no one the wiser at his disappearance. The dull ache soaked into his body was a constant, harsh reminder that he was alive, and nothing but William Bradley’s death was to thank for that. But to think of Tom with the knife dripping scarlet in his hand, the cold way he had looked the soldiers straight on and shrugged at their charges, with a cool, “I am not in a position to deny”... Tom Watson was the one person he knew whose presence was not haunted by the continual specter of a planned assassination or a second life. Tom was his hiding-place, the voice that could bring him back to reality. Tom had just driven a knife through another man’s ribs. Plainly he was not the only one in this cell keeping secrets.

And why, mingled with the fear, was there a vague sense of excitement in the back of his mind when he thought of it? It could not only have been the concussion. Was there something wrong with him, that the idea of the man he loved committing murder for his sake was, if partly frightening, at least an equal part thrilling? Things like that did not happen outside of poetry, except in the world of espionage in which breaking the most essential commandments was all in a day’s work. Was it being around him that brought this world to life in others? Or was he so suited for it that everything he cared about hummed with a secret level of danger?

“Kit, are you even *listening* to me?” Tom demanded.

He flinched. How long had he sat there without responding? “Yes,” he said readily. “Sorry. I think I’m concussed.”

Tom groaned. “Which will do wonders in front of the hangman, I’m sure. The least you could

do is look concerned that you've gotten us both killed."

"Listen," he began. He did not trust himself to stand or move too quickly without his vision blurring, but he sat facing Tom in the darkness. Two days' worth of watching in the shadowed cell made it so Tom could see, if not be seen. "I know what it looks like now..."

"A quick wait and a short drop?"

"Tom, they wouldn't dare hang us. It's not in the crown's interest to remove my head until it's said what it knows. I'm not an idiot. They lose me, they lose the cipher, they lose the Queen." What had happened, that he was the rational one, trying to placate Tom's anger?

"And you think the Queen will know you're here? Do you think she skims through the names of men thrown into Newgate every morning over breakfast and will pick out yours as a mistake? This isn't my life, Kit. It might be yours, but that doesn't make it mine."

For a moment, he thought it had been the sound of his heartbeat still throbbing in his ears that distracted him, but Tom had sat up straighter as well. He had heard it too. Footsteps approaching, and the rattle of iron keys in a lock.

"It looks," Kit said vaguely, "as though we have a visitor."

As if it had heard, the door pulled open, and a porter's voice came from outside.

"Here you are, sir. And you'll knock to let me know when you've finished?"

"Certainly."

It only took one word, three brief syllables, that curt "certainly," to identify the man even before he entered the cell. He allowed the door to close behind him without a moment's unease, though he was now alone in a nearly dark prison cell four feet from a pair of new-caught murderers. Then again, Sir Francis had never been one to let the circumstances intimidate him. He looked at Tom, who had leapt to his feet the moment he heard the lock turn. The secretary had never seen this young man before, though he thumbed through his mental library for the memory of his fair hair, his blue-grey eyes, the way he stood as if he expected to be attacked at any moment. It did not matter. He was the

accomplice, only background material. It was not for some seconds that he located Kit, who had remained sitting on the floor either from arrogance or a lack of confidence in his legs to support the rest of him. Sir Francis looked between them, his expression tired, and shook his head.

“Marlowe, for the love of Christ.”

“I assure you, Sir, that love of Christ had very little to do with it.” It was only half the spymaster’s words that brought the inappropriate smirk to his face. The rest came naturally from the incongruous figure of the Royal Secretary trying to make himself look at home in a prison cell. Sir Francis’ linen doublet and clean, starched trousers, though of a sober and respectable black, looked as though they wanted to abandon their duty of covering his body and flee into the open air, away from the smell of piss and mud and rats’ filth. In his line of work, he harbored few illusions about the state of the city. But the dirty cells of Newgate, the poverty-wracked streets of London’s underbelly, these were not his element. Sir Francis Walsingham did not belong here. People with Kit’s clothes, Kit’s habits, Kit’s lack of aversion to sitting on a floor reeking of shit, they did.

“Somehow I had hoped that when I found you again for the first time in months, the interview would not require a trip to prison. It would have been such a pleasant surprise to hear your name in a more flattering context.” Kit was not given the chance to protest that this was in fact the first time Walsingham had come upon him in a prison. “Clearly I hoped for too much. You’ve come with a message for me.”

He did not make it a question. What other reason could there possibly be to give? But Kit was not about to pass up his chance for salvation before giving it his all. Time for his trump card, though it was so dark Sir Francis would not have known an ace of spades from a two of clubs. Whatever Tom thought, the men at court could not afford to let him hang. “I have, sir. The matter you charged me with this December? Consider it dealt with.”

Sir Francis started. What he had expected Kit to tell him was unclear, but his ordinarily stoic face had flashed with what, possibly, might have been called desperation. He had been waiting to hear

that phrase. He had been waiting for entirely too long. “Give me the letters, Marlowe. You still have them? The soldiers did not have them confiscated?”

“Sir, I’m too careful for that. The message is written in the most secure place I have.” Kit tapped a single finger against his temple, with a self-assurance that made Sir Francis grit his teeth and Tom close his eyes in pain. He remembered seeing this well-dressed gentleman in the Cambridge library, months before, and the sense of foreboding he had brought with him had remained even until now. This was not a man one baited.

“If I have to bring you bound and chained to Whitehall myself, you will reveal the matter to the council before the day is out. My God, Marlowe, you must revel in making my life difficult.”

Tom made as if to speak, then remembered he was not the party being addressed by this intimidating stranger and closed his mouth again.

Sir Francis was unamused by this hesitancy. “Yes? Anything pressing you’d like to bring to my attention?”

“Just that bail might be more difficult to obtain than you think, sir.”

The requisite “sir” blew over Sir Francis’ head like so much dust. “You will tell me this instant what you have been arrested for. What must I contend with? Blasphemy? Burglary? Trying to take a prostitute that turned out not to be one?”

Tom’s momentary mastery of speech had failed him. He turned away from Sir Francis, his eyes looking in the direction of the far wall, but he did not see the grey stones of his prison. He saw only the blood between his fingers, the knife sliding between the ribs... He had meant it, what he had said. This was Kit’s world. He did not intend to make it his. Not again.

It fell to Kit to answer. “Murder,” he said tonelessly, adding a “sir” that dripped with insincerity.

Sir Francis blinked. “Murder,” he repeated. “Murder. Marlowe, you are my servant, not a hired mercenary. Have you no sense at all?”

Kit shrugged. "He had it coming."

Tom groaned and turned his back to them. With his hands over his head, he pressed his forehead against the stone. That was it. They were done for.

"I sincerely hope he did," Sir Francis snapped. "I hope he murdered every individual member of your family and then turned the knife on you. What part of 'draw no attention to yourself' did I not make clear?"

"Sir, it's not him." Tom's voice was quiet but firm. He did not turn to face the secretary, who watched him with the interest he would give a dog performing an unexpected trick. But if Kit's life was in the hands of this man, at least Tom owed him the truth. Kit, sensing this, rose carefully to his feet. Paying Sir Francis no attention, he placed one hand on Tom's shoulder. He could feel him shaking beneath his touch. Tom had risked his life to protect him once already.

"It doesn't matter." Kit felt Tom flinch at his words, and he carefully drew his hand away. "He's dead, and the world's a better place for it. Between losing me and my message or a man no one will miss, which would you choose?"

Sir Francis observed the movement of Marlowe's hand, the shift of his accomplice's shoulders, the way the collapsed space between them felt different than that between himself and the prisoners. He was not paid to run an intelligence operation for nothing. The young man turned. Perhaps he had felt Sir Francis' eyes on him, searching for a confirmation that was not truly necessary. The silent interview lasted only a moment, before Walsingham turned his attention back to Kit.

"I'll speak to the magistrate," he said after a moment. "I can convince him to dismiss the charges, with some persuasion. I will construct the story to suit our purposes."

"And what story will that be, sir?" Though Sir Francis had moved onto other matters, Tom continued to fix his eye directly on the spymaster. Kit could not see any fear in that look, though he searched hard for it. It was the collected look of a man who had seen death and no longer particularly cared about it. He said, "What story will that be"; he meant, "If I'm to hang, do me the courtesy of

telling me now.”

“I will say what will best serve us,” Sir Francis said curtly. “Does that trouble you?”

Tom paused, a momentary silence that Kit instantly mistrusted. Now was not the time to develop a conscience. Now was the time for shameless, unscrupulous lying. “If it will get us out of prison, sir, you call us secret Papists who mate with goats, for all it bothers me.”

Sir Francis, for the second time in recent memory, blinked without saying a word. “You...”

“Haven’t fucked a goat? No, sir.”

It was plain that this was not what Sir Francis had meant, but the phrase “fucked a goat” had struck him into silence. He fumbled with the beginnings of words before settling upon a concise “hmm,” and rapped his knuckles against the door.

“Porter?” he called. “We’re finished here.” The door scraped open against the flagstones, and Sir Francis slipped into the corridor. “Wait for me, Marlowe,” he said shortly. As if Kit were capable of doing anything else. And then Tom and Kit were left alone again in the darkness.

There was a moment of silence. Kit leaned heavily against the wall. If he allowed himself to sit, he knew how difficult it would be to stand again. Tom remained staring at the door and the tiny square of secondhand torchlight that reassured him there was a world beyond their four walls. “So that was your royal spymaster,” he said.

“He’s quite the man, is he not?” Kit enjoyed the dry savor of understatement. “You can see why the Queen values him so highly. Give the King of Spain ten minutes’ conference with Sir Francis Walsingham and he’ll forget he ever set his sights on English soil.”

“You saw the way he looked at me. He doesn’t know me, but he wouldn’t mind seeing me dead.”

Kit wished he could dismiss Tom’s words as paranoia. “Why would he want you dead?”

“He knows. He’s no fool. The penalty against sodomy is —”

“Ridiculous,” Kit said curtly.

“Burning, actually.”

“Tom, you think Sir Francis gives a damn if I pass my nights with you instead of some London whore? He has priorities, and they don’t include what I feel for you, or you for me.”

“Yes, and his priorities include making sure you keep a low profile. That means you not doing anything that would make people talk about you, or look twice at you in the streets. That doesn’t mean murdering strangers, and it doesn’t mean me.” If Tom’s voice had disappeared in the presence of Sir Francis, it had returned twice as strong now that they were alone again. Newgate’s walls were at least a foot thick, but Kit would not have been surprised if someone passing in the streets heard him. At least the other prisoners in the adjacent cells were getting an unaccustomed level of entertainment. They were better than a staged drama at this point. “I want no part in this. This is your business, not mine.”

“Tom, please.” Kit could not remember ever having felt so tired. He was anxious enough without having Tom accusing of betrayal and stupidity, particularly not when the charges were so wildly justified. “Everything will be fine. I don’t get by anymore by trusting people. But I trust Sir Francis to do what’s in the best interest of England and the Queen, and right now that includes getting us out of prison as efficiently as possible. Try not to worry. It isn’t as if we’re locked up facing death, after all.”

“You’re lucky you can barely stand up,” Tom snapped. “If you didn’t look so pathetic, I’d break your nose for this.”

Under ordinary circumstances, a remark like this would not have been considered reassuring. Still, Kit heard his tone shift, away from anger and toward a terse mask to hide his panic. He was hardly exonerated, but laying blame was hardly the most important thing at the moment. What mattered more was their freedom. In the safety of London’s streets, Tom could shout at him until his voice went hoarse, if that was what he wanted. For now, they had to stay on each other’s side.

“I never actually thanked you,” he began, “for —”

“Don’t,” Tom cut him off. “I don’t want to think about it. And I don’t like hearing you thank

people. It's not in your nature."

He grinned. "There I go, trying to be ordinary and gracious, and you don't like that either." His legs were exhausted from supporting himself all this time, and he sagged against the wall and closed his eyes. "I don't know what you want from me anymore."

"It doesn't matter what I want. You don't need me to tell you that. This is life now. Men like *him* everywhere we go, always with things we can't say to anyone, always waiting for the worst to happen."

He didn't know what to say to that. How could he respond, when the only possible answer was a confirmation? The only alternative to a life like this was for Tom to run away, to forget that he had ever known anyone by the name of Marlowe. And even that might not be enough. Kit made to reply, but both fell into a hushed silence before he could speak. The stillness of the prison magnified every noise a hundred times over, and the approaching footsteps in the hall sounded like the echoes of cannon fire. They both stood nervously, Kit with some effort, to stand side-by-side in the darkness. And the door groaned open.

Two men stepped into the cell, hardly big enough as it was for the two already in it. The provost, uniformed in black with his sword at his side and his face blank. And Sir Francis, who stood two steps behind with crossed arms.

"Christopher Marlowe?" the provost said. Tom glanced at Kit nervously, but his expression was set and his body tensed. He was ready for this.

"Present," he said shortly. "Who wants to know?"

Tom could only watch as the provost grabbed Kit by the front of his shirt and jerked him several steps forward. "You'll be coming with us." All four men knew what was going to happen, but none of them would say it. He tried to meet that detached, searching look the spymaster had given him, but Sir Francis seemed incapable of seeing him. Tom knew. He had known from the beginning.

"Sir," he began, his voice curiously dead.

“Were you addressed?” the provost snapped. “Then keep your mouth shut until spoken to.”

“Tom.” Kit twisted desperately in the provost’s grip. “Tom, I—”

His knees buckled under him as he took a fist hard in the stomach, forcing the breath from him in a sharp gasp. His aching body already formed Bradley’s last monument to the living, but this was too much, and amorphous golden specks flashed before his eyes. Tom had been right. He was the one they needed. He was the one who knew. Without another word, Kit was yanked forward through the door, out into the corridor. He was stronger than he looked, able to hold his own in many brawls that ought to leave him flat on his back, but at the moment even standing unaided was a risky business, and his dangerous proximity to hysteria did nothing to help him.

“Tom!” His shout only earned another blow for its trouble. And then the door slammed shut behind him, and he was marched down the hall, barely able to keep his feet. Door after door whipped past him in a blur, half-shadowed from the torches dotting the walls, as he was led behind Sir Francis’ quick military steps. Without windows, without any directional sense, he couldn’t judge which way he was being taken: deeper into prison, or out of it, to the tribunal, to testify? But if they had been granted a trial, they would not have taken him alone. There would be no trial, not for a case like this. When they were finished with him at Whitehall, what was to stop them from getting rid of him, now that he had proven he was dangerous, a man who knew too much and couldn’t be trusted to stay out of sight? And Tom knew everything he knew. His last thought before the provost jerked him to a halt was of the silhouette of the scaffold at Tyburn Hill, and Tom’s neck, encircled with the rope...

Kit felt a hard shove in the small of his back, and already off-balance he stumbled forward and fell. A thick, fetid wetness soaked through his knees, reached past his wrists, splashed across his face. Hands stinging from sharp contact with the ground, he looked up hesitantly. Cool, clear water pattered against his face, and the dried blood from his forehead began to flow down his brow, into his eyes, borne by the raindrops. He stood slowly, up to his ankles in the mud that pooled in the nearly deserted street. It was early evening, which at this time of year meant a darkness still illuminated by the

memory of the brief day. Spring was coming, melting the dirty snow that still covered parts of London. And he was outside. He looked over his shoulder for the provost, but the door had slammed shut. He was alone with Sir Francis in the middle of a filthy street near Ludgate Hill, filthy and aching and utterly alone, but somehow in the open air. Sir Francis watched him with folded arms.

“Come on, Marlowe,” he said dispassionately. “We can make you presentable at the palace, but you’ve an audience with the Privy Council the moment you can stand on your own legs.” It was plain he wanted nothing more than to retreat from the general malaise of the city. But though he turned away and took several steps in the direction of civilization, Kit remained where he was, muddy and drenched to the skin, looking back at the grey stone block of Newgate.

Sir Francis looked back, saw that he was not being followed, and stopped again. “Perhaps you were under the impression that I was making a request. I was not. Come.”

“What about Tom?” The shakiness in his voice disgusted him. “What –”

Sir Francis laughed. That laugh struck Kit sharper than any of the blows that had left bruises other men could see. “You still believe I give half a damn about what happens to your murderer lover. Don’t be surprised,” he said coldly in response to Kit’s flinch. “Surprise is for the stupid and the naïve. You couldn’t be less subtle if you tried. You are my employee, and I owe you nothing. I owe your whore less than that. You will do as I tell you, if you do not want me to instruct the magistrate to put you both to death for sodomy and murder as you so richly deserve.”

Kit stared at him. “And if he’s...” He struggled to say any of the words needed. Convicted. Condemned. Executed. For something that’s entirely my fault. For saving my life.

Sir Francis looked at him intently. This was not the Marlowe he was used to dealing with, the man who took such perverse pleasure in making his life difficult, who felt as comfortable in the taproom of an alehouse as the recitation hall of a university, who was quick to complicate any situation by saying something untoward about God, Queen, and country. This was a new side: afraid, capable of emotion, prone to panic. This was humanity. It was weakness. Sir Francis did not like it.

“Listen to me,” he said coldly. “Now is not the time for sentiment. There is work to do. And we have not forgotten your ill-advised decision to leave Sheffield without telling a soul. Consider this... a sort of surety. I have spoken to the magistrate, and your man Watson lives in Newgate under my authority. When I say he should be released, he will be released. If I say he should swing, he’ll swing. Think of his immediate future as your recompense for a job well done.”

Kit stood his ground and met Sir Francis’ eyes steadily. He watched the spymaster through the rain even as it coursed from his hair and mingled with what, had he thought about it, he might have noticed were tears. “You bastard.” His voice was low but dangerous. “How long do you think you can use me like a slave before something comes of it?”

Sir Francis made a dismissive noise and turned to walk away, but Kit jogged several steps to catch up, still speaking in that same voice that whispered hints of murder. “Do you know how much I know, working for you all these months? Mary Stuart trusts me. Have you considered what I could do with that, if the mood took me? And you’re *dangerously* close to letting the mood take me. I could destroy you, you devil’s whore, you pig shit, if people started to talk. You will release Tom, and then you’ll leave me alone. There’s already one murder charge on me. One more won’t make a difference.”

“And what exactly is your plan of action?” Sir Francis snapped. It was not anger but impatience. He did not have time to entertain these assertions of independence from his servants. “Run wild through the London streets, raving about the Queen’s secret plans to have Mary Stuart murdered? Who do you think gives a damn what you say in your spare time? And if you were stupid enough to speak, how long did you think you’d last? You have no idea how many men are in the Queen’s service. Men who understand their place. Men who will see that a liability to national security is removed. And you’re beginning to speak like a liability.” Sir Francis, as he spoke, never broke step. “I offered you your whore’s life as payment,” he concluded. “I would advise you to take it. You won’t do better.”

If Kit had ever had a moral compass, it was far from his thoughts now. One man was dead already. What difference would one more make on his soul? Surely none, especially not one who so

clearly deserved it. Murder was a gateway to more murders. Blood would have blood. But what good would that do him now? Kit was familiar enough with the art of manipulation to know when he was cornered. If he could have reached through time and grabbed his past self, he would have done anything it took to make him speak out, that October evening in the Master's office. He should not have taken it silently. No matter what was offered. No matter what his ambition said. No matter how desperately he wanted to make something of himself, no matter if it meant a meaningless existence of manual labor and petty scholarship, it could not be worse than this. Nothing was worse than being owned by a man who did not care if he walked or was killed.

“You demon.” He glared at Sir Francis through the rain misting his eyes (the rain, of course, it was the rain). “You devil.”

Sir Francis gave a half-smile. “Not the worst thing I've been called. Now, hurry. Your audience with the Privy Council approaches, and you need to wash before you are received. For God's sake, you smell like you've been sleeping in a stable for a month.”

XVIII

The frigid water stung as Kit splashed himself in the washbasin Sir Francis had provided. Newly awake, he shook his head, scattering water droplets across the room like a dog come in out of the rain. Sir Francis looked on in distasteful silence, clearly disapproving of the stains the dirty water would leave on the mahogany. Let the man turn the palace into a whorehouse, if that was his way. Sooner or later he would be repaid in full for his patience.

Kit washed his face and hands with vicious enthusiasm, feeling the dirt and sweat that caked his skin melt away and dye the clear water a murky brown. It had been just over a week since he and Tom had left Cambridge, and yet it felt like years since he had been properly clean. It had not escaped his notice, either, that the queen's spymaster had surreptitiously washed his own hand before turning the basin over to Kit. As if poverty and criminal tendencies were contagious, he thought drily, turning his attention to the brown-scarlet stain that discolored the water. He refused to think of it as blood.

"At least now you look close to human," Sir Francis said shortly, when Kit stepped away from the turgid water and dried his hands on the towel lying on the washstand. "Now if you'll just get yourself out of those clothes."

"What's wrong with my clothes?" Kit did not know why, but he felt strangely attached to his inelegant attire. It was not what he would have worn for a court audience under ideal circumstances, but they were his. If there was to be an insurmountable gulf between himself and the members of the Privy Council, and he was under no delusions that there would not be, he'd rather be honest about it. It was not his taste to put on borrowed finery and bow like any other courtier, under the illusion that any

gentleman with eyes would not notice the difference.

“There’s blood still on your shirt,” Sir Francis said blandly, and pointed.

Kit glanced down. “Oh.”

“I thought that my son-in-law would be about your height,” he said, turning to the table in the center of the room, “and so I took the liberty of borrowing a few of his things for you. Forgive me if I anticipated you would turn up looking like this when I was told you were in London.” He thrust a bundle of clothing at Kit in blatant disregard for the irritated look he received in return. “A little haste wouldn’t be out of order, either.”

He wanted to ask how much protest Sir Francis’s kinsman had put up when told he was to clothe a renegade university student fresh from prison, but instead took the clothes silently. Very well. He would play their game, for as long as he was expected to play it. Though there were some limits, even for him. Sir Francis made no move to leave the room.

“You want me to change here? *Now?*”

“Suddenly modest, Marlowe?” Francis said coldly. “I can’t imagine I’d be the first man to see you in the like state.” Kit flushed hot, both from embarrassment and anger. You would think Sir Francis would be more careful with his words, considering where Kit had just come from, and under what charge. But having enjoyed the effect, the spymaster turned his back. “Again, it’s not that I don’t trust you,” Walsingham said lightly, as Kit hastily stripped down and yanked the new trousers over his hips, “it’s just that you can’t be trusted. You have a terribly annoying habit of slipping away unannounced, and the last thing we need at this stage is a liability.”

“I came to you, didn’t I?” Kit snapped, pulling the shirt over his head with displaced violence. “And you’ve said your piece about what happens if I fail. There, now I look enough of an idiot to be going on with, are you pleased?”

He spread his arms wide in disgust as Sir Francis turned around again, giving him an appraising look. The spymaster had not had high hopes for Marlowe’s transformation from convict to courtier, but

he had to admit the effect was not displeasing. The dirt and blood were cleared from his face, and he had changed from his usual utilitarian garb to a clean pair of tan breeches, a pressed white linen shirt with modest lace around the wrists and chest, and a dark-green doublet with gold piping across the breast. The clothes were too loose – it was an occupational hazard of working on the margins that one was seldom allowed to build up as robust a figure as those with money to spare – but transplanted up three social ranks his tall body almost seemed elegant, rather than rangy and awkward.

He might almost, Sir Francis realized suddenly, have been handsome, under other circumstances. Newly dressed well and cleaned from the street, Marlowe suddenly, overwhelmingly reminded him of Sir Philip, and a sudden flash of discomfort struck the unshakeable spymaster. Christopher Marlowe could have just as easily slipped into the role of son-in-law as associate. Instead, he had sent the young man into the world of political intrigue, the dangers of which he knew all too well. The guilt this occasioned flashed hot but briefly, and then it was as if it had never been. Sacrifices had to be made. Abraham had known that well enough, and Isaac had done more than look like his son.

“What?” Kit asked, aggravated. Sir Francis had been looking at him like an animal in a menagerie for upwards of a minute, and he did not appreciate it. There would be enough appraising stares in moments to come without preparing them in advance.

“Nothing. Can’t you do anything about your hair? It sticks up like you’ve come from Bedlam.”

“It does that,” Kit muttered. “Do you think the Council cares more about my hair than my reports?”

“The Council,” Francis said coldly, “cares about respect. Foreign as the concept is, you would do well to exercise it for the next hour or so.”

The room that Sir Francis had selected for Kit’s rapid transformation was only a short distance from the chambers of the Privy Council. Still, standing outside the door, Kit felt his heart pounding as if he had run for miles. He was not afraid. He was not nervous. He had nothing to be nervous about. He also, he thought drily, had a terrible habit of lying to himself in times of stress. The two men paused in

front of a closed oaken door, a great doorknocker in the shape of a lion's head dangling in the center. Kit strained his ears to listen. He was sure he could hear voices drifting through the crack under the door. The words were muffled, but he could hear the distinctive pitch of male voices speaking urgently, snatches here and there slipping into his ears.

“...the Spanish will not be prepared, if you...”

“...I assure you, gentlemen, I shall not fail you...”

“...all our best wishes for your imminent success...”

“...you are too gracious...”

All the usual courtly drivel, graciousness and assurances and groveling without reason. But the Spanish... Spain brought a host of connotations to the forefront, not least of all the letters still echoing in his head. What did the Council know already, and how did they know it? He realized again, though it was a fact continually being brought to his attention, how little of the actual proceedings of the Queen and her court he was privy to. One small piece in a massive political machine, which only knew the tiny motions it was granted and remained blind to the rest. Still, it only took one failure to destroy the entire operation.

Sir Francis raised his hand to the doorknocker and let the heavy handle fall back against the door, once, twice, three times. The murmur of voices stopped immediately, and after a brief pause a man's voice spoke from within.

“Sir Francis?”

“Indeed.”

“Enter.”

Kit took a shaky inhale, suddenly aware that he had forgotten to breathe. It had come to this. From nothing and nowhere to the threshold of the Privy Council. He tried to remind himself that this attention from the highest echelon of court society was in part what he had worked for. On the other hand, the part of him debating the merits of bolting down the hallway to somewhere he could vomit in

private had a few reservations. But there was no going back now. Tom's life, and the whole of England, depended on the outcome of this audience. Nothing like pressure to force one's hand. Sir Francis opened the door to the chamber, and the two men stepped inside.

If he had been asked to describe a tribunal set to condemn him to death, he would have painted a similar scene. The room was wide enough to admit a large, long table and fourteen high-backed chairs, but not so large as to counteract the claustrophobia of the dark walls and low light. The setting sun had ceased shedding light on the private gardens outside the windows, and several scattered lamps illuminated the faces of the council, giving the impression of a secret cabal rather than a political enterprise. The members of the Privy Council had been mere amorphous names and titles for him, and to see them suddenly transformed into flesh and blood was unnerving. It was like seeing the Knights of the Round Table stroll from the page and demand you account for yourself. Kit wished the door had not closed behind them. He sank into a low bow, murmuring a soft and insufficient "my lords." What else was he expected to say? He did not have the vocabulary for such a situation.

Sir Francis, for what it was worth, seemed to be enjoying Kit's sudden humility.

"You may rise," the eldest gentleman said, a white-bearded, black-clad man who sat at the head of the table. Lord Burleigh, Kit's mind furnished dimly. Royal Treasurer and the head of the council. He wasn't entirely sure he *could* rise, regardless of whether or not he *might*. The little he had eaten during his imprisonment, the residual injuries from the brawl, and the wave of shock under which he was currently drowning all worked against his legs. *Come on, focus. If you faint in front of the Council, Sir Francis will laugh you all the way back to Newgate. Think about something, anything else.* Anything to avoid his current idiot silence in the wake of this disconcerting audience, like an eagle struck blind by the sun. He scanned the table, watching those watching him, and suddenly he realized he had seen one of those faces before.

It had been years, over a decade, since he had last seen those black eyes, that tall proud figure, that handsome face. And yet memories of childhood imprinted themselves so deeply that there could

be no mistake, he knew him instantly. It was only fitting that he should rediscover this man now, this vestige of both his past and his present, and whatever his future was going to be. It stunned him that they were of a height now. Through his nine-year-old eyes the otherworldly nobleman guiding him to the front of the Canterbury crowd had seemed a giant, ten feet tall if an inch. Time changed some perceptions, but the feelings of insufficiency, of inherent poverty, of shame, had remained. The familiar yet anonymous stranger smiled at him and inclined his head politely.

“You’ll be Sir Francis’s man, I presume?” he said lightly. “Marlowe? We have spoken much of you. A pleasure.” Kit nodded his acquiescence, still not trusting himself to speak.

“Sir Philip,” Sir Francis said politely, nodding in deference. “I trust my daughter is well?”

“Exquisitely well, when last I left her, Your Grace” Sir Philip said with a dashing smile – Kit realized he was poeticizing the man as he watched him, but there was no other word to describe his mannerisms other than *dashing*. Sir Philip Sidney. Knight in the service of Her Majesty. Soldier. General. Poet. Artist. England’s secular saint. Sir Philip Sidney, who had just said “Marlowe” with that black velvet voice of his. Never before had he felt so strongly the disadvantage of borrowed clothes.

“You have come in excellent time, Sir Francis,” Lord Burleigh said, and instantly the room’s attention flicked back to him. “We have just finished discussing Sir Philip’s commission to the Spanish wars. His ship departs in the morning.”

“He told me he expected to leave soon,” Francis said, his voice slightly flat to be genuinely emotionless, “and that he could think of no better use for his energies than the protection of England’s liberty. You will, of course, be missed here.” Kit suddenly felt uncomfortable, as though he were witnessing a scene not meant for him. Sir Philip grinned rakishly at Sir Francis.

Stop it. You just thought the word “rakish” in connection with Sir Philip Sidney. If you weren’t going to hell already, you’ve just closed the arrangement with what you’re thinking about now.

“It’ll take more than a handful of papists to keep me from returning to England, father,” he said, with cheer clearly designed to reassure the older man. *Father*. It was unsettling, to think of Sir

Francis as a father. God help the children who grew up in that household. God help his wife. “You and I shall continue our work for the safety of our queen and nation – you from within, and I from without. I need not ask you, I think, to look after my wife in my absence. Now, if you will excuse me, gentlemen,” he said, “I have much to attend to before my ship sails in the morning.” He and Sir Francis shook hands briskly. Paragraphs and silent speeches passed between their hands, a conversation for them alone. Sir Philip bowed and took his respectful leave of Lord Burleigh and the council. Just before he was about to exit the room, he paused for a brief moment, glancing at Kit with interest.

“I say,” he remarked lightly, “isn’t that my doublet?”

Kit wanted nothing more than to melt into the floor and die. Sir Francis smiled unkindly and nodded at the gentleman to continue: a later explanation would be in order. And then he was gone, and the Privy Council’s attention focused on its interloper.

“Marlowe, then.” The man to Lord Burleigh’s right, a short, impatient man with a close-cut sandy beard, had addressed him. He folded his hands one in front of the other and looked at him intently. “Sir Francis has elegized your talents to us on more than one occasion.”

“I’m sure he has exaggerated my abilities, sir.” Modesty was not Kit’s native language, and the words came with some difficulty. Particularly as he could only imagine with faint horror what Sir Francis might have said about him.

“Without a doubt. I have not yet had the pleasure of judging you for myself.”

He bit his tongue to stop himself from responding. All those weeks with Mary had taught him how to deal with royalty in exile, but here was his first experience with the unbridled language of power. If Mary had been a captive kestrel brooding on her perch, the council was a pack of wolves, with no regard for who its teeth might wound.

“It is a relief, Sir Francis, you managed to track down your renegade informant,” the man opposite Kit’s cold-eyed judge said drily. He was a younger man, handsome in the aristocratic vein, black hair and arresting eyes. “At your age, you should not need to chase your servants the length and

breadth of London.”

“I am not so advanced in years, my lord Essex, that I do not recognize when the effort is worth our while,” Sir Francis said curtly. Essex raised a hand in concession and smiled faintly. He had a tremendous amount of nerve, the Earl, Kit thought. Royal favor did strange things to a man. “You recall the letters intercepted from Mary Stuart and her correspondent the Earl of Shrewsbury.”

The mood of the council darkened, and Lord Burleigh’s eyes narrowed to match. “We would have some difficulty forgetting the matter, Sir Francis,” he responded. “And you, Marlowe, you have discovered something else as important as these unreadable letters?”

“Better than that, my lord” Kit said. A small measure of power shifted back into his corner, and he seized onto it for all it was worth. “I can read them.”

It was something, he thought, knowing he had the capacity to shock the entire Privy Council. The surly man who had spoken earlier leaned forward in his chair, where up until this point he had inched away from Kit like a lady might a rat in the street. “You can read them.”

“I think his English is perfectly comprehensible, Sir Robert. I understood him to have said exactly that,” Sir Francis said with a wryness that unexpectedly gratified Kit. Not every day did the Royal Secretary trade snide remarks with Sir Robert Cecil to defend the importance of your words. “Which is why I have brought him here. We dare not commit the message, translated, to paper.”

Cecil looked at Kit expectantly, reminding him of how nervous he had every reason to be. He had a memory for words, as any poet would remember a phrase that had struck him. But here every syllable was crucial, and every verb straddled the delicate line between life and death.

“Well?” Cecil asked. It was not an encouraging invitation. “We are all at leisure to hear. If you would be so kind?”

All eyes were on him, and terror threatened to usurp his memory. But he took one moment, just long enough for an extended breath. *Don’t think about them. Imagine you’re at home again in Cambridge, alone. You can do this.* His voice was hesitant at first, but gained confidence as he spoke,

and his audience hung on his every word.

“Most mighty, most excellent, my dread sovereign lady and queen, unto whom I owe all fidelity and obedience. Standing upon my departure, there was addressed unto me from parts beyond the seas a man of singular zeal to the Catholic cause, and your majesty’s servant. The man informed me of great preparations by the Christian princes, your majesty’s allies, for the deliverance of our country from its extreme and miserable state.”

Sir Francis started, adopting the rapt attention of a dog waiting for the scent of its quarry. The “parts beyond the seas” had caught his attention. It was fortunate Sir Philip was already preparing to leave for Spain. It saved the effort of having to muster an army from nothing.

“Which when I understood, my desire was with the hazard of my life, and all my friends in general, to do your sacred majesty one day’s good service.”

“One day’s good service on the scaffold,” Essex said coldly. Lord Burleigh gave him a dark look, forbidding the earl from interrupting again.

“In such service, first, in the assuring of invasions...” Kit’s voice faltered for a moment at the word. The power of the Spanish Armada was in its syllables. Each man around the table remained silent, but they no longer appeared as a council of statesmen or even judges passing sentence. They had become a crowd of generals plotting their defense. This was no longer simple treason. This was a war. “Sufficient strength on the invaders’ part to arrive are appointed, with a strong party at every place to warrant their landing, the deliverance of your majesty, and the dispatch of the usurping competitor. I protest before the Almighty, that what I have said here shall be performed, or all our lives happily lost in the execution.”

“Aye, most happily!” Lord Burleigh again glared Essex into silence.

“And for the dispatch of the Usurper, from obedience of whom by executing her we shall be made free,” Kit went on, feeling Essex’s eyes like daggers against him, “there are six noble gentlemen, all my private friends, who by the zeal they bear to the Catholic cause and Your Majesty’s service will

undertake the deed.”

“Names, damn you, Marlowe, where are the names?” Sir Francis thundered. Kit cowered beneath the spymaster’s violent disappointment. The power of the room’s occupants to strike him dead with a word was becoming a recurrent theme in his thoughts. “What can I do without names?”

“Hold your peace, Sir Francis,” Lord Burleigh said coldly. His voice was blank, thoughtful. “Let him finish. Then we will discuss.”

Kit took a steadying breath. “I shall be expecting Your Majesty’s answers and shall execute what they command me. Your Majesty’s ever faithful subject and sworn servant, Anthony Babington.”

He took a step back, keeping his head lowered to as to avoid the Royal Treasurer’s piercing eyes. His memory had held, if his knees threatened not to do so for much longer. His task was fulfilled, his duty discharged. And as far as the council was concerned, he might have disappeared completely. In their eyes, it was as though Sir Francis’s servant had ceased to exist, wiped out by the spectral presence of Sir Anthony Babington.

“Shrewsbury will, of course, be removed,” Cecil said at last. “The men of his household will be no match for ours. But the plans that he has set in motion with this correspondence will not so easily be undone. Stuart, did she respond to this missive?”

“She did, my lord,” Kit assented. “In like manner.” Cecil nodded at him without speaking, indicating that he should present the full story. Without prelude, he recited note-for-note the letter he had deciphered during a lecture on the motions of the planetary spheres. This second speech passed without interruption, though he felt the room’s air darken at the mention of an army, and he heard Walsingham laugh drily at the mention of “spies and false brethren.” Recitation complete, he hung back as close to the door as he could manage without attracting attention. He was finished. He had done what he set out to do. Now let Sir Francis remember his promise. But the council did not seem inclined to grant him a dismissal.

“We feared as much, Master Secretary,” Lord Burleigh was saying, “but this is irrevocable

proof of treason, it cannot be denied.”

“Nor shall it.” Essex, though not addressed, took as a personal offense the insinuation that the letters might not be repaid by hanging. “Bess has inherited the throne from King Henry, lawfully, through the Act of Succession. The law cannot be altered to suit the whim of a heretic. As if Stuart could lay a shadow of a claim to the English crown.”

It was perhaps for the best that the Council had forgotten Kit’s presence. Cecil’s silent condemnation of Essex calling the Queen of England “Bess” was nearly enough to make him laugh. Not that anyone was surprised – the cause of his zeal was well known – but still, there was no reason to be so obvious.

“Then what do you recommend, Sir Francis?” Lord Burleigh went on with the patience of a saint. “Forces have already been deployed to Spain, led by Sir Philip. We shall double the number of men in his command and give the Spanish something to remember us by, should they decide to drop anchor near this isle. But for Babington and Stuart. What of them?”

“I should think the solution obvious,” Cecil responded – the adjective Kit was tempted to use was “petulant.” “We have practices in place for dealing with traitors. I will arrange a company of soldiers, and Stuart will be in custody in the Tower before a fortnight has passed, awaiting the Queen’s justice.” The amount of pleasure he took in the words “the Queen’s justice” left no one in any doubt that he would have liked nothing better. But Sir Francis paused, then shook his head.

“I do not think that wise, sir,” he said, to the manifest surprise of both Kit and Cecil. For his part, Kit could not fathom in what universe hesitation was preferable to immediate action. What was the good in giving Mary and Babington more time, when they could move this very moment and cut off their treason where it stood? Sir Francis, however, did not need to be pressed to explain further. “Setting our forces on the so-called Queen of Scots would only attract the attention, and the anger, of her Spanish allies. When she is removed, Philip will sail for England before the day is out. I make it my business to know the state of our nation, and the English fleet is not prepared for a war against the

Armada by tomorrow evening. And there is the matter of these co-conspirators to consider. If we act immediately, Stuart and Babington would be disposed of, and the snake would temporarily be rid of his fangs. But you heard what he wrote, gentlemen. Six of his allies work with him, and we have no names. What good is it to remove the beast's head if only to spur six more heads to bite even harder? We must stab our enemies through the heart, not through the throat."

Kit wished he were in a position to speak. From his position by the door, all he could manage was a small, horrified inhale he found himself incapable of releasing. He was used by now to speech that said one thing and meant three more, and he knew how this would end. Sir Francis was right, of course, from the point of view of policy. The council knew this. They would hold off their final strike, and Walsingham's spies would move deeper into the heart of Mary Stuart's enterprise. And by "spies," he meant one man in particular. One man who wanted nothing more than to be gone.

"You speak wisely, Sir Francis," Lord Burleigh said after a moment, tapping his fingertips against the bridge of his nose. The gesture, in a lesser man, might have been seen as a half-hearted attempt to nurse a headache, but Kit felt the power of the motion, as if the weight of nations rested between his fingers. To some extent, he supposed it did. "Though we will stipulate that there is only a certain amount of time it is prudent to wait. One may await the proper opening, but not at the risk of opening Her Majesty to imminent peril. We will allow you some time to uncover the names of those who are aiding Mary Stuart, before closing the door on the enterprise. Can this be managed?"

Sir Francis smiled; Kit wanted to scream. He had been so close. He had done what they had ordered him to do. He had deciphered the letters, he had presented his information to the council, they could do what they wished with it now. He was supposed to be finished and to escape from the madness that his service had become. He and Tom might have been home again before the week was out. But the spider had seized him by the ankle, and he could feel himself losing his grip. Again, he was under Sir Francis' thumb, the plaything of the Privy Council. And he could say nothing about it.

"Marlowe left the Scot with a plausible cover enabling his return when it suits us." Kit hoped

Sir Francis was telling the truth – it occurred to him that he was not sure what story William had spun.

“One step ahead, Sir Francis, as always.” Cecil smiled, but there was no warmth to it. In the streets it would have been cause for a duel. In the council it was only another repressed current of a powerful emotion, to mix with Kit’s hands clenched together behind his back until the knuckles turned white. “The Scottish Queen has been moved these past few months to Chartley Castle due to Her Majesty’s skepticism of the loyalties of the Duke of Norfolk who had been overseeing her.” This was news to him, and he had half a mind to say so. It would be helpful if the people running his life at least kept him up to speed. “He will depart for Staffordshire at once, then. We shall expect regular reports of our progress via Walsingham’s associates.”

At once. Dear God.

“Gentlemen,” Walsingham interjected, “might I request on Marlowe’s behalf a day’s rest before dispatching him again. He has come from rather unconventional circumstances.” This unexpected gesture of compassion took Kit aback; Walsingham must have seen how he had flinched at the words “at once.” They had sent the room tilting, and he had choked on his attempt to take an ordinary breath. Let Sir Francis take this as evidence that his beating and imprisonment were taking a toll on his physical well being. It would not be wholly a lie. He, of a sudden, did feel ill.

“Very well,” Lord Burleigh concurred; Kit felt the pressure of his appraising eye, as though daring him to swoon under it. “We will have rooms made ready for him.” He did not know which made him more uncomfortable, that the Privy Council showed no interest in what these “unconventional circumstances” might be, or that it persisted in speaking of him in the third person. But none of the gentlemen around the table would look at him. There were more important things on their minds than how desperately Christopher Marlowe wanted to walk free.

Tom was hardly the only Cambridge ex-patriot in indeterminate captivity.

XIX

Kit lay down his pen and sighed. It would take some minutes for the ink to dry, so he set his new-completed letter aside and rose from the desk, pacing the length of the room to purge his restlessness. Ordinarily he scorned movement without purpose, but the palace was so expansive that one could walk for hours, it seemed, and never see the same place twice. *En perpetuum mobile*, without a destination. An apt state of being for his state of mind.

Lord Burleigh's page had directed Kit to the chamber set aside for him, and though only an hour had passed since, it now felt more like a prison. A room to himself could not be prized highly enough, and yet the four walls pressed closer the longer he paced between them. Staying here, surrounded by this finery and deliberate isolation, made him feel even more like a mongrel dog brought amid purebreds. But the thought of leaving was worse. He could not bring himself to follow Sir Francis to supper in the hall with an assembly of visiting dignitaries. The idea of sitting alongside men in starched white shirts discussing foreign politics made him want to vomit. Better to go hungry than to endure such a spectacle. It was not as if he was unused to going without.

Slipping through the cracks between the floorboards, traveling down through three floors of palace apartments to the hall, the fog of Kit's mind moved across the room, examining the identical faces of Elizabeth's advisors and flatterers. There Sir Francis would sit in his usual regalia of all black, manipulating his knife and fork with the dexterity of an expert weaver and the disinterest of a haughty prince. Beside him, perhaps, Sir Philip Sidney would trade stories of the wars, reminding everyone with enough charm to make the message palatable that it was his life at risk for their security, not

theirs. Would Walsingham's other men be expected to put in an appearance? The notion of Arthur Gregory sitting in that princely hall was laughable. What would he do but snap obscenities at the serving-boys and scowl? Perhaps he was being unfair. Perhaps Gregory was endowed with talents he was unaware of, such as the ability to behave himself in civilized company. He was not Walsingham's man for nothing. Multiple public faces were in his nature.

He stopped his pacing abruptly. The sharp knock on the door could not have been in his imagination, though it was beyond him to imagine who could still have any interest in speaking to him. He wanted to ignore it; nothing good ever came from knocks on doors, particularly not when Sir Francis was nearby. But he knew better than to ignore it. He was in Whitehall now. Being anything less than overly attentive was not a risk worth taking.

"Who is it?"

"A friend."

He rather doubted that. "Come in," he said, running a hand impulsively through his hair. Kit wasn't sure if this was in self-conscious attention to or blatant disregard of Sir Francis' remarks about its inability to lie flat.

It was Sir Philip Sidney. He stepped into the room, bearing a small package wrapped in a white linen napkin in one hand. "I observed you were not present tonight. I thought you might be hungry." He extended the parcel like an armistice, a gesture that took Kit aback. It was not as if he had any dislike for Sidney. On the contrary, he seemed like one of the few kind men he had encountered since October, and kindness went a long way for a man whose every waking moment was consumed with assassination and murder. It was not the gesture itself that bewildered him, but its motivation. What good did it do Sidney to do him favors? This was the royal court. Nobody did anything without expecting something in return.

"Thank you." He took the package from Sidney and laid it on the small end table near the door. He could smell fresh bread and roasted chicken, and to his embarrassment he found his mouth was

watering. Well, it could not be helped. He would give Sidney the benefit of the doubt, at the urging of his stomach. "I couldn't face a state dinner. It's been... a very strange week."

"So I'm told." Kit shuddered to think how much of his history was already common knowledge. "May I come in?" Kit gestured vaguely at the room, as if to say "You're Sir Philip Sidney, for God's sake, I daresay you can do what you like." Sidney entered and closed the door quietly behind him. "They've put you up comfortably, I see," he commented, looking around. "These were the Earl of Warwickshire's rooms when I was last here. He's fallen out of favor, so I'm not surprised Her Majesty's rather giving them away. Some nonsense about a set of rosary beads discovered in his closet."

"Better a spy than a secret papist in her guest rooms, then."

"Anything better than a secret papist. Pray heaven you have no Spanish blood in your veins, or even my father's reports of your usefulness will not protect you against the English vengeance of Sir Robert Cecil and his cohorts."

"I highly doubt Lord Cecil need worry about that, Your Grace," Kit shrugged. "You get precious few Spaniards leaving bastard children in the back streets of Canterbury, which is the only way I'd manage it."

"Canterbury, you say?" Sidney smiled. "You've done your pilgrimage rather in reverse, haven't you?"

"If I came to London seeking absolution, sir, I certainly have gotten one or two things the wrong way round," Kit said. Sir Philip had taken a seat in one of the room's scarlet-upholstered armchairs, crossing one long leg over the other at the knee. Kit suddenly realized that he was still standing like an idiot in the center of the room. He had read a purloined copy of Sir Philip's *Arcadia* one evening in Cambridge, an evening that had turned into morning before he realized it. And here he was, chatting with the poet himself about, well, about nothing. Life. He would never understand it.

"You are to leave London tomorrow, then," Sidney went on. "My father tells me we will both

be making our way into the world slightly after sunrise.”

“I think the council will greet one of our departures with rather more relief than regret, sir,” Kit said. He was still unable to fathom the strangeness of that “we.”

“I’ve heard Cecil and Essex were less than enamored with you,” Sidney conceded, “or you with them. On that note, permit me as a man who has spent entirely too much time in court to give you a piece of unsolicited advice. Be very careful. The council,” he went on, “and when I say the council I mean Sir Robert Cecil, desires nothing but what is in the best interest of England. That is not necessarily equivalent to what is best for you.” The unspoken “or for me” was nonetheless heard, in the shape of a ship departing for Castile in the morning.

“Forgive me, sir, if I intend on keeping my cards far away from the sight of the council, and throwing in my whole hand as soon as I can,” Kit said bitterly. “I’ve found little in Her Majesty’s employ that entices me to maintain it.”

He knew as soon as he had spoken that he should not have said that. A critique of the Queen in her own court was less than wise, particularly when flattery was the currency for advancement and he already had “liability” branded to his forehead. But Sir Philip seemed unconcerned. He was a poet, besides a courtier, and those who held the pen knew the pain of feigned assent as much as they knew the dangers of speaking truthfully. Kit had already made a stupid mistake and had gotten away with it. If he was to begin speaking his mind, he might at least try to the end. The risk, in light of everything, seemed minimal. “Sir, may I ask you something?”

“You may call me Philip, if you choose.”

Philip? Right, and I’ll sidle up to the Queen and call her Bess. That will end well.

“Sir, if you would do me one small favor, I would —”

“Ask.”

“Would you...” He hesitated again, then plunged forward. “This letter needs to be delivered to Newgate. I would send it myself, but it will be opened and read unless Sir Francis arranges it, and it

can't be seen by anyone but the recipient. You know his skill at getting around closed doors. Will you give it to him, and tell him that if he has it delivered, I would... I would hate him marginally less?"

"In those words exactly?"

"If you use those words exactly, sir, he will know they come from me. It wouldn't be the worst thing I've said to him in the last twenty-four hours." No use hiding it now. So long as Kit followed orders, his mind and his words could remain his own business. They had to.

Sidney nodded. "Marlowe, let me tell you something. I have been at court intermittently for ten years now, and I have met no one who can torment my father so effectively as you without suffering the consequences. I think it is valuable for him. It helps him to have at least one person treat him as a man and not a monument to justice. And so I'll help you with this, if..." The knight's tone took Kit by surprise. He had hesitated. Someone like Sir Philip Sidney had no reason to hesitate asking anything of someone like Kit. Whatever the condition was, he would grant it. Not only because he found that he liked the man, but because defiance of people who mattered burned bridges he could not afford to lose, not when his survival depended on others tolerating his presence.

"If you will bring this letter with you to Chartley, and deliver it to the lady of the house when you arrive."

Sir Philip reached into the pocket of his doublet and procured a single piece of paper, folded into eighths and unsealed, which apparently he had been waiting through the entire interview for the proper moment to reveal. He had been right, then. No one helped anyone without expecting reciprocation. "This makes us partners in illicit letter-writing, then, sir?" Kit said wryly and took the letter from the knight, who seemed to show some reluctance in releasing it.

"It does not matter to me if it is read or intercepted," Sir Philip said with deceptive nonchalance. It mattered a great deal, personally if not politically. "But even so —"

"Sir, consider it delivered, and save yourself the pain of asking," Kit cut him off. "God knows I have too many secrets myself to judge others for theirs. If you were to read what I've just given you,

you'd know that much."

"I see we understand one another perfectly. I am in your debt, Marlowe."

"And I'm in yours, sir. I think that renders the arrangement more or less equal."

"I'll leave you to rest," the knight said. The look of preoccupation that had endured throughout the meeting was gone. He was leaving for Castile in the morning, with the prospect of certain war and not-unlikely death joining the sunrise. But now that the letter would be sent, none of that mattered. Let the Spanish do what they would. He took Kit's note from the desk and placed it in his pocket, taking the place of his own missive. He had no obligation to do it other than his own honor. Sidney could command Kit as his messenger, but breaking his word to a spy meant nothing. But he had not done so. They were too alike for betrayal. "You have all my best wishes. May God be always on your side."

"Thank you, sir." It was a mark of his respect for Sir Philip that Kit did not say anything about how much pleasure he and God took in not being on each other's sides. When he had left, the room seemed far emptier than it had been before he came. And yet there was that letter, so minutely folded, so vastly important and yet of no importance.

"My Dear Honorable Lady Deveraux,

*Stella oft sees the very face of woe
Painted in my beclouded stormy face,
But cannot skill to pity my disgrace,
Not though thereof the cause herself she knows.
Yet hearing late a fable which did show
Of lovers never known, a grievous case,
Pity thereof got in her breast such place
That, from that sea derived, tears' spring did flow.
Alas, if fancy, drawn by imaged things,
Though false, yet with free scope more grace doth breed
Than servant's wrack, where new doubts honor brings,
Then think, my dear, that you in me do read
Of lover's ruin some sad tragedy.
I am not I; pity the tale of me.*

If you think not of the gentleman you have left behind you on the road to your marriage-bed, as indeed you have no cause now to do, think then perhaps of these lines from time to time. Remember the pen

that set them down, if not of the hand that held it. You need not think of me beyond the bare and inky persons of these words, though you people the world of my thoughts. Think not of me; think of my love for you, which lead us both into immortality.

Forever and always, though perhaps never again,

Your loving Astrophil.”

~*~

Mary Stuart did not know what to say. She crossed the library to the opposite wall, using the walls of leather-bound books as a distraction to hide the surprise she could not mask entirely. At the desk, Sir Robert Rich tallied the estate’s expenditures without a flicker of uncertainty. Of course he would not react. He was the master of Chartley Manor. He had not been in those dark, drafty halls of Sheffield. Even if he had been, Sir Robert would not have remembered the names of its servants. But Mary had a head for faces. She knew the young man who knelt before her on the carpet, head bowed in respect, before her serving-boy had given his name.

“James Watson, my lady,” the boy said, bowing deeply. There, at least, she could see the reflection of her own perplexity. The servants knew one another. And if one among them were to vanish in December without a word, and then reappear in March fifty miles to the south without having been informed of the move, surely that was cause enough for surprise.

“My lady,” Watson murmured. He kept his head bowed, waiting for her permission to rise. Mary did not give it.

“I did not expect to see you again in my presence,” Mary said coldly. She kept her back to him, and instead selected a single, slim volume of Aquinas from the shelf. “I do not know what kind of rules you are used to, Watson, but in my household desertion is not generally rewarded with further employment.”

Kit did not flinch. After watching men die on bloodstained floors beside him, after the dark cells of Newgate and the darker threat of the Privy Council, it would take more than tacit disapproval

to frighten him. This was a job, nothing more. He would do it, and it would be over, and life would return to the way it was before. The rest was mere distraction.

“I cannot apologize enough, my lady, nor can I excuse my conduct.” The words flowed easily from his tongue now, a second language in which he was finally fluent. Time had passed. He was learning. “I must beg a pardon I do not deserve. I would not have left under ordinary circumstances, but I received news from a man in town that prevented me from thinking clearly. There was a sudden death in my family, My Lady, and I thought it right to return to my parents.”

“A sudden death.” Mary did not sound convinced.

“My sister, madam.” Details. The truth in the details, the lie on the whole. Mary returned to the couch before the fireplace and flipped the book open to a chapter toward the middle, but despite her disinterest he could tell she was both listening and judging. “My younger sister, Jane. She died giving birth to her first son. I would have returned sooner, but when I arrived back at Sheffield, I was informed that Your Ladyship had been removed, and no one could tell me of your new location.” There. Now the damnation was complete. He had used Jane as a political tool, to construct a plausible lie. And yet no fire and brimstone rained from the heavens to destroy him. Christ must subscribe to the policy that the ends justified the means.

Mary sighed and snapped the book shut, ending the pretense of reading. “My cousin the Queen has seen fit to remove me from the presence of the Duke of Norfolk and house me here in Staffordshire. For my own safety, I am sure,” she added darkly. “I will not attempt to deceive you, Watson. If I were the master of my own household, you would be dismissed immediately. If I cannot trust you, you have no business in my service. But Her Majesty has reduced my staff by half again, and I cannot afford to send away those still willing to serve me. Against my own better judgment, then,” she went on, “I shall permit you to reclaim your former position in my household.”

Kit bowed his head in gratitude, which was a blessing in its own right. This way, she could not see the satisfied smirk that spread across his face. He was in. Mary did not realize how terrible a

mistake she had made, not once now but twice. Worse now this time, because he had become a man with nothing to lose. His safety, his independence, Tom's life, all were inversely related to Mary Stuart's freedom. The thrill of the chase, the possibility of glory in the eyes of court, all this had lost its sparkle. All that remained was the cold metal armor of the man of business.

"I am grateful for your understanding, My Lady."

"Don't be," Mary said coldly. "My understanding is conditional on your service. And it does not mean your transgressions have been forgotten." The cruel rush of success faded in a moment, replaced by a cold wave of foreboding. He had been brought back to deal with business. Punishment by an exiled queen for what amounted to treason was nowhere in the bargain. Had it crossed their minds what his return meant for his own safety? If it had, it had not stayed there long. He remembered Sidney's words in a sudden flash of resentment. "Cecil and the Council want nothing but what is in the best interest of England. That is not necessarily equivalent to what is best for you." For every stroke that fell on his back, he swore he would make Sir Francis and the Council feel the full weight of two.

"I will instruct Master Etheridge to see that you receive your first meal on Sunday morning, after mass. It shall give you something to be thankful for on the Day of Our Lord, Watson."

In the initial flash of horror, Kit wished Mary had simply ordered him whipped. Sunday? It was only Wednesday. The few scraps that Sidney had managed to steal for him in Whitehall felt as far removed as a beatific vision, and he had ridden for the past two days barely stopping to rest. His stomach chose that moment to make a noise like a bear beset by dogs. If he did not starve to death before Sunday, it might be cause to re-evaluate his recent turn away from God.

"You are gracious to your staff, My Lady." Sir Robert Rich did not glance up from his ledger-books, but this final remark had outstripped his capacity to permit events he did not direct himself. "If he were my servant, I would make certain his punishment fit the nature of his presumption." Another morning, another opportunity for a man with an estate to speak about him in the third person. At this point, it had lost some of its sting.

“We are a Christian, Sir Robert, not a barbarian,” Mary said coldly, throwing him a disdainful look. “We treat others with the mercy Christ teaches us.” Sir Robert nodded, chastised if not satisfied, and returned to his numbers. But Kit had months of practice at hearing a shift in pronouns where it did not belong. Mary had slipped, without her even realizing it, into the royal plural. As if Sir Francis and company were in need of further evidence. Be careful, My Lady, or your own words will undo yourself. Or yourselves.

“Watson, you are dismissed,” Mary said curtly. “Cooper will show you your tasks.” Kit rose and bowed low, first before Mary and then slightly higher to Sir Robert. As he crossed the room, he could feel Mary’s eyes follow him out over the spine of a closed book. He might be in her service, he thought, but he was no longer the invisible figure he had once been. He was a risk now, an anomaly. All the more reason to be doubly careful. He was not the only one depending on his success.

~*~

I’m sorry, Tom. As if it does you any good, knowing that I’m sorry. This is all my fault. I should never have let you leave Cambridge and come with me. You need hardly remind me that I didn’t allow it, I asked you to come. I know that without you, I’d be dead. Sometimes I wonder if that wouldn’t be better for both of us.

I’ve spoken with Sir Francis on your behalf. I have, incidentally, also threatened Sir Francis with a knife to the throat. The amount of success I haven’t had won’t surprise you. Your life is my payment for a job completed. When this will be, I can’t say. I hoped it to be this morning. Now, it seems, I leave London tomorrow, to begin the second act. Perhaps you can sense my enthusiasm dripping from the page.

I have no right to ask you to forgive me. You shouldn’t forgive me, not considering where you are, and where I am, and why. I can’t think that I deserve what Sir Francis has given me, but your hatred fits squarely into my accounts. I would say that this is God’s way of showing us we’re worthy, by testing us with suffering, but God does not approve of us and I’ve long since stopped believing in

him in any case. I won't say it, then, to spare my double damnation if, in the event of the Final Judgment, my theories are proven wrong. We suffer because the world likes to watch us suffer, and because I've made mistakes I don't know how to undo. Nothing metaphysical to that.

I will do everything I can to see you free again, and soon. Please be strong. I think of nothing but you. If you hate me forever, at least know that. I haven't forgotten, and will never forget.

Always yours,

Kit

Tom squinted through the dim light at the writing, barely legible through the shadow. Spring was coming, but in this permanent state of darkness and draftiness it was near impossible to tell. John Poole, his cellmate, a permanently hunched man with a beard in tatters, strove to peer over Tom's shoulder at the page, but he folded it quickly in half, and then in half again. John could not read, or at least the odds were good that he could not, but he could not bear to have that letter profaned by even illiterate eyes. At least one person outside the prison walls remembered he was still alive.

"Who's writing to you, then?" John asked. The sound was jarring through the silence, unaccustomed to men's voices. Either he could not see through the darkness Tom did not want to be disturbed, or weeks in isolation had left him desperate for conversation. Newgate was having the opposite effect on Tom. He would have given all he had to be alone with his thoughts.

"No one," he said curtly, and tucked the page carefully into his jacket. Pressed close against his chest, it whispered a soft but constant reminder. *You are alive. He won't forget you. Even if he can't do anything to help you, you are not forgotten.* The dark silence, the smell, the sound of the rats that followed him into his dreams made it all too easy to forget the man he had been when free. Reading Kit's voice, he had something to grasp.

"Which means it's from a lover, isn't it?"

Tom sighed. Someone needed to release John Poole as quickly as possible. Counterfeit coin was a petty offense, whatever the law said, and if he spent much more time in his company Newgate

would have another murder on its hands. But if he didn't respond, John would only be more insistent. He could feel his mind beginning to crack under the pressure of isolation. If the door had been opened right then, he was not sure he was sufficiently in possession of himself to walk over the threshold. Conversation, however odious, could keep him sane.

"Yes," he said at last. Not much by way of conversation, but at least it was a start. He had somewhat lost the knack of small talk.

"I knew as much. If it were family or friends, you'd have no cause to hide it from me. What's she like, your lady?" The desperation for human contact was palpable. Cutting him off now would be murder. And he could not hide the smile at his cellmate's formulation of the question.

"Brilliant, really," he said, "if nearly impossible at times. Dark hair, dark eyes..."

"Rich?"

"In certain ways, if not with money."

"Beautiful, you mean."

Now it had become a game. His smile was the more real for being the more out of practice. "I'd say so, though you might not. I'm not exactly impartial."

"And you miss her." John's thoughts were clearly elsewhere. Tom was familiar enough with the ways of men to know when one used another's words to project into another place, a place meaningful to him alone. God knew he was guilty of having done it hundreds of times. Poole had mentioned his wife once before, in passing, though Tom had been in no state of mind to read anything into it. Would she remember him, when he was released? Would anything that happened before matter now that he had fallen out of time? Would anyone remember that they had disappeared?

"I do," he agreed. "I shouldn't, there's no use in it, and at least three-quarters of me is furious with hi— with everything, but I do. The thought of them outside is all I have left."

"It will end," John said. It was not clear who he was talking to, himself or his cellmate. Identity was unimportant in Newgate. Without anyone to recognize him, days and weeks gone by without

anyone having said his name, Tom was not sure where his thoughts ended and other men's voices began. Who was he, on his own? The isolation filled his mind with voices. He felt as if he were twenty men at once, and none that he recognized. "It will end. It has to."

As if that were sufficient reason for something to happen. Tom closed his eyes, losing himself in his own darkness rather than the darkness outside him, and felt the promise from the paper against his chest. *Come on, Kit. If not for England, if not for yourself, then for me.*

XX

Sir Robert Rich and his wife Penelope had not requested that an assumed traitor take up residence at their manor house in Staffordshire. Few would – keeping the Duke of Norfolk in mind, the endeavor was likely to culminate in a thankless accusation of treason. But if their hospitality had been more solicited than volunteered, the least that could be said for the couple was that under their watch, Mary wanted for nothing. Kit’s time in Whitehall had enhanced his aptitude for sizing up a room and the people in it at a single glance, and while Mary’s chamber in Chartley was not fit for Elizabeth, it was certainly more than sufficient for a less-fastidious queen. The mahogany four-poster bed was dressed with pale blue and silver hangings, covered in linen and wool blankets to ward off the chill that permeated the manor’s rooms even at the turn of March. A large carpet was spread over the cold stone floor, mingled white and brown and embroidered with branches and stems of red and gold flowers. Mary herself sat at a chair before her dressing table, thumbing through the pages of her black leather prayer book. She did not glance up when Kit opened the door. He stood watching her for a moment, as she turned one page after another. He had never been called alone to her before. If she had thought of a fit sentence to add to his nearly completed four-day fast, he was not sure he wanted to hear it. But she remained ignorant of his presence, absorbed in her reading. A mark of success. He had become so unremarkable she did not even know he was there.

“My Lady,” he said. “You sent for me?”

Mary flinched slightly at the sound of his voice, then quickly folded the ribbon into the page and set the Bible aside.

“I did, Watson,” she agreed, more to remind herself of it. “Forgive me. I spend my evenings during Lent reading the scriptures.” Was that the only thing she had been thinking of, the psalms of David? He rather doubted it. “You might close the door.”

Kit would have much preferred leaving it open. Mary had said in so many words that she did not trust him, nor did she think herself likely to. No matter how determined he was to finish the job at whatever cost, there was a line between self-assurance and idiocy. Mary might be a queen in exile, but her disfavor still brought consequences. He stood between the door and the dressing table, awaiting whatever had caused her to call him alone into her private chambers, after dark, when he was the very last person she had any reason to trust.

“I will require you to help me undress in the evenings, Watson,” Mary said, as if nothing could be more natural.

“My Lady?” *Him?* That was it. Mary was mad. There was hardly an earthly duty he was less qualified to undertake. Was it usual for Scottish ladies to take footmen instead of chambermaids, and only his English sensibility railed against it? But she had been raised in the French court, he reminded himself. That explained everything. Perhaps this was a common practice for the shameless Parisians. Scottish by birth and English by aspiration, Mary was still in many ways unsettlingly French.

“If it comforts you, Watson, you were hardly my first choice. Her Majesty the Queen” – she loaded these words with more irony than Kit had thought six syllables could support – “has reduced my staff to the absolute minimum, which as you will have noticed skews entirely toward the male. The title of ‘traitorous heretic’ with which she lauds me makes it rather difficult to attract a suitable ladies’ maid. And you have seen the country boys I keep in my house. I am not surrounded by options. If you would kindly compose yourself.”

Kit bit his tongue to bring his focus back. His mind was racing, but he forced his face to adopt the blank look of the servant. He had not learned the trick of it for nothing. He who least deserved her confidence, now granted the most of it. He could not have asked for a better opportunity, if he could

manage it. It was not as if the process was unknown to him, either. The public houses of Cambridge had trained him in the rudiments of corsets and petticoats, though he imagined Mistress Howard's evening girls might be simpler to divest than the Queen of Scotland *in absentia*.

"Of course, My Lady. Forgive me."

"I seem to spend a great deal of my time forgiving you," Mary said drily. Unsure whether or not she was joking, Kit decided silence was safer.

"Shall I begin with...?"

"My hair, if you would, boy. The pins are drilling into my skull, as if I did not have a headache already without them."

He stepped silently across the carpet to stand behind her. He had never been this close to her before, as his fingers brushed across the nape of her neck, searching for the cold metal pins hidden in the dark weave of her hair. He had never thought of what that hair would feel like under his hands, or how the arch of her shoulders would look from behind. Why had he never thought of it? Why would he? *You're thinking too much. You're hungry and you're exhausted, and it's playing with your mind. What does it matter that her hair feels softer and thinner than you thought it would? Or that you can see the veins through the skin on her hands, and every wrinkle across the palms? She's older than I'd thought. I'd forgotten that. No. Stop that. Stop.* He tried to force himself to operate on touch, like a blind beggar searching for alms, but he could not prevent his eyes from drifting up to the mirror standing atop the dressing table. In the dusty surface of the glass, clear in the center but scratched around the edges, anything not looked at directly appeared faded, distant, almost otherworldly. It was as if Mary watched herself in the glass while a dark ghost lurked behind her, saying nothing, but never far from her throat. The scratched mirror transformed him, broke his reflection into shards until Mary was the only real person in the room, and he a bastardized imitation, the ghost of a thought.

Kit had not seen his reflection since before Newgate. As he watched himself take down the tightly coiled waves of Mary's hair it was with difficulty that he stifled a shudder. He was still

Christopher Marlowe, he reminded himself. Seven months of double-dealing could not change that. But the thin, shadowed face in the dusky regions of the glass did not belong to that name. It bore the look of a man who had seen too much, at the same time telling of a servant who had seen no more than he should. Mary was one person. A genuine human person. What was he? So many men that now he was none of them. And he could not stop imagining the inevitable motion of that ghost in the mirror, the sudden jerk of its hand, the sharp shimmering of the pin as it moved across the woman's bare throat, in the quick and practiced motion of the assassin. There was more power in information than in any hidden dagger. What he could tell Walsingham would be worse for her than any poison. When she learned that the man she trusted was the one hiding her words in his sleeve, what then?

“Do you know, Watson,” Mary said thoughtfully – Kit nearly dropped a handful of pins to the floor in his surprise at hearing a real voice – “Do you know I was once called beautiful?”

Under ordinary circumstances, Kit would have pulled a phrase from his store of flattery, tailored to the occasion. But the two faces in the mirror had shaken him, and any prescribed response felt like a step on the road to losing himself entirely. What would Kit Marlowe say in this situation? The answer came immediately – Kit Marlowe would say nothing. He would never be in this situation.

Mary shook her head to loose the last remaining pieces of her coiffure, the wave of her hair falling down to the middle of her back. A response had never been high on her list of priorities. If Mary Stuart had been an abstraction until five minutes ago, James Watson remained so still, and an abstraction could not reply. “But no matter now. Do not think me vain. I pride myself on other virtues far more seriously than beauty.” She rose from her chair and gestured behind her back at the lattice of strings and laces that held together the bodice of her gown. With far more care than he had granted the girls of Cambridge's public houses as an undergraduate, Kit took the stays and began to unlace them, listening in silence. “The book of Ecclesiastes teaches us to shun vanity, for beauty will disappear with time while only solid virtues remain. I must be patient. I must endure to the last.”

“The last, My Lady?” He had heard her speak often in this vein, especially when she did not

think he was listening. The true value of Catholic majesty. The tests that God put upon his most faithful. But this was the first that he had heard her speak so clearly of what she knew, or at least suspected, of her own danger.

“My cousin has not put me under lock and key to keep me safe, Watson.” Mary shrugged her shoulders. The motion eased her out of the whalebone bodice, leaving her shoulders protected from the night air only by a thin white chemise. “I have been separated my home, my son, and my people, but not my wits. She suspects me of more than I have power to enact, even if I were so inclined. The priests were as wrong as she when they assumed Christ sought an earthly crown over the Jews.”

“I’m not sure I follow, My Lady.” But of course he did follow, as Kit gave a final sharp yank and the garment slid to the floor like a snake’s skin. It was a game always played with three pieces missing, never certain what she thought he knew.

“No matter.” Mary stepped from the circle of her abandoned dress. She raised one arm, and Kit set to work unlacing the remaining sleeves. “You should give thanks to the Lord that you are only a servant, Watson. The moment a crowned head turns its attention to you, it is difficult to look the world straight in the eye.”

Kit couldn’t remember the last time he had looked anyone straight in the eye. He could hardly look at Mary at all, as he bundled the pieces of her gown into a clothes press, to be dealt with later. Seeing Mary without her shield of skirts and distanced self-assurance was, to say the least, alarming. He thought of few things other than her anymore, but what remained of her without her shell was not something he wished to delve into. It was like removing the carapace of a lobster, to see the vulnerable pink flesh beneath. But there was nothing for him to do but acquiesce as she asked him to braid her hair for her, to keep it in order while she slept.

The over-and-under plaiting came with unexpected ease, and as he worked he remembered the last time he had been granted the sacred trust of arranging a woman’s hair. Or rather, the second-to-last time; the not-so-sober memory of Susanna from the Bow and Bridle did not count. He could see the

dark brown hair, straight but with a trace of curl, that he had woven between his fingers as Meg sat in front of the fire, on a cold evening years ago when John had been away doing what no one said but everyone understood. She had trusted him then. She had known his touch would be gentle, his care genuine. It was as if the memory had been waiting for the touch of a woman's hair in his hands to resurface.

But he could not afford to forget himself. Being too much at ease in his mistress's chamber would lead to his discovery in a moment. And the Kit Marlowe of Canterbury was years behind him now. Then, a sixteen-year-old boy with his sister. Now, the faded specter in the mirror, a dagger hidden in every word.

"You may go for the evening, Watson." Though he had finished his task, his dismissal still felt sudden to him, the rejection abrupt. He bowed slightly to Mary, who gave no indication that she had noticed. He understood her preoccupation, though she would say no more to him that evening than "you may go." They harbored the same thoughts that night, though neither would break the taboo and speak of them. Kit backed away respectfully and opened the door again.

"Good night, mum," he said quietly. She did not respond, but remained seated at her dressing table, looking into the glass with one hand on the black-bound Bible. It was as if he had never come.

And yet that night, his mind was tossed with new images, dreams, phantoms, that threw themselves against him and slowly beat down his defenses. The same image, returning every time he drove it away. The darkened grave, overrun with weeds, its epitaph sheltered by a thin veil of dust and broken leaves. A white-clad woman paced before that marble headstone. She held a rosary in one hand and a hairpin in the other, watching him with sharp black eyes, black to the very edges. Those eyes, and those of Mary Stuart, would not leave him, not until the dawn streamed through the manor windows at the end of a sleepless night.

~*~

Kit had almost forgotten, during the gap between his previous installment with Mary and his

unusual return, how much of a spy's work was dull routine. Flashes of interest might punctuate the boredom, new trusts and positions granted, but once he adapted to his new role it was as if he had fallen back into the scheduled existence of a Cambridge scholar. Every day could not be momentous. Most of them were identical.

He would wake just after sunrise each morning to check for any scrap of paper a messenger might have brought the night before. The timing was not only to avoid attention from the household; Mary's most ardent writers seemed to shirk daylight. On the not-uncommon occasions his efforts were rewarded, he would duck into the small room Mary had had converted into a private chapel, where under the pretense of offering up prayers to the Virgin he would translate and transcribe her correspondences into a small octave-sized book he kept with him at all times. Sealing the envelopes again so that no one would ever suspect the message had been tampered with (a trick he had learned from Gregory in the back room of the White Stag in Cambridge), he would then bring them to Mary's bedroom, for her to sort through as she pleased while he helped her dress for breakfast.

In the evenings, he would be left to his own devices (meaning Etheridge's devices) until half past eleven, if Mary did not call him to her sitting room before then. The summons was always met with enthusiasm on his part, though the first time he had to explain to William where he was going and for what purpose had nearly stopped the poor man's heart. The possible benefits of his new position as her closest companion (at least geographically) were hardly more important than an escape from the butler's tyranny some hours in advance. Mary's evening requests were easily met, generated as they were from boredom. He was an easy source of diversion as he matched her at cards, told stories, sang the songs she remembered from childhood while darkness fell on Staffordshire. If she thought to wonder where James Watson had gotten the knack of French pronunciation, or how he could weave a tale with more skill and grace than half the court of Scotland, she did not remark on it. Their partnership was built on a delicate balance of not asking questions, which, if the truth be told, was the state of affairs infinitely preferred by both. Kit, for his part, was more than willing to serve as court

musician, fool, village idiot, anything for the privilege of bringing her letters in the morning and being the last person to speak with her at night. At which point, after the regular rhythm of her breathing replaced her prayers, he would steal through the halls to the manor wall, in a small hole of which he would press the octave-sized book. A man staying in the village who waited for him every evening after sunset would tug it easily through the opening. The sound of pencil scratching against paper, a few clarifying questions in a hoarse whisper, and in under ten minutes Kit would reclaim his notes and return to the manor, in search of his own rest. If his sleep was broken more often by the specter of Mary Stuart watching him from the churchyard, or by Tom's voice calling his name amid the bedlam of prisoners' screams, he did not mention it to anyone.

If his work was eroding his self-control and perverting his dreams, at least he was granted the occasional thrill of its being worthwhile. The day he had discovered the morning's message from Shrewsbury included the names of four of Babington's six previously anonymous accomplices, he barely managed to strangle the cry that would have brought half the household running. One hand over his mouth, the other gripping the letter, he stared at the names until he could have recited them in his sleep, then recorded them carefully for Walsingham's man outside. The angular capital letters stood out like a death warrant. Charles Tinley. Edward Abington. John Savage. Henry Barnwell. Four more men whose lives were in his hands.

Now was not the time to develop a conscience. Sir Francis could not have known the effect being taken into Mary's confidence was having on Kit's resolve, but the spymaster always managed to keep one step ahead of what he could feasibly have known. Sometimes Kit thought Walsingham understood his men better than they understood themselves. It took a fortnight for Kit's handwritten transcription of Babington's conspirators to reach Whitehall and for the response to travel back north from London. But Walsingham managed to make those four names more than worth his while. Suddenly, thanks to his midnight associate outside the walls, he was the addressee, instead of the interceptor. The note was brief, clearly dashed off at a moment's notice, but if it had been written in

gold it could not have been more precious. He read it over until he could have recited it from memory, while the man outside waited impatiently for the moment to pass.

“Four men in exchange for one. Yours is at liberty. I always keep my word. FW.”

“Always” felt like a stretch, but at last he had done something right. He had followed Walsingham’s orders to the letter, and now Tom was free. He wanted to cry with relief, but there was still nothing more dangerous than drawing attention to himself. Four men in exchange for one, but guilt did not enter his mind, or he would not let it. Four for one. But all lives were not created equal.

XXI

Cambridge, June 1586

“I understand your concern, Headmaster. But I simply do not see how we have any other choice.” Master Wyndham appeared to have forgotten that the Corpus Christi gallery was not so large that he needed to raise his voice to make himself heard. Then again, Norgate consented with a silent laugh, perhaps it was for the best. At least a third of the masters were over the age of fifty. Raising his voice could not hurt if he were to win the fight against their deafness. It would, and did, grate against his patience, but with this interview his patience had begun in short supply.

He tapped the tips of his fingers against one another and looked at the solemn portrait of his predecessor, a stately and untroubled-looking Thomas Aldrich. *Did you, my friend, ever have to endure the likes of this?* Of course he had. It was an illusion of the gilt frame, the dark wood of the wall behind, the twelve armchairs circling the large wooden table in the room’s center, all this scholastic seriousness that conspired to give him his unperturbed appearance. Every Master of the college had been an unwilling negotiator and politician, driven to it by circumstance. It was only human nature to forget that your misfortunes were neither the first nor the last.

“You were more than willing, as I recall, to confer Thomas Watson with his Master of Arts. His recent absence was hardly more expected than the student you so oppose.” There were more holes in his reasoning than a target at the end of an archery range, and he knew he had set himself up for a volley of critique. But if they called upon him for his opinion, he would deliver it.

Haywood clicked his tongue against his teeth. “Come now,” he said, with enough

condescension to drown a lesser man, “you know that’s hardly the same matter. Watson is a model student. His Latin rendition of *Antigone* was sublime. And in any case, he has returned now. One brief period of absence is not enough to condemn him.”

“Though the precept is, I see, hardly universal. And Watson is not half the scholar that Marlowe is.”

“*Was*. When he was present, which as you will recall has not been for four months. After his disappearance without a trace this autumn, we can hardly ignore the second time. And even when he is present, he is no model of respectable behavior.”

“Respectable?” Norgate idly wondered how long Master Crawley, dean of mathematics, had been waiting to tell the masters exactly how he felt about Marlowe. Some years, most likely. “As respectable as you’d expect from the son of a Kentish shoemaker. I have never opposed the practice of admitting poor scholars, Headmaster, and my colleagues can speak for my support of universal education. But surely there must be a policy for revoking his privileges. It is not an issue of class, it is an issue of morality, of propriety, of merit. I support any student who excels in his studies, but the line must be drawn somewhere.”

“You are nothing if not precise in your judgments, sir.” The response would have sounded like a compliment had it come from anyone but Master Williams, dean of poetics, where it came across as a crude oath. Norgate was hardly surprised that Williams would leap to Marlowe’s defense – it had been at his enthusiastic insistence that Norgate had read the student’s translation of Ovid, had been from William’s office that the loudest praise of his pen was sung. Poets bonded naturally to their own, when they could expect little support from any of the other sciences. “But could you perhaps temper your virtue with a small amount of compassion? His circumstances are, as I think, unusual.”

“Unusual is an excellent word for him,” Haywood consented wryly, “though I think you might go slightly farther.”

Norgate sighed deeply. He had begun to detest these meetings with the council of professors

that decided the academic fates of his students at the end of term, but he had known from the beginning that this particular discussion would be the worst of all. His eleven fellow scholars watched him from around the large oaken table in the center of the gallery, and the oil-painted faces of headmasters past kept the conservative eye of history at his back. What would they think, he wondered, if he were to tell them the truth?

The question of Christopher Marlowe's graduation with a Master of Arts marked the simultaneous culmination and conclusion of Norgate's dealings with Whitehall politics. He did not dare disobey that dark-eyed man who had appeared in his office with a letter bearing the Queen's insignia and demanded the poor scholar from Kent be summoned to him immediately. Norgate's business was with books, not with men of that nature. Let them know it, then. He would force his colleagues to pass Marlowe, and that would be the end of it. The man could then continue on his way to damnation, as far as he was concerned. The portrait of Thomas Aldrich regarded him with some reproof at this, but he refused to take the bait. What was done was done. Marlowe had chosen his path, but Robert Norgate had no intention of eternally replacing scholasticism with subterfuge. He had hoped he could maintain the secret to the end. Revealing it would raise questions that he had no desire to address, and if it could have been done with diplomacy and discussion he would have negotiated until the sun set in the east. But Marlowe was, and had always been, a difficult case. It was the easiest way to wash his hands of the whole affair, and he would have to take it.

"I do not protest against Marlowe's expulsion from my own personal sympathies," he said coldly. His words sounded, even to himself, as though he regurgitated them from some ancient book of rhetoric. "Nor do I do so for any purely subjective reasons on the basis of his academic talents, which, as you know, are manifold. I argue on the basis of *this*."

He thrust a single paper onto the table, where it lay silent and commanding against the wood. The council looked at the page in silent shock. They did not need to take it up or read it to see the delicate seal that had once kept its contents secret, ornamented with the unmistakable Tudor rose.

“Master Wyndham, if you would be so good as to read the letter to the council.” Norgate’s invitation was not a request. Hesitantly, the aged dean of history lifted the page from the table and began to read.

“Master R. Norgate, and whomsoever else pertaining to the furtherance and good standing of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge,

Let us first assure you, gentlemen, of the extent to which we appreciate the zeal and attention with which you fulfill your duties at the university of Cambridge, and that we trust you shall continue to behave admirably in the service of Her Majesty and the education of our English youth. Without further preamble, we address the matter of one scholar under your charge, one Christopher Marlowe, as the suspicions you hold against him have reached our ears. In all Marlowe’s actions outside the university he has behaved himself well and discreetly, whereby he has done Her Majesty good service, and deserves to be rewarded for his faithful dealings. Therefore, we request that he should be invested with the degree that he was to take this commencement, for it is not Her Majesty’s pleasure that anyone employed as Marlowe has been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed and denied privileges by those who are ignorant of the affairs with which he has been engaged.

With all respect duly befitting so learned and noble an institution,

Lord Chancellor Sir Thomas Bromley, Lord Treasurer Sir William Cecil, and Royal Secretary to Her Majesty the Queen, Sir Francis Walsingham.”

The faces around the table stared at Norgate, stunned out of speech. What was one supposed to say, faced with the revelation that the renegade student you had spent nearly six years loathing had been secretly employed by at least three members of the Privy Council? He recognized his initial response in their expressions, and it was all he could do to prevent a small laugh. Let them enjoy knowing just enough to know that they knew nothing.

“Well then, gentlemen?” he asked. “Are there further arguments to be made?”

Crawley had reached an impasse. His strict adherence to authority was now at direct odds with his loathing for Marlowe, a complication he had never expected to arise. He took several moments to compose his thoughts. “Headmaster... we cannot... a degree is not a bribe or a disguise. Academic integrity requires...”

“The purpose of academic integrity is to improve the knowledge and prosperity of the nation,” Williams said calmly. “And it would appear that though Marlowe has been going about this in an unconventional way, he has had the same goal in mind.”

“But we cannot simply...”

Norgate could bear it no longer. With the council, nothing would ever be easy. Show these professors a carved stone tablet from the Mount and they would still need to debate it for hours before anything was decided. They had forgotten that only one of them bore the title of Headmaster. “Gentlemen, I have asked your opinion on the matter,” he said, and pushed back his chair with a scrape. “I will take them into consideration in my final decision.” Crawley stammered a protest at the singular possessive, but Norgate was through listening. “I will naturally inform you what I decide.”

As the masters watched him sweep out of the room and close the door sharply behind him, Norgate thought he at last understood the attraction of empire. The Old Testament might have warned against Pharaoh’s tyranny, but it was the only effective model for doing business.

~*~

Sir Francis’ office was all but uninhabitable in the summer months, particularly as the Royal Secretary persisted in lighting a fire regardless of the close August heat. The air was dense and nearly wet with its own weight, and Robert Cecil was making certain his unwilling host was well aware of it. He sighed and paced the length of the room with his hands clasped behind his back, while Sir Francis remained seated at his desk. Twenty years ago, the spymaster would have risen to his feet and dismissed Cecil from the room. If propriety had allowed him to remove him bodily, he would have. But that spring had been a difficult one for London, and for him. Though the sickness had struck

hardest closer to the river than the palace walls, the fever had inched its way through Whitehall's stones and bypassed his own defenses. He would never admit to anyone how much he resented the silver-topped walking stick he now kept with him at all times, or the small fire he needed in the hearth at all times to fend off the chill constantly following at his heels. With God's grace, he would be all right again when the summer was over, along with this stifling heat that nurtured plague in the city walls. In the meantime, let Cecil pace as much as he liked. He himself could be as efficient seated as standing.

"Well, Francis?" Cecil demanded. "You know you cannot continue to keep this information to yourself. If you have received intelligence from your spies, the Queen must know of it."

"I understand that," Sir Francis said tightly. "It does not follow that every message I receive needs to pass through you. I assure you, I am not keeping my information to myself for the pleasure of possessing it."

Cecil ceased his pacing and turned to face the Secretary directly from across his desk. He placed both hands on its surface and leaned forward as he spoke. "I know the kind who keep your council, Francis. We all saw the caliber of man that works for you in February. Forgive me if I came away unimpressed. Your spies' work is a matter for the Council in its entirety to discuss."

"And by 'the Council in its entirety,' you mean you."

"I am not asking for anything unreasonable. Perhaps if you widen your circle of confidence, I can be of service to you. My advice might be useful."

Somehow he doubted this, but there was nothing for it. Cecil was younger than he, determined, ruthless, and an addition to the enterprise he was not sure he needed, but nonetheless a man who enjoyed the Queen's favor. He could not allow personal biases to color the handling of his duties. Even personal biases so well-founded as these.

"I hear from Staffordshire at least weekly, as you know. The news of late has not been altogether reassuring."

“Francis, do not be coy with me.” Cecil sat on the opposite side of the desk and folded his hands one atop the other. Sir Francis leaned backwards slightly in his own chair. Even being that much closer to the odious, opportunistic man felt like a perversion of his mission’s dignity. “I am aware you have agents crawling over Stuart’s estate like fleas on rats. If you have news concerning the safety of Her Majesty, you would do well to share it.”

Sir Francis sighed. The exhale turned into a wince as a sudden residual stab of pain shot through his left leg. It would be all right again when the weather turned. It had to be.

“Marlowe has secured the names of four of Shrewsbury’s six accomplices, whose estates are now all under close surveillance,” he began. Consolidating the matter so outsiders and councilmen could understand it was hardly ideal. The net was much more complicated than these isolated threads made it out to be. But Cecil was interested in results, not in process. “While we have yet to ascertain the names of the final two men, and while fortifications of the Navy continue at a painfully slow rate –”

“Francis, you disconcert me.” Perhaps Cecil was not so much of an idiot as he appeared. “You know I do not like it when you mention fortifications of the Navy. I beg you to tell me these are pre-emptive precautions.”

Sir Francis met his eye steadily – the effect of that gaze, at least, had not faltered. “I thought you asked me to speak the truth. Events are moving more rapidly than we previously had reason to suspect. Marlowe has sent me the transcription of Babington’s letter to the Scot. The Earl has left his estate at Shrewsbury. He resides now in the house of a friend in Litchfield, not ten miles from Stuart’s current location. I of course have placed a man on the inside of this operation, for our own security. Babington will make no move that we are not aware of. But I fear that movement will be sooner rather than later.”

Cecil’s fist slammed against the table to punctuate his oath. Sir Francis, on the other hand, remained coolly unperturbed. Whatever the Queen believed, his decades of experience had given him more than advanced age and failing health. One did not serve a long and decorated career as Royal

Spymaster by flying off into a rage at any given moment.

“He might be at her doorstep in a matter of hours, you mean to say. And if their plans for an army are to continue unchecked... God’s blood, Walsingham, what do you think we’re waiting for?”

Sir Francis narrowed his eyes. “I beg your pardon?”

“You might believe this delay and this secrecy are for our own security, Francis. They are not.” Cecil had risen again, resumed his agitated pacing. “I would go so far as to say that this approaches treason on your part. An attack on Her Majesty’s life is imminent. She must be informed, and immediately. I will send word to Sir John Elsworth at once, with instructions to ready the guard for immediate departure to both Litchfield and Chartley Manor. You have done your duty, Francis, but we have allowed the serpent to brood long enough. Its fangs are too sharp for us to wait longer.”

Sir Francis attempted to stand, but the pain in his leg railed against it. He hissed his breath in through his teeth and gripped the head of his cane, focusing his attention instead on the cool metal in his palm. “Robert, I appreciate your zeal, but I know what I am doing. The capture and condemnation of Mary Stuart will provoke the King of Spain sufficiently for him to send his forces against England. The Royal Navy is not prepared for such an onslaught. We must play for time until we may –”

“Francis, I know you think you act for the best. But in not acting, we are tempting God, not demonstrating any lack of faith in you. This is England, is it not? England, the crown, and Saint George. We do not wait for others to tear us down. We strike first, and we strike hard.” Cecil had crossed the room already to the door, had made to leave already. “I will speak to the Queen the moment I am granted an audience. We will leave all further action to her pleasure.”

With Cecil gone, the walls that had pressed in on Sir Francis moments before now enclosed an enormous space, too big for him to fill alone. He slumped forward in his chair and gritted his teeth against the pain. So this was what became of waiting. He had waited one moment too long, and before he had become aware of it he had changed from Elizabeth’s most trusted advisor to a tired, overworked, ailing man of nearly sixty, graying about the temples and deeply creased between the brows, rapidly

running out of tricks. So. The decision was in Elizabeth's hands now. He was in no suspense at how Cecil's audience with the Queen would fall out. The plot, whether or not the time was right, drew suddenly to a head. Soon it would be England's turn to move.

And may that be the end of it.

~*~

Kit snapped the deck between his hands and felt the cards ripple back into place before dealing four to Mary and four for himself. It seemed impossible that autumn was nearly back again. In another life, in another world, a new term would be starting at Cambridge. Not for him, of course – he could not help but smile as he thought of the message he had received two weeks previously by Walsingham's go-between, scrawled in a hand he knew as well as his own. "I'm keeping your degree with mine for security until I see you again. Don't keep me waiting, Doctor." He didn't know what surprised him more, that the masters of Corpus Christi had decided to approve his graduation in absentia or that Walsingham had passed along a message like this. Maybe he knew how much a glimpse of Tom's handwriting could bolster his resolve. The months in Staffordshire felt as though they would never end, and he wished everything to be over, in whatever way that could happen. It was already August. Soon it would have been a year.

"Your play, My Lady."

Mary swept up her cards and examined them, her face blank. She was an excellent player at primero, as stoic as Seneca when deciding whether to bet or fold. Not that she often folded – for her, money was less important than prolonging the diversion, and she lent Kit the money to place his bets in the first place. He'd learned the game at Cambridge, though when he had played against Tom they generally bet tobacco instead of gold, and his skills were passable in their own right. Mary had gradually replaced her regular opponent of Sir Robert Rich with Kit, calling him "a better player than the Earl, as you can keep a straight face and have nothing to lose." Both, he had to admit, were true.

Mary pushed three shillings across the blue silk cloth that covered her sitting-room table,

adding to the already not-inconsiderable pile. She had left the window open that evening to circulate the stifling manor air, and the song of the thrushes that had nested on the grounds floated in to fill the room. Not every moment had to be filled with danger. Even for a spy, there were moments when the thrush song filled the silence, a note from Tom was hidden beneath his mattress upstairs, and his hand would beat anything that Mary held. He dropped three shillings in the center of the table to match Mary's bet and raised an eyebrow. Your move.

Mary paused, but she could read nothing of Kit's plans through his eyes. Nothing for it but initiative and trust that he would make a mistake. She drew two more cards, and he did the same. This time he could not help it: he smirked. The rules of deception and prudent play stopped mattering when his hand was this good. A quartet of sevens for luck, and the Queens of hearts and spades for a bonus. One hundred and four points. Let the lady do better than that if she dared.

"Whenever you smile like that, Watson," Mary sighed, "it never does me any good."

"I want nothing but what tends to your benefit, My Lady," he replied, "except when it comes to cards. In that, I am incorrigibly self-serving."

Mary shook her head and laid out her six cards on the table. Two aces, nothing else that suited. "Whatever else men may say about me," she said, "I know when I am beaten. Come, let me see my undoing."

Kit made to fan his cards out across the blue silk, but they fell from his hands to the floor with the flutter of rustling pasteboard. The faint sound disappeared beneath the door crashing open against the opposite wall. He leapt to his feet, his heart pounding. Six men, dressed in sober livery and heavily armed, poured into the room, their swords drawn and pointed at Mary and Kit. One moment. One moment he let his guard down. His hand went instinctively to his hip for a blade, though of course he never wore one. But the fear lasted only an instant, just long enough for him to understand the meaning of the scarlet and gold rose on the shoulder of the soldier's doublets. The Tudor rose. If it wasn't now, it would have been later. It appeared it would be now. The Queen had decided to stop waiting.

“Mary Stuart, in the name of Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth of England, we arrest you on charges of treason, heresy, and conspiracy to commit regicide. You will remain under our strict surveillance until the time and place of your trial, which shall be arranged at Her Majesty’s pleasure.”

Mary’s betting face served her well. Her eyes betrayed nothing, not so much as a hint of surprise. She rose from behind the table, the pale blue of her summer gown rustling with the movement, and fixed the soldier with a look cold enough to freeze the August air. “Treason? Who accuses me of treason?” It was a convincing performance – Kit wanted to believe her. Nearly a year of waiting for this moment, nearly a year, and now that it was come all he could think of was the ghostly woman of his dreams, watching him with empty marble eyes. He had imagined it hundreds of times, but something was wrong. It was not supposed to end like this.

“Who indeed?” The guard flung a heavily creased paper toward Mary. She did not need to look at it to realize with sinking horror that the handwriting upon it, the cipher, the signature, were all too familiar. “No one but yourself. Arrest them.”

“You will not lay a hand on me,” Mary said coldly. She swept past the table to face the soldiers unobstructed. “I am a Queen yet. You dare not touch a Queen. Lead on, gentlemen, where you will.”

And so saying, Mary walked from the room, shoulders back and head high, under the close watch of four soldiers of the Queen’s Guard. It was the way royalty was meant to face its downfall: with the full belief that any action against her person would mean the end of life as the world knew it. More than likely, she was right. Something had changed that could not be undone. But only four of the Queen’s Guard had left with the lady. And Kit had distinctly heard their choice of pronoun.

He raised his hands and began to back away slowly. “Sir, listen to me. I work for the Queen, under Sir Francis Walsingham. I –”

“*You* work for the Queen? You’re in quite the wrong county to be a courtier, it looks to me. We apprehend the whole traitorous household. Orders of Sir Robert Cecil and the council.”

Kit swore quietly. Cecil. Of course it was Cecil. In all of his imaginings, he had not considered

this. The guard took him roughly by the collar, and in a moment his arms were pinned behind his back. There was no use resisting it – he was down two swords to none. No fool would have played those odds. The door slammed shut behind them.

The abandoned hand of cards lay on the floor. Half of the sevens rested upside-down, but the Queen of Spades had landed face-up, directly atop the Queen of Hearts.

~*~

“I seem to be finding you in this position more often than either of us would like, Marlowe.”

“You might,” Kit muttered, “have at least told them.” He glared through the barred cell door, seated with his back against the wall, hands hanging between his knees. The twenty-four hours he had spent locked in the gatehouse had done nothing for his patience.

“I came for you, did I not? Stop complaining and get up.” Sir Francis was in no mood for complaints. He leaned on his silver-topped walking stick and regarded Kit with something between sympathy and contempt. “We couldn’t afford to have the guards misidentify you and allow one of her conspirators to escape instead. You should consider yourself lucky. Men in my employ have spent more than a day in prison from misidentification.”

It seemed to Kit that this was not something one should brag about. He had no choice but to trust Sir Francis and the council with his life, but that night in his cell he had wished someone left him a second option. If this was the treatment a nameless servant had to look forward to at the crown’s hands, what was happening to Mary, whose guilt he himself had helped to ascertain? The woman who had conceded defeat at primero did not belong in a cell like this. Royal privilege was a sword that cut both ways. He could not decide if she were better or worse off for her birth. He should have thought of these things months ago.

“You still might have suggested that beating and chaining people that were only minding their own business wasn’t strictly necessary,” Kit said. His own circumstances were all he trusted himself to speak of, or Sir Francis to hear. If he wanted to see the other side of these bars, he could not allow the

spymaster to guess at his thoughts.

“If you had been more polite, they would have treated you more graciously.” Sir Francis seemed to be enjoying this. “Though I should have remembered your inability to do anything you’re told.”

“It’s a curse,” he replied bitterly. “Now would you open the damned door?”

With the air of a prince bestowing some great largesse on the public, Sir Francis inserted the key into the lock and swung the door open. Kit pushed himself off the packed-earth floor and with some difficulty after twenty-four seated hours moved beside the spymaster in the hall. It unsettled him, the sudden switch from prisoner to conspirator, abandoning feigned ignorance in the face of someone who knew better than most the whole affair was a farce. And Sir Francis would not be alone. Half the court would come to keep a close and careful guard on Mary. Both his masters in the same place, delivering orders that went directly against one another. Who, he wondered, would he have obeyed if the force of precedent had not pulled him toward London? Did it matter, now?

“What happens now, sir?” Kit asked at last.

“You will accompany me to Fotheringhay Castle in Northampton, where we are expected. We must begin immediately to present the best possible case for the just execution of Her Majesty’s will.” The words came as easily for Sir Francis as if they had been set down for him. His duty was prescribed well in advance. Mary Stuart was a heretic and a traitor, and she would receive the punishment reserved for heretics and traitors. If there were some minor casualties the process, that was a price more than worth England’s safety and security. “The trial is set to begin on the first of October, which is not nearly as far away as it seems. Much must be discussed so that all will go without incident.”

“And by ‘without incident,’ you mean you’ll be able to chop off the head of an unarmed woman you’ve captured out of her own house, is that it?”

Sir Francis turned to look at Kit with eyes that held no surprise, only disgust. It had been months since Kit had been on the receiving end of that look, and he felt himself shrink beneath it. Any

resolve to speak his mind formed during the night withered and died beneath that look.

“Marlowe, if you would restrict your poetic temperament to those who are interested in it. There is no room in our world for men who grow sentimental,” Sir Francis said coldly. “Sentiment is for the weak and the foolish, and the weak and foolish are for an early grave. Mary Stuart would have levied an army against the Queen and against England. She has the whole of the Spanish Armada at her back, ready to jump at our throats along with the rest of the Catholic world. She would have you killed in a moment if she knew the truth about you. Do not allow your feelings to cloud your judgment. I suggest you take the situation more seriously than you appear to. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” Kit said quietly. “I’m sorry, sir.”

He understood perfectly. It was no longer for him to make decisions, nor was it for him to question those made by men and women above him. It did not matter that no one was better acquainted with the situation than he was, that no one had been more in Mary’s trust than he had been. He was an actor that had played his part, without the freedom to write new lines. And above all, without the ability to decide when to take one last look at the stage, take his bow, and exit, to walk in the streets with one name instead of three. He had heard that remark, seemingly made without thought, that reference to “our world.”

“Sir. Please. Let me ask you one question.”

Sir Francis gripped his walking stick harder for support. His leg ached from the journey and so much time spent standing. “What is it.”

“After... after this is over, I need you to promise me something. After this, I’m finished. Once the trial ends, the council gives me my life back again, and I leave. Can you promise me that?” If he was forced to sell his soul for this, if the process of healing by bloodletting had to extend to the body politic, at least let it be worth something.

He knew Sir Francis had heard him, but the spymaster would not meet his eye. “Come with me, Marlowe. The tribunal is waiting to hear your testimony.”

XXII

Northampton, September 1586

The north wind tore through the courtyard of Fotheringhay Castle. The wild grass that ranged unchallenged and unkempt through the small square enclosure bent and buckled beneath its force, bowing as congregation before the altar. But the gathering crowd had no crucifix or gilded Bible for their trouble. The block and the scaffold loomed large before them, their twin presence doubling their significance. Here, one alone would not be enough.

The trial had been the very model of bureaucratic efficiency. It had hardly been worth the effort to assemble a jury. Babington's letters, read verbatim to the assembled company and matched against a recently taken signature, had settled the question almost before it had been asked. The duke's case had been no less straightforward – indeed, Norfolk had appeared to take pleasure in his own condemnation. He had stood before the bench with the look of Saint Paul accepting his sentence of imprisonment by the Philippians, as if the sentence was merely something to endure while waiting for the arrival of a divine earthquake.

“Better to die in the service of a true Queen than to live in the thrall of a tyrant,” he had said in response to the charges. A simple “innocent” or “guilty” would have sufficed, Lord Chancellor Bromley had remarked drily to Lord Burleigh beside him on the bench. Still, if the duke wanted to ensure his reputation in the history books, he could not have done better. It was a good phrase, a well-balanced phrase, following all the requirements of accepted rhetoric. It would serve.

It was plain the tribunal was reserving the better portion of its prudence and attention for the

principal accused. As for her conspirators, justice would be bold, uncompromising, and immediate.

Norfolk met Sir Anthony's eye across the platform as the hangman took up his station. The grudging distaste the duke held for the Earl of Shrewsbury had faded with the trial, and the man himself seemed changed in the event. His impatience and snide mockery had faded in the cold light, replaced by the uncompromising fixity of a brother in arms. It took nothing more or less than martyrdom to reconcile a first impression. In an uncharacteristically sensitive moment for Norfolk, all his senses painfully sharpened by the biting wind, Babington looked not unlike the Saint Sebastian painted by the Italian Botticelli. Even with the noose ready and waiting around his neck, the young earl maintained a look of cool disinterest, as though the pending drop of the platform and all that followed were mere inconveniences. He stood tall, straight, serene, eclipsing the cowering Charles Paget who, to Norfolk's distaste, had quietly begun to sob. He had forgotten how young Babington was. But neither youth nor age mattered to the hangman.

Norfolk and Babington looked at one another, and the living Botticelli smiled, actually smiled, as if a smile belonged in such a place. There was nothing else for it. There would be the noose and the fall, and then there would be the block and the knife and the fire and the axe and more, and more, and all. But if they had not mistaken God, He would permit those who had served Him above law and lord and country to die before the end. They stood together in the calm before the storm. They could only keep their minds fixed on the calm after.

"Gentlemen, I bid you speak. Confess your treasons and lighten the burden of sin from your souls by asking the Lord forgiveness."

The voice could have come from the hangman, or from the priest behind the scaffold, far enough away to prevent a drop of blood from staining his soutane. Norfolk did not know, did not care, might have laughed to think how he could not tell the difference, might have wept at the same thought. Confess? Confess and be hanged. Repent, be hanged and be damned.

"If any man worship the beast and her image," he said, and his words carried through the silent

crowd, “he shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, and they shall be tormented in fire and shall have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and her name.”

Babington caught the verse and added his voice to the air. “The dead which die in the Lord are blessed, for they rest from their labors, and their work follows them.”

The north wind tore through the courtyard, and the tall grass bent and bowed its head, and the gallows ropes jerked taut as the prisoners fell.

~*~

If Mary was not to be brought to court for fear for the Queen’s safety, it seemed that court was to be brought to Mary. The castle’s hall had been transformed into a displaced rendition of Whitehall’s Star-Chamber. The usual banquet tables were pushed to the side to create the two long rows of benches that housed nearly three dozen of the Queen’s most trusted counselors. Kit had spent nearly the entire month of September surrounded by their ever-evolving plans, and yet few of their names had managed to stick in his memory. They did not matter. They were only votes and bodies to fill the vast hall, nameless adversaries to the woman they were all waiting for.

Kit couldn’t understand the council’s surprise that Mary refused to answer their first two summons to the trial. What would they have done in her place? He couldn’t imagine anything more horrifying than facing a room like this, a room of men with a better chance of sprouting wings than showing pity. He clenched his fists tighter and stared up at the ceiling, tracing the arcs of the rafters with his eyes and trying to keep his mind solely occupied by architecture. They could not hope to convince her that appearing would not threaten her safety. The screams of Babington and his conspirators still sounded in his ears when he lay awake at night, waiting for sleep that he knew would not come for hours, if it came at all. Had she heard them? Could she hear them now, as he could?

Her summons had been sent half an hour ago. The delay was nothing, not in comparison with the days they had already waited, but every additional minute felt to Kit like a punishment conceived for him alone. His fingernails bit into his palms until he thought he would draw blood, but he did not

mind the pain. It was enough, so long as it kept him silent. He remembered Gregory's words, now a year old, and ran them through his mind constantly for stability. *You do not exist. You are furniture. Decoration. Empty air.*

But the chant collapsed as he realized that he recognized not only Sir Francis on his right, but the lord who had taken his seat on his left. Sir Robert Rich, Earl of Warwick. That answered what had become of Mary's latest hosts. He could feel sweat prickling against the back of his neck, and he closed his eyes to take several deep breaths. Rich had not recognized him. He would have said something if he had. Nobility did not remember the faces of their servants. And the game was up now. Let Rich know his name if he liked. But though he knew this, it had suddenly become twice as difficult to breathe. It was October. How could the room possibly be so warm?

The door opened, and two guards unformed in Tudor scarlet and gold marched into the hall, flanking between them Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland.

There she stood, in a black gown with a white lace veil over her hair. Noble blood was plainly worth something to the tribunal, as far as her treatment was concerned. She stood as straight as Kit had seen her stand on the day of her arrest, and with the same disdain, scanning the assembled company like a Caesar before the senate with both eyes on his Brutus and his Cassius. Her guard led her to a chair covered with a scarlet velvet cushion (Tudor scarlet, and it was clear she noted it), but she did not sit at once. She stood before thirty-one men with the power and the will to destroy her, but the scorn with which she watched them made it seem as if it were she who sent them to their deaths. That haughty, patronizing look passed across the proudly impatient Lord Chancellor, to the stately if fragile Lord Burleigh, to the granite profile of Sir Francis Walsingham.

And there she stopped, frozen, staring into the wide eyes of Christopher Marlowe, whose presence in the hall made everything suddenly clear. Treason. Betrayal. Spies and false brethren. The nine-week absence and unexpected return. And to think how she had trusted him. Kit felt himself bend under her eyes, and the uncomfortable heat of the room became almost unbearable, until he was sure

someone would notice the color rising in his face. He could not meet her eyes without thinking of the last time they had spoken, the faint echo of her laughter before the appearance of the guard. *Stay calm. She's nothing to you, nor you to her. You're only doing what you were meant to. It's almost over.*

Sir Francis must have sensed when Kit had turned his eyes to the high ceiling, and long experience must have taught him why. He heard the Secretary's voice whisper in his ear, though neither turned to look at the other.

"She is finished. You have nothing to fear now."

That was the tragic flaw of Sir Francis' view of the world. He had no idea how much there was still, was always to fear.

The Lord Chancellor stood abruptly and began to pace before the assembled nobles on the bench. *Of course he would be the one to begin it.* Even with his limited acquaintance, built on wearying weeks of examining letters and legal precedent, Kit was not surprised that Sir Thomas Bromley could not begin a trial without bringing the room's attention to himself. But it did not matter. The sooner it began, the sooner it would finish. Kit did not think his nerves could bear another moment's delay. Bromley began to speak, in a voice that bore every sign of having been practiced at length.

"Madam," he began. Kit winced at the foregone conclusion in those two disdainful syllables. "Madam, you are before us today to address various and serious charges leveled against you by several informed parties, with the purpose of our examination being to secure both the safety of Her Majesty's person and the dissemination of justice, so as not to pass a sentence lacking either in severity or mercy."

"I am familiar with the idea of a trial, Lord Chancellor." Mary instantly cut the wind from Bromley's well-rehearsed sails. Kit would have laughed – the effect was as if Mary had pointed out that the Lord Chancellor's enormous rhetorical effort explained that the sky, generally speaking, was blue.

Bromley narrowed his eyes and ceased his pacing directly in front of Mary. A more violent weaponless joust would be difficult to imagine. “In that case,” he went on, matching her voice for temperature, “will you be so kind, sir, as to read the royal statute in the transgression of which the defendant stands accused.”

A notary seated at the opposite end of the bench stood at Bromley’s words and began to read from the paper he kept in his hands. “If, at any time following the enactment of this decree, any act be attempted tending to the hurt of Her Majesty’s most royal person by or for any person that shall lay claim to the crown after Her Majesty’s decease, or if any such thing be imagined tending to the hurt of Her Majesty’s most royal person, Her Majesty and her servants shall have authority to examine all such offenses, and to give sentence as shall seem just unto them. Thus, all Her Majesty’s subjects shall and ought by virtue of this act to pursue the condemnation and death of every such wicked person who acts against the life and person of Her Majesty the Queen.”

It did not speak to the notary’s credentials that he needed the page – Kit could have recited the Act of Association verbatim. There had been no paragraph read, repeated, and argued over so much in the weeks previous as this piece of legislation to protect the Queen’s life at whatever cost. Had it been written for this express purpose? He would not have put it past Elizabeth to generate law for the sole use of this trial. It would not be the first time a Tudor took the law into their own hands.

“Do you understand the charges that have been laid against you, Madam?” Bromley demanded, once the notary had again taken his seat.

“Have you charged me with anything, Lord Chancellor? I was under the impression you were merely providing a dramatic reading.” No Gethsemeneian wavering here – it was as if she disdained her own crucifixion as something unreasonable and dull. A less-concerned defendant did not often grace the bench of an English court.

Lord Bromley’s perturbation was obvious. He spoke quickly, with the clipped syllables of one who, under less formal circumstances, would have been shouting. “Mary Stuart, you are herein

charged with base and treacherous violation of the Act of Association through your treasonous plots upon the life of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, through your conspiring with proven traitors, and through your role as mover and instigator in such plots against Her Majesty since the day of your entrance into the English nation.”

Kit had known that Mary would remain cool, collected, in total possession of her wits. She would rather risk death than give a man like Bromley the satisfaction of sensing her fear. What he had not expected was for her, at the words “mover and instigator,” to incline her head at the Lord Chancellor with the hint of a smile. This went beyond Kit’s capacity to imagine bravado. This, as he knew it, was stupidity. She had to know that in a room like this where each flagstone was a square of a chessboard, every motion, every gesture, every word formed the balance between life and death, and in her position as exposed queen there was no room for error.

“And what proof do you have to support these baseless charges, Lord Chancellor?” *Baseless. How can she say “baseless” when she’s seen me sitting here, and knows everything she’s told me?*

“What proof, Madam?” Robert Cecil had had enough of leaving the Lord Chancellor to his own devices. “What proof? The word of convicted traitors that the treasons that earned their place at the scaffold were committed in your name. Do we need more proof than this?”

However ill advised Cecil’s interjection was, and however much it compromised the tribunal’s carefully laid strategy, it had its desired effect. Mary’s face went pale, though her expression was as fixed as ever. “What traitors do you speak of, my lords?” she asked, as if the response were not cruelly obvious. The word “convicted” had sounded stronger than the rest, Kit knew: she was not alone in that. He could still hear the screams in his ears, could still smell burning flesh from the courtyard. She hadn’t known. At least two people in that room would have the same dream that night.

“Anthony Babington, Earl of Shrewsbury, Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, Charles Paget, John Savage, and Henry Barnwell have received already the just punishment for their confessions.” Bromley appeared to enjoy the flash of shock Mary fought and failed to suppress. She closed her eyes

and – Kit could see Cecil leaning in eagerly – made the sign of the cross over her chest. It might have been the response of any Christian at the news of death. For Cecil, it was as good as a confession.

“I regret the deaths of any of God’s children,” Mary went on, with a calm that clearly cost her everything, “but the word of two convicted traitors cannot outweigh the word of a royal prince, though I am far from my home and country.”

“Babington confessed your written communications against the Queen’s life,” Bromley pressed, but Mary remained obstinate.

“Perhaps he has invented transgressions to sooner end his suffering. It would not be the first time a court has gained a false confession. But if Anthony Babington and all the world say I am a traitor, they lie. I know nothing of any such letters.”

Lord Bromley stopped his pacing, and the stiff line of his mouth curved up into a smile. The room was warm, so warm, and that smile made Kit’s stomach turn. Did Bromley not realize that a woman’s life was in his hands? A woman, a mistress, a mother, a queen? That smile was of a dog one stroke away from murdering a tethered bear, not a lawyer in a court of justice. Was this massacre what Sir Francis had intended all along? *Of a traitor. Of a would-be assassin. Stop thinking like this.*

“I think you remember these letters perfectly well,” the Chancellor said. “Permit us to refresh your memory if necessary. Lord Burleigh?”

The aged Royal Treasurer presented a packet of paper to the Lord Chancellor. Kit was as far from the accused as he could manage without leaving the room, and yet the thought of those letters in the eager hands of Thomas Bromley, and their transcribed counterparts in his own handwriting, made him feel violently ill. Mary, it seemed, had reacted similarly. Her hand had gone unconsciously to her throat, where it remained as she looked at the ciphered messages before her, and her thoughts in plain English beside them. Verbal arguments could be contested, anecdotal evidence laid aside. Words and letters were permanent. She had been undone by her own hand. By her own triumphant signature. Mary Regina. Mary the Queen.

“Madam,” Bromley said viciously, “you consort with traitors and murderers.”

“I,” Mary said haltingly. She took a moment to compose her voice before continuing. “I stand before you under the law, and yet I am the Queen of Scotland. The Queen of England owes no less respect to me than I to her. But I swear to you, gentlemen, I am no traitor, and I am no murderer. I see that you are assembled against me, and would use whatever means you would against me. But I swear to you, gentlemen, that while justice holds, you shall not have the cause of Mary Stuart.”

“Madam,” the Lord Chancellor said coldly, “if you would do us the honor of writing your name, we would be ascertained that this is indeed your hand. You cannot deny what you have set down. You cannot deny the justice of our accusations.”

Mary’s mask was broken. All the evidence was against her. She had no advocate in that room, no one to speak in her defense. There was nowhere to turn now. She had played their game, and played it well, but they had played it one step ahead.

“Sir,” she said softly, “you are my enemy.”

“No, Madam,” Bromley said coolly. “I am the enemy of the Queen’s enemies.”

Mary’s eyes passed desperately across the bench. Lord Burleigh would not speak in her defense, no more than the Earl of Leicester, or Lord Compton, or anyone. And then, in a wild moment of throwing consequences to the winds, she spoke to the one man whose expression had remained unchanged from the beginning, moving neither in hatred nor in pity.

“Sir Francis Walsingham.” He looked straight back with emotionless attention. “I know that we have never been allies in any cause, and that you have actively practiced against me, my son, and my religion. You will not deny this. I do not ask you to. But I know you to be a fair man, one dedicated to justice. I think I can trust you to see reason.”

Sir Francis’ expression did not change. It was as if Mary’s words were spoken in a language he did not understand. Perhaps, in a sense, they were: pleas for mercy were not part of his vocabulary. “Madam,” he said, “I will commit myself to the aid of any fellow servants of God, Queen, and country,

but I do not consort with traitors.”

If Francis had been made of stone throughout the trial, he had, Medusa-like, spread his own disconnect to the accused. Mary fell back into her chair as if the word “traitors” had siphoned the life from her. With a look that was no longer one of supplication, she turned from the Royal Secretary to the man at his side. The young man she had known as her servant. The man who had combed out her hair after the sun had fallen, who had told her stories of Hero and Leander, and of Dido and the fall of Troy. Kit’s head was swimming. She knew everything. Now it was her turn to condemn. His hands were shaking from where he had rested them on his knees, and suddenly he did not care what the tribunal thought of him. He would run. Let them stare. He could not endure that look for one moment more. That look revealed him for what he was. A murderer.

Sir Francis placed one hand on his shoulder, never turning away from the imprisoned queen. You thought this man was yours, that look said in silent, frozen words, but he was never yours. He is mine, and he has always been mine. He owes you nothing. And you will receive what you deserve. Francis’ touch against Kit’s skin felt like a vise around his neck, a noose that would not let go. There was nothing to say. For the second and final time in the hall of Fotheringhay Castle, Mary closed her eyes and made the sign of the cross over her chest.

“*Consummatum est,*” she murmured. Who else had heard her, Kit could not be sure. But he had heard. It is finished. No resurrection waiting on Sunday’s dawn. God was not known to repeat the same miracle twice.

“Mary Stuart.” The Lord Chancellor’s voice sounded as if it came from a great distance. “You are hereby condemned for practices against the health and life of our Most Sovereign Majesty Queen Elizabeth of England, Ireland, and Wales. The penalty for such treasons, as established by precedent and by the Act of Association, is death. As your birth entitles you to the privileges of your estate, your sentence shall be transmuted to beheading, to be enacted at Her Majesty’s pleasure.”

Mary’s marble expression did not change. “My lords, if you have so spoken,” she said. Her

voice was barely above a whisper. “Now, if you would permit me one small request.”

“Madam?” Bromley said coldly.

“Permit me to leave those who delude themselves into believing what they have just decreed is an act of justice.”

Mary had phrased it as a request, but she had no intention of waiting for a response. She stood swiftly from her chair, and her two guards rose to flank her on either side. What good was their protection with the sentence of execution hovering above her head, waiting only for the moment to fall? She swept past the members of the tribunal, who made no move to leave the bench. They watched her leave in silence.

Somehow, Kit had survived this long without blood on his hands. Now, beside the stone-faced Sir Francis, he knew at last what it meant to be a murderer.

XXIII

Kit pressed his forehead against the window to the courtyard, thankful for the chill of the glass against his burning skin. The leaves on the courtyard trees had already fallen, which lent their bare spidery branches the look of a forest of gallows waiting for a neck. They would find him here, of course, sooner or later. The members of the tribunal would have to pass him on their way to the hall, which had again been converted away from its intended purpose. That day, at eleven o'clock in the morning, it would be done. Placing it inside felt irresponsible. It gave the impression of a masque, a spectacle, nothing serious. How could they bear it, standing in the hall with full knowledge of the blood set to stain the floor? Possibly the requisite for serving the Queen was not unwavering loyalty or a sense of justice, but a cruel lack of imagination. If the councilmen could see what Kit could see, in the cold hours between midnight and morning, or even now, leaving a blurred circle of sweat against the windowpane, they might have reconsidered their impatience.

He would have given anything to be away from this castle. The handful of letters he had received from Tom during the month had been just enough to keep him sane. Beyond the payment Sir Francis had provided – a purse that still made him cringe when he thought of it – the idea of what was to come after had pushed him through the preparation and the trial. There would be a time when their speech could be more than just letters, and when he would surround himself only with men of his own choosing, and when he would be able to speak freely without fear of the consequences. He would rediscover the meaning of honesty. He would wear his own name like a shield. But before that, he knew what had to come first. The head that wore the crown could never rest easily, and that head was

not known for keeping its troubles to itself. He sighed, sending a misty cloud across the glass. If it could only be five years from that moment, when everything would be long gone and forgotten. It would be worth the cost, in five years.

“James! My God, James!”

Kit froze. He had thought he was living in a nightmare. He thought he had already known the worst that could possibly happen. That was before he had heard that voice.

He turned slowly, though his brain urged him not to. There was no need. He had thought about this, at fist, before the trial seized his attention by the throat. But how had he ever forgotten it? He couldn't have. The image was there before he turned. He knew what he was going to see. Two soldiers, each holding the arm of a young man, wide-eyed and barely standing independently of his guards. Captivity had barely touched Mary, but it had touched him – his face was pale, filthy, and frightened. His frantic eyes had locked on Kit, who suddenly felt the bile rising in his throat and forced it back again. *Don't meet his eyes. You already know what it is. You know. They arrested you, when they thought you were a servant. You're not an idiot. Sir Francis, Cecil, the rest, if they were in your place, they wouldn't look. They wouldn't be touched. One man, one woman, for a country. Don't.* But Kit could not avoid the desperate, flashing hazel eyes of William Cooper, pinned between two guards who forced him forward to where the castle opened onto the courtyard.

“James, they've let you go? I knew they'd made a mistake. Tell them. I'm no traitor, you know me, tell them!” William was a servant. He had only done what servants were born and bred to do – follow orders and ask no questions. Could Elizabeth ask more from any of her subjects? *No. Not Will. It's my fault, they can't do this, not Will, not because of me. They can't.*

“Let him go.” His head was swimming and he felt on the verge of fainting, but somehow his voice did not break. It was the same voice that had gained him entrance to Westgate, the same that had sneered through the darkness at John Marlowe, the same that had threatened Sir Francis with death in a London street. He did not know where that voice came from when he needed it most, but he needed it

now. It was enough, thinking of the execution to come in the hall. Not Will. Not on top of her. No more. “For God’s sake, let him go.”

“Marlowe, what in Christ’s name are you doing? You’re late. Again. They are about to begin.”

Of all the voices that might have been helpful. He could not help but hear the last words that voice had spoken in his hearing, that voice coldly proclaiming, “I do not consort with traitors.” If he was looking for a sympathetic supporter, this was not the man. Sir Francis passed by William as though he were not there, unconcerned at the way his spy stood with his back against the window, as if he were the one under guard. He took Kit hard by the wrist and made to lead him in the direction of the hall. *Don’t do this. Don’t pull me from one execution to see another. They’re both because of me. I can’t end one, but let me end this.* William looked at the pair as though he had never seen either of them properly before.

“Marlowe,” he repeated. Kit could not breathe.

Sir Francis’ patience worked in opposition to unsolicited questions. He gestured at Kit coldly. “Christopher Marlowe, agent of the Queen’s Men. Perhaps you’ve met.”

“Sir.” Kit shook his hand out of the spymaster’s grip. The touch against his skin was too close to prison chains for someone who deserved hanging more than any receiving it. He moved to stand between the guards and the open passage, with the posture of an unarmed man thrust into the middle of a duel. If they were to pass, let them pass through him. But no movement and no words could lessen the damnation William’s eyes promised him. “Sir, in God’s name let him go. He’s done nothing. I’ll swear on anything you like, he’s —”

“A traitor,” Sir Francis finished coldly. “A traitor in the service of traitors. He will swing for his treason, the same as all the rest. I know you pick favorites, Marlowe, but this is becoming ridiculous. Come. The tribunal will not wait for you.”

“You *bastard*.”

Both Sir Francis and Kit fell silent. The secretary, because it had scarcely occurred to him that

the object pinned between the guards had the capacity to speak. The spy, because he knew that while the sentence would be brief, he would never be able to stop hearing those words.

“If there’s a traitor anywhere, it’s you. Your soul will burn in hell for this. Traitor. *Murderer.*”

“Please,” Kit begged, unsure to whom he was begging – Sir Francis? William? God? Did it matter, if no one was listening? “Don’t do this, you can’t –”

Sir Francis shoved past the guards, gripped Kit by the shoulder, and pulled him roughly to the side of the hall. He could almost feel his skin bruising beneath the pressure but could not think of it. He struggled to free himself, to block the passage again, but the secretary, with surprising force for a man who walked with a cane, pushed him back against the wall. “You will come with me,” he said, his voice low and dangerous, but Kit barely heard him. Beneath the sound of the guards dragging Will from his sight, beneath the sound of that final, half-broken shout before the three men vanished around the corner, there was no room for anything else.

“Damn you, Marlowe! The devil take you!”

He barely realized that his legs were moving him toward the hall. The once-familiar passages he had roamed since August, searching for a single, safe place the Queen’s servants would not find him, now seemed the landscape of a dream. Sir Francis’ hand on his shoulder led him like a wayward sheep to the hall where the scaffold, the audience, the executioner waited for them. They could not have done it already. No, it was entirely possible that they had. His sense of time had collapsed. But it *was* impossible that from the depths of the castle, from the entrance to the hall, he could hear the snap of a straining rope, the twitch and cry of a dying man. That was impossible.

“The devil take you.”

Sir Francis, sensing that Kit had lost the ability to move, opened the door to the hall and pushed his charge in the small of his back so that he stumbled into the room. No one watched him as he entered. He turned in a vain attempt to flee into the safety of the passage – *nothing was safe, nowhere was free* – but it was too late. Walsingham had closed the door, propelled him to the farthest seat on

the bench. He collapsed as if his knees had been cut out from under him. Beside him, the Earl of Leicester did not turn an eye to the man now shoulder-to-shoulder with him on the bench. He was not the one doomed to die, and yet Kit had become as insubstantial as any ghost. The only thing assuring him he still lived was the sound of his breath roaring in his ears.

For the little it was worth, Sir Francis had been right. They were late. And it was about to begin. The tension of the lords seated silently on the bench, however long it had already continued, was soon shattered as a door opened at the far end of the hall. Mary did not look at any of the assembled company. For Kit, it was just as if she had. His own personal demon, come to take him to account. She was a pale specter dressed in black, who walked guarded on all sides but without regard for her escort. He did not attempt to fool himself with the usual lies, the stock phrases of treason, of heresy, of deserving. This day was not concerned with justice, but with vengeance. The sound of her footsteps echoed away like the report of pistol fire in the silence. She had no eyes for anyone, not even the reverend who stood beside her, not knowing whether it was his place to begin. Her total detachment destabilized the room. She was moments from death, and yet the reverend was not alone in fearing her.

“Madam, take this opportunity to confess your wrongs and take the sacrament in the manner of a true and penitent Christian. Do your soul the benefit of perishing with God’s blessing upon—”

“Master Reverend, you waste your breath. I have nothing to do with you, nor have you anything to do with me. I am a Roman Catholic by birth, and I shall die a Roman Catholic. *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus...*”

The reverend attempted to speak over her, calling out for the assembled company’s prayers, but he was barely heard over Mary’s loud, ringing prayers. She clasped a white bone rosary before her chest as she knelt on the scaffold, eyes closed, and spoke as clearly and calmly as if she were alone.

“Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, oro pro nobis...”

Months and years of hiding were all worthless now, at the end. Let them kill her if they dared

in the middle of her prayers. Kit wanted to pray – if ever there were a time for prayer, it was now – but he could not do it. His mind was blank, humming with a silent horror, and the only phrase he could summon was “Your soul will burn in hell for this. Traitor. Murderer. Your soul will burn in hell.”

“Nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.”

The two guards stripped away her dress. He saw himself in their place, helping her to undress, preparing her in her own rooms for this same scaffold. Her black gown fell away to reveal the crisp, clear white of her chemise, flashing like moonlight through the dark, and she knelt before the scaffold with the rosary still clutched in her hands. Her voice picked up the thread of another prayer before the echoes of the first had died. Kit could see the executioner behind her, the handle of the axe in his hand, waiting as was the nature of his trade for her to finish. But if she would not end, if she were determined to die with a prayer on her lips, what did that mean for the men who cut her short? Kit knew too well what it meant for him.

“In te Domine speravi non confundar in aeternum in iustitia tua libera me –

In thee, O Lord, have I hoped, let me not be confounded, and deliver me in thy justice.

Her voice hastened through the psalter, her hands gripped her prayer beads as the executioner silently approached. She knew each movement. He heard the catch in her voice at the sound of heavy footsteps, but the prayer would not die. Kit could not see Sir Francis beside him. The room had narrowed to a single white-clad figure kneeling on the scaffold, and all else melted away.

“Educes me de laqueo hoc quem absconderunt mihi quoniam tu es protector meus –”

Thou wilt bring me out of this snare, which they have hidden for me, for thou art my protector.

The silver blade of the axe arced upwards and hung a moment there, suspended. Mary spread her arms wide, rosary still grasped in her right hand, her neck resting on the block.

“In manus tuas Domine commendabo spiritum!”

Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

And the axe fell.

A scream that shattered his mind into shards of glass.

The sound of a blade through flesh. Steel striking bone. Obstructed. Stopped, halfway.

A second fall.

And a third.

The scream hovered a moment, faltered.

And then silence.

Through the blackness spreading from the edges of his vision to swallow the hall, through the voice of Sir Francis urgently repeating his name, two fingers pressing against his neck, men's hands supporting him, helping again from the floor as his limbs refused to let him stand, he could smell burning blood and clothing, the scent infiltrating his body like a disease, one that could not be purged.

The devil take you.

He didn't need to. The devil was here.

XXIV

The church is like no church I've ever seen. A ceiling miles high, lost in shadows. Only endless rising walls, dirty stained glass, and dark echoing space. They won't let me move. I'm trapped here. I thought the devil and his kin were meant to burst into flames in a church. But divine vengeance needs a belief in God. Demons aren't so particular. They don't ask the courtesy of belief to come for you. An absent God only leaves them more room to move. I can hear them coming, from where the altar would be if this were a church with something still to worship. I can hear their voices, and they bring with them the smell of burning hair and cloth. The bells from the steeple, impossibly high above the hovering roof, strike twelve. It is midnight here. It is their hour. They've been waiting for this. They've been waiting for me.

"Murderer. Traitor." William's hand closes around my throat, and I feel myself crumble under the sudden heat, as if his fingers are tongues of flame. I can feel the sweat pour from my brow, cold but at the same time hot enough to steam. I could hardly breathe before, and now I'll die here, trapped in this walled, dusty void, trapped beneath this shadowed ceiling, away from the sky.

Mary says nothing, but her eyes pierce mine, those frozen black eyes, black to the edges. She too grabs me. Her fingers tear through my chest, aiming for my heart, but the pain is nothing to the smell of blood and the heat of flames burning me from within.

The others hang back, watching. They say nothing, their throats hot and dry from the fires. Norfolk and Babington watch as I collapse to the floor. I can't breathe and I can't stand. They know I am here to die. It's only justice. I fight, I fight them as hard as I can, but I am crumbling under them.

William is at my throat and Mary is at my heart. The empty hall echoes as I gasp enough breath to scream, but no one is listening. No one will come against the demons that drag me, heart still beating, to hell. A second martyr in a cathedral. A martyr, but no saint.

Do you hear me? I'm sorry. I confess everything. This is your house, answer me if you hear me! My God, don't let it be too late. I'll undo everything that's brought me here. I'll swear never to speak again, never to read again. Everything I've done, I'll burn it all, I'll burn everything, only don't let them take me, let me breathe a while longer!

The flames rise to lick the cathedral walls, and I am lost.

~*~

Doctor Lopez closed the door behind him quietly. It was not until then that he allowed himself a single, tired sigh. His charge was at last sleeping quietly, though he doubted this would last long. The Royal Secretary waited in the hall outside. He was late already for a meeting of the Privy Council, and it was clear that he knew it, but he made no move to hasten his departure. There were other things on his mind besides reports of threatened retaliation against the murder of the Spanish King's Scottish sister in Christ. He had warned them of this. Time and again he had said that the moment the axe descended, the Armada would rise up like the beast of the sea, and it would do him no good to repeat the admonition after the fact. And considering the most recent news, he refused to discuss Spain with counselors who considered men as chess pieces. He would go. He was not so dismissive of his duty as to shun the council entirely. But he had waited for the Queen's physician's report, regardless of how long it took. Though he would never admit it to anyone, Marlowe's collapse after the execution had shaken him. Perhaps, though he would not grace this possibility with anything more than a *perhaps*, the spy's reaction to the death of Mary Stuart forced open his eyes to how little he himself had been moved. What did it signify if an event that sent a man with a morality as Machiavellian as Christopher Marlowe's into a fever did not so much as give Sir Francis bad dreams?

"How goes it, Doctor?" he asked. If Lopez was surprised to see the spymaster, he hid it well.

“I will not hide the truth from you, my lord, I fear for him.” Lopez had never been one to talk around the matter. Hence his irreplaceable value at court, despite his Portuguese nationality and questionable faith. In medicine even more than politics, one needed to hear the worst when the worst arose. “You have done well to bring him back to London. I do not like to think what would happen to him under the attention of those charlatan provincial physicians. He suffers both from distraction and fever. His body rejects both food and drink when I can persuade him to take them. He speaks wildly, but he does not address anyone, as far as I can tell.”

They had done what they had set out to do. The axe had fallen, and the heretic was dead. For all Sir Francis was concerned, his dealings with Christopher Marlowe should have been over. But it was not so simple as that. The man he had enlisted in the offices of Cambridge was no longer the man on the opposite side of the door. A fool still, without a doubt, but he could not forget Marlowe’s reaction when the axe had fallen, as if it had been his neck cut and not the Scot’s. He knew the feeling of your legs being cut from beneath you by someone else’s death-blow. He had deliberately delayed meeting the council to avoid thinking of it, but the threads of memory were entangled and could not separate one man from another. A marble monument, a stone obelisk in a sea of black-garbed mourners. The ruined body wracked by sword and fever, brought back in state from Spanish shores. The stone engraved with the name of Sir Philip Sidney. Once his son. Now the dust beneath his feet.

“What does he say, when he speaks?”

“Nonsense, my lord. The words of madness. Demons, and women in white. He whispers names in his sleep.”

“Names?”

“William. Mary. Most often, and with less fear, Tom.”

Doctor Lopez had tended to the health and well being of the Queen and her household for more than fifteen years. In that time, he had never seen a sentence cause such a change in Sir Francis

Walsingham. Lopez had heard the disdain Sir Francis used to describe the man currently wracked with fever in the room opposite. Even the request for the physician's treatment had sounded like the secretary bestowed a favor its recipient did not deserve. The distance between them was a void of class and age and estate that nothing short of divine intervention would span. But watching Sir Francis consider what he had heard, Lopez thought it might be prudent to be on the lookout for angels.

“This means something to you, Your Grace?”

He did not elaborate. Even if he had, Lopez would not have believed the explanation. The reasoning was simple, and yet incomprehensible. A single conversation, in a voice he would never hear again. *Your new poet-spy is a good man, father. See to it that nothing happens to him. He has done well by me.* “Tend to him as your time permits, but do not neglect your other charges on his account,” Sir Francis said, already turning to leave. “I have a letter that must be delivered to a man in London.”

One man had died alone in strange surroundings because of his orders and the council's will. The number did not need to rise to two.

~*~

“Are you Thomas Watson, sir?”

Tom, startled, glanced over his shoulder. It was not as if the general population of Whitehall was able to identify him on sight. Though a Londoner by birth and, following his graduation, by residence, though he had been in semi-regular communication with Sir Francis Walsingham over the past several months, there was still a sense of danger to breaching the palace threshold. He did not belong here. But when Sir Francis had told him Kit was in London, and had told him why, he had to come. Let them think what they would.

“Yes, sir,” he replied. “I was sent for.” In a moment, his apprehension faded. He was addressing an old man, bearded and with a thick, dark Portuguese accent. He wore the long black gown and cap of a doctor, and this together with Walsingham's letter stitched together the remaining pieces. Roderigo Lopez. The Queen's physician. Tom's heart sank. If Sir Francis had managed to recruit the

palace's best-reputed doctor, it meant the letter had not exaggerated.

"I know. I have been expecting you." Lopez moved around Tom toward the door to the closed-off chamber. "I am glad you've come. Perhaps your presence will help him."

Tom hesitated a moment. What was he meant to do? Cambridge had granted his Master's certification, but he was not *that* kind of doctor. And it had been so long since they had seen each other, nearly nine months. A few snatched letters were hardly enough to bridge the gap. Would he know what to say? Had he forgiven Kit entirely? How much had changed since they had last seen one another? Prison had altered him more than he'd expected. Nine months ago he would have pushed into the room without a moment's pause, and God help the man who got in his way. It wasn't that he cared less, now. But there was a limit on how much the human soul could take.

He saw him the moment he entered the room, to the exclusion of all else. A man about his own age leaned over the edge of a four-poster bed, loose white shirt translucent with sweat, to vomit weakly into a chamber pot. All evidence pointed toward a long-lasting illness, as there was hardly anything in his stomach he could still expel, but his body refused to accept it could not purge itself of everything: food, water, memory. *Get it out. Get it out.* Tom moved slowly to sit in the chair provided at the side of the bed. He could not make himself believe that this half-broken man who now sank back onto sweat-soaked pillows with closed eyes was someone he knew well, was maybe the person he had known better than any other, was Kit Marlowe.

Sir Francis, whose motivations were best known to himself, had written that Kit had returned to London from the north due to an illness, possibly the fever, though the doctor could not be sure. But words were not the same. It took bringing the words into the world for Tom to realize he had never seen Kit ill before. He was always standing, pacing, smoking, laughing, shouting, six steps ahead of anyone else. Seeing him like this, cut down, gaunt and feverish and wild, had turned him into a stranger, made more strange by time. He wanted to ask what Kit had seen that threatened to bury him. But he could not forget the three dark, tormented months in Newgate that had come from agreeing to

share even the bare minimum of his activities. Directly? Perhaps not. But it was enough to convince him of the danger of knowing the things that Kit knew. Neither of them had survived the experience, it seemed, without scars. Tom's had healed, at least to the outside eye. But from all he had seen, and could see, the possibility frightened him.

"Have you been able to treat him, sir?" Tom asked. He pressed his hands between his knees where he sat, hunching his shoulders. Lopez stood some steps apart. Evidently such things were normal enough in Kit's illness that he barely observed them now. Or, in any case, observing them more closely would do no good. Exhausted, Kit had slipped into the grey mist between sleep and consciousness. His eyes were half-open, but he saw nothing, seemingly heard nothing.

"I have done my best," the doctor replied. "The fever is elusive at best, and I fear that the greater part of his distress lies in his mind. There the patient must attend to himself."

"But you're a *physician*. Can't you, I don't know, what is it physicians do, bleed him or something?"

"I assure you, I have not neglected your companion's care," Lopez said shortly. The faint pressure he laid on "companion" was neither remarked on nor greatly noticed. "I have not attained the post of the Queen's physician through incompetence. If you have come to critique my practices..."

"Tom?"

He nearly fell off the chair. Doctor Lopez took several steps back to give him at least the semblance of privacy as Tom struggled to grasp that the voice he had heard, the voice that had spoken his name, had come from the bed and not the doctor. Kit's voice was still hardly his own, raspy from little use and a burning thirst, but his eyes had fully opened. For the first time in days he was looking directly at something, seeing it and not the endless shadows that obscured it. He was meeting Tom's eyes. If Lopez had not seen it himself, he would have dismissed it as a lie.

"Yes," Tom said, trapped between wanting to laugh and cry. The doubts, resentments, hesitations were not strong enough faced with the sound of that voice. Nine months. It had been nine

months since he'd heard it. "Yes, it's me. I'm right here."

"How did you..."

"Sir Francis sent for me. He wrote you'd come to London. Can you believe I was allowed in?"

Kit's brow furrowed. "London?" Tom took his hand, damp with fever, and traced small circles with his thumb across the back of his palm.

"Yes, you're in London." Tom kept his voice soft, as a father to a son awoken from a nightmare. Kit had known nothing since Northampton. His battle with death had passed in a dream. "Whitehall, if you can believe it, so Doctor Lopez could see to you. You've been very ill."

"Can you keep them away." His eyes no longer met Tom's, but looked at something just over his shoulder, in the empty air. Lopez was not surprised – this moment of lucidity was a turn, but not a full about-face. The voices and the visions were still there, might always be there for all he knew, even if this fair-haired man possessed some special power to comfort his imagination. "Tell them I give up. Don't let them come for me."

Tom didn't know what to say. He hadn't prepared himself for this. Sickness had been unsettling, but madness? He gripped Kit's hand harder and nodded. "They won't," he said. "Nothing will happen to you. Not while I'm here. It's over. You're safe."

Kit closed his eyes again. The effort of conversation had exhausted him, and he was already slipping backwards into unconsciousness. "It's never over," he said. His words were audible only to Tom, who bent close beside him to catch them. "You know it'll never be over."

"Don't think about that now." Tom ran his left hand across Kit's hair, keeping the right laced between his fingers. "Just sleep. You need to rest. I'll be here when you wake up. I'll be here."

And to Lopez's astonishment, a faint, tired smile passed across Kit's face. The first expression without pain that he had seen since Sir Francis brought the man into his charge. In moments he had closed his eyes and drifted into a sleep so deep there was no space for dreams.

XXV

London, August 1588

In the thick heat of late summer, daylight began long before Kit had any intention of deeming it morning. He burrowed his head beneath his pillow in an attempt to block out both the light and the sounds drifting through the window from the street. His success was moderate, but the voices were more determined than he was, and left him little room for victory.

“God save Her Majesty!”

“God save the Queen!”

The pillow was accomplishing less than nothing. “Could God manage to save the queen at a reasonable hour,” he muttered to himself. “Say, two in the afternoon.”

Tom had left the bed at the first pealing of the bell and paced to the window. Now he threw the wooden shutters open and leaned forward into the street. It was hot already, though it could not be past eight. At least, Tom thought it couldn't; the ordinary sound of Shoreditch Church tolling the hour had not jolted him from bed. The street echoed instead with the constant pealing of bells, which had begun some ten minutes before and had not ceased since. A royal procession, he had thought through the last traces of his dream. But then he remembered what he and Kit had discussed the night before, as they sat playing at cards and abandoned play for talk as the night grew darker. The Queen, of course, was not in London. The Spanish threat that had hung over the streets since he and Kit had left Whitehall months before had evolved from a vague threat to an imminent reality. War had been on the horizon for so long that many had given up believing it would ever actually happen. The over-presence of an

enemy bred familiarity and a nervous scorn in London's streets. But Kit had known better, and Tom knew better than to doubt him. It might take months, but the day would come. And sure enough, under the August sun, Queen Elizabeth had ridden to Tilbury to meet the Armada face-to-face. And he and Kit had remained here.

Tom watched the motley movement of people in the street below Kit's apartment, and savored the warm humid breeze tousling his hair while Kit fought a losing battle against awakening. It was hardly surprising that he would rather sleep than hear the news. The summons to arms had been further proof of the change Kit's service had wrought on his personality. Though he had always been slow to patriotism except under duress, Tom had not been prepared to see Kit tear down the bulletin from his apartment door that urged "all able-bodied men to take up arms and join the forces of Her Royal Majesty, to defend Our Great and Glorious England from the Spanish Invaders."

"Let them come and threaten me with conscription if they dare," he had said with a violence that precluded a response "If they demand I take up a sword and fight for Bess, I can tell them a tale about what real service looks like."

The bitterness was a new development since his installment in these sparse rooms in Norton Folgate, as was the quantity of drink he had become capable of taking in a sitting. Certainly Tom was not opposed to this on principle. During the months after his release from Newgate, he too had fled the nightmares at the bottom of a glass. There was a difference, though, between drinking to forget and drinking the way Kit did now, alone after midnight surrounded by a dim cloud of tobacco smoke and page upon page of blotted manuscript, until the stars faded into the grey of morning. It could not be healthy. He had physically recovered from the fever and had managed to gain back some of the weight he had lost, though there were shadows in his face that Tom, intimately familiar with each detail of it, did not remember. But he still slept restlessly, even the nights when Tom abandoned his own apartment in Fleet Street to stay with him, and his eyes never quite lost the haunted look that had appeared under Lopez's care. Still, Tom could not tell him to leave aside his work and go to bed, as he

had done at Cambridge. More depended on his writing now than it had then. And there was always a feeling that Kit did not want him to interfere.

“God save the Queen!”

Kit grumbled something indistinct from the bed, no doubt essentially that Friday mornings were made for sleep, not news. Tom leaned forward farther, now head and shoulders out the window. Norton Folgate was full of people, unusual for the district whose enterprises did not generally gain momentum until close to nightfall. The sound of their meeting, embracing, shouting drifted in through the window. It was not a festival day, nor could the appearance of any hero from the front have sparked the celebration. But a celebration it certainly was: Tom had not seen London in such an uproar since Sir Francis Drake had made port in the harbor from the East.

“God save Queen Elizabeth, the death of Spain!”

What?

The speaker had been close, almost directly beneath the window, a short bearded fellow in a blue jacket. His steps were not the steadiest, but his words were clear enough to be reliable. And in any case, Tom had to know. “What’s happened?” he called down to the man, who flinched at the question from above but roared back with enthusiasm once he found the source.

“Why, haven’t you heard? Everyone’s heard! The Queen’s army blew the Armada to pieces at Tilbury! Raleigh’s ships and the storm sent the Spanish pirates packing to Madrid!”

“Tom, stop shouting at people in the street,” Kit muttered from underneath the pillow. The sound of the man below vomiting beneath the window replaced the previous effusion of nationalism. “You’re going to make a spectacle of yourself. That’s my job.”

“Did you hear? Come look, would you?” Even if Kit was not about to charge the Spanish lines with the dragon of Saint George on his flag, at the very least he had to be *interested*. “The whole city’s gone mad.”

It was a rare occasion indeed that the word “madness” was used outside of something he

himself had done or said. Kit conceded that he might be the smallest bit curious. With a tremendous effort, he flung the pillow to the other end of the bed, swung his legs to the floor, and paced over to where Tom stood half-suspended out the window. Still disheveled and naked from the waist up, Kit peered out into the street, taking in the festival proceedings that painted the usually dingy lane. As Tom watched, he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the window frame, as the voices of the celebrants continued undeterred.

“Walter Raleigh and his ships defeated the Armada,” Tom said. “For the moment, at least, England’s won.”

“You got me out of bed for something like that?” Kit said drily. “You ought to have let me sleep.” He began to return to bed, but Tom spoke with enough disbelief to turn him back.

“I know patriotism isn’t your strongest suit, but weren’t you at least *vaguely* concerned that the Spanish Armada might defeat our army and take over England, burning and pillaging as they went?”

“Not particularly.” Kit shrugged. He appeared, as best Tom could tell, to be telling the truth. “I thought it might be interesting to be Spanish for awhile. Perhaps we could stow away on a ship to New Spain and come back swimming in gold and silver.”

Tom looked at him incredulously. As if he’d learned *nothing* from what had brought the Armada to their shores in the first place. “You should be careful no one hears you talking like that,” he began, but Kit only laughed.

“If I haven’t been hanged yet for what I’ve said to half the royal court, it’s only because they’ve decided I’m not worth the trouble.” It was true, for what it was worth. Being useful afforded a certain liberty of free speech, even if that liberty was dependent on Sir Francis’ mood at any given time. But the true reason was not something he wanted to say out loud. Tom would want to turn it into a discussion, and the rest of the morning would be tied up in analysis. He would have to talk about the dreams again. The dreams he had thought would go away when Lopez had at last permitted him to rise from bed and leave Whitehall behind, but had only become more lifelike. He would have to confess,

because Tom believed his brooding only made it worse, that when he awoke screaming in the middle of the night, he could in fact remember exactly what had frightened him. He would have to explain that the reason he longed to escape London's revelry in any way possible was that he knew, or believed strongly enough that it felt like fact, that the war with Spain was thanks to him. If he had not delivered up Mary, Philip would have continued to bide his time, with no English blood to stain his sword. Even the dead sailors of the Spanish fleet could now be added to his tally, which had now grown so that he could not fix a definite number to it. It was a turning point of some kind, when a man has killed more men than he can count.

But the moment Tom noticed the way his thoughts were tending – and Tom would always notice – he forced them in a different direction. The mask was always waiting. He had known it would be. “Leave the mob,” he said, “you’ve got your victory now, for what it’s worth. Don’t tell me you mean to run outside and join them.”

Tom shook his head. “You know full well it’s a Friday. I need to go. I’m expecting clients today.” He never named Fleet Street as the destination for these weekdays when he had “to go.” They maintained separate lives on opposite sides of the city, Kit in his self-designated study in Shoreditch and its environs, Tom surrounded by books of common law and records of upcoming trials. He had expected Kit to put up more of a protest when he’d mentioned living apart might be the wisest idea. In a perverse way, he was almost annoyed at how readily it had been agreed to. But if Tom’s profession required a certain care for his reputation, he was not alone in that.

Kit’s work was hardly over. The closer those he cared about were to him, the more vulnerable they were. It would have sounded paranoid had he spoken it aloud. But he had not forgotten the way Tom still went coldly silent if anyone around them so much as mentioned prison, which, in Shoreditch, was hardly uncommon. They were apart, and he did not like it, but it was for the best. If he were to let the other half of the room, and the landlady’s insistence on punctuality vis-à-vis the rent made this an increasingly attractive option, he would have to choose the man carefully. A natural aversion to asking

questions would be required, either about extended absences, dubious dealings, or occasional (lately, not so occasional) suspicious company sharing his bedroom. No one was more vulnerable than someone who knew things he shouldn't.

“And you should work as well,” Tom went on as he tugged on his left boot. “Won't Henslowe send the Furies after you if you make him wait for the script? You've heard what a tyrant he is.”

Kit shrugged. “Philip Henslowe will get the play when he gets it. He works with actors. He must be used to men who can't keep a schedule. Besides, I doubt he's waiting with bated breath for my verse. You know as well as I do he's only giving me a chance because the Privy Council will have his head if he doesn't.”

Tom allowed this to pass without remarking on it. Kit had said before that his sudden introduction to the Lord Strange's Men was more intertwined with politics than poetry, but he had not explained the details and Tom had not asked. Not after he had realized what kind of answer he would be getting, and after he knew what the truth would cost.

Kit had imagined earning a living as a poet for years. Somehow he had never imagined it would come about like this. He owed Sir Francis everything for convincing Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange, to go out on a mad limb and support him. From his position, he could not hope to write without the faith of a patron, and faith was difficult to earn without having written anything. But all through the interview, Sir Francis' words had echoed in his ears, giving him detached phrases of his orders that nonetheless conveyed everything. “Second in line to the throne.” “Dutch sympathies.” “Royal ambitions.” “Dubious religion.” Keeping this straight in his mind while trying to negotiate a five-act drama to run in early September had not been as easy as it sounded. Try balancing those two worlds on a razor's edge and see how well you managed. He knew the play was good. He had carried the ideas around in his head for years, and the espionage that now peopled his dreams had propelled them into motion. But that was nothing to Walsingham. Poetry was a convenient cover. Keep both eyes on your patron. Gain his trust and his confidence. And if you can ascertain the nature of his

dealings with the Prince of Parma in the Low Countries, so much the better.

“Regardless of who’s put you up to it,” Tom said, “I have difficulty imagining you finishing something the same *year* it’s commissioned, let alone the same summer.”

“Rehearsals begin in two weeks,” Kit said lightly, while Tom finished lacing his second boot and headed toward the door. “I haven’t much of a choice anymore, have I?”

“No, I don’t suppose you do. Make sure you write at least *something* today. I’ll be back tonight, or if I can’t, then tomorrow.”

“If you say so. Don’t worry yourself. I’ll be as diligent as a monk in an abbey, copying out scripture until my eyes cross.”

Tom’s footsteps had not yet disappeared beneath Shoreditch Church’s bells before Kit pulled the shutters closed and burrowed back into bed. Within ten minutes, he was fast asleep.

~*~

“For the love of Christ. Please, someone tell me you’re joking.”

The Lord Strange’s men were used to interruptions. The mark of a play’s failure was silence, its success cheers for the hero and hisses for the villain. But during rehearsal, it seemed early still to be decrying the whole play as a farce and a failure. Particularly when the interjection in question had caught Edward Alleyn in the middle of a speech. If you valued your job, you did not interrupt Ned. Only Henslowe had the nerve to try it, and then with enough flattery to impress a French courtier. But the director, from his position at the side of the stage, pressed a single hand over his eyes and sighed. He wished he were as surprised as his actors by the interruption. Three days into his acquaintance with this poet, and he was already too well accustomed to the territory.

“If you don’t mind,” he sighed, “we’re rehearsing a scene.”

“But I do mind.” The actors followed the sound of the voice, which had not come from any member of the company onstage. Seated on the ledge between the pit and the lowest gallery sat a man in his early twenties, thin and pale in the manner of those who could spin tales of the fever that ran

through London in waves. He lounged with one leg dangling over the side and the other resting on the wood bent at the knee, his back against the beam. From this position, he directed his disdain at Henslowe, who received it wearily. “Did you hear him?”

“We breathe the same air, Marlowe, I imagine we hear the same words pass through it.”

Thomas Kyd, opposite Ned in the scene, looked at the speaker with redoubled interest now that it was clear rehearsal would not resume anytime soon. So this was Marlowe. He had seen the name in the proudly unprofitable place of the author on the drafted playbills. *Tamburlaine the Great, presented by the Lord Strange’s Men, written by Ch. Marlowe*. Somehow he’d imagined the man bearing the name would appear more... well, authorial. Maybe he would grow used to the way the theater crowd conducted business. He would have to, if he ever hoped to advance from acting scripts to writing them. Still, he’d imagined it would be easier to tell the playwrights from the pickpockets.

“I’m sure you heard him, but did you hear Tamburlaine say ‘by the fortune of this damnèd fowl’?” Marlowe said drily. “Fowl. As if a chicken stripped the Turkish emperor of his crown. *Foil*, man. You’ve *foiled* Bajazeth.”

New as he was to the company and to London, Kyd knew this was not a wise move. One did not simply tell Ned Alleyn he had made a mistake. One learned to administer instead a tasteful cordial of flattery and wheedling. He was the best name the Lord Strange’s Men had on their playbill, and Henslowe could ill afford to lose him. The script was good, Henslowe would admit it, better than most. But the poetry of *Tamburlaine* did not compensate for having to deal with this, not without turning a profit in return. He could not pull Ned aside every twenty minutes to soothe his injured pride.

“We’ve enough time to fix any problems before we open. And we’d fix them that much faster if you stopped interrupting and suffered me to do my job.”

“If you *did* your job, I would,” Marlowe said lightly. “But when you allow idiots to massacre my words, I can’t suffer you to go on like a beheaded fowl. Or foil. As you will. You, Tamburlaine, what’s your name?” He vaulted neatly from the ledge and crossed the pit towards the stage.

“Ned Alleyn.” The irritation was manifest: Ned hardly appreciated replacing his name, not unknown to the theater crowd, with the tri-syllabic creation of this playwright who had so clearly forgotten his place. Which, in case the point was unclear, was *not* on the stage, not when Ned Alleyn was delivering his lines. Henslowe could only watch as said playwright placed both hands on the boards and pushed himself up, landing easily on both feet as though he had been entering stages the wrong way round all his life.

“Alleyn, you say? I’ve heard of you.” Ned made to deliver some faux-modest response, but Marlowe was not finished. “Somehow I expected you’d be better.”

“The lines are hardly easy to pronounce, sir,” Ned said defensively, with an unpleasant pressure on the *sir*.

“They’re only difficult because they’re well-written, for a change,” Marlowe cut in with devastating patience. “I trust your genius to learn the words. That isn’t the problem. Have you ever fought a man before?”

“I am from a family of good repute, not a band of pirates,” Ned replied stiffly, which Marlowe dismissed with a laugh.

“You’re playing a mercenary raider and the Scourge of God, so you’d better learn to pretend. It’s a weapon, not a spade. Don’t hold it like you’re burying shit in a ditch. Here, give it to me.”

Ned looked at Henslowe with exasperation. The look spoke clearer than words: “Would you leash your mad dog before he injures himself?” Henslowe raised his hands in despair, utterly unconcerned whether the playwright saw him. At this point in their professional relationship, good manners had been cast out with the bathwater, leaving only the bare minimum of cordiality required to function without resorting to murder. If he had not come at the recommendation of the Lord Strange and the quietly insistent urging of the court, Henslowe would have thrown him to the curb long ago.

Marlowe grinned and took the sword from Ned, then turned to Tamburlaine’s foe. Unused to having armed strangers set upon him, even with prop swords, Thomas Kyd watched with

bewilderment. “Now then. If you don’t want to be laughed out of the theater by men who know the business of death, just listen to me for a moment. On this stage, you are not actors, and this is not London, and your words are not memorized. You are emperors, warriors, gods. And you need to fight like gods, and hold your swords like gods, and not like chambermaids. For instance, I,” he said, and he turned his sword on Kyd with the grace of a duelist. Kyd did not care to imagine how the poet had become so familiar with the act of separating souls from bodies, but the way Marlowe held the sword made him suddenly grateful its edges could not cut. “I am Tamburlaine, the wrath and scourge of God, come to seize the crown of the Turkish Empire. Will you let me proceed so easily, Your Excellency,” he asked, with a look that would not have ill-befitted Tamburlaine himself, “or will you give me the welcome my presumption deserves?”

And he lunged forward, sword aimed at his opponent’s heart. Though Kyd was no swordsman, more a tavern brawler than anything, he parried the blow and matched Marlowe stroke for stroke, step for step. It was not a fight so much as a dance, but one with enough at stake to make any misstep his last. It was difficult to remember that he need not actually fear for his throne, his country, or his crown, that in fact he had none of these, and in the rush he did not attempt to remember it. He breathed in the hot, dry air of the plains of Constantinople, felt the dust of the Scythian encampment billow about his feet, tasted the salty tang of sweat and heard his blood rush through his ears. Either he would be the death of his opponent, or his opponent would be the death of him. And then Tamburlaine caught the Turk’s sword from the underside and jerked it from his hand, where it crashed against the ground with a clang. He was unarmed, hands raised in surrender, the warrior-thief’s blade at his neck. His crown, his freedom, his life, all were Tamburlaine’s to command.

“Now, king of Turkey,” Tamburlaine said, with a half-smile that spoke nothing of mercy, “who is conqueror?”

The blade hung there a moment, balanced on a hair’s breadth. And then Marlowe freed Kyd from imminent beheading and thrust the sword’s hilt back into Ned Alleyn’s astonished hands. “And

that, gentlemen,” he said, “is how you stage a battle. You may proceed, Master Henslowe. I’ve done.”

Henslowe did not seem overly placated by the permission to continue as Marlowe jumped from the stage and took his former place on the gallery ledge. As if it were not difficult enough to keep the company in line without mad poets rushing in from the wings to take matters into their own hands. He clapped his hands together briskly.

“Again, then, gentlemen?”

Ned took up the place that Marlowe had just vacated, holding the sword before him like a housewife about to skin a polecat with a poker. “But come, my lords, to weapons let us fall! The fields are ours, the Turk, his crown and all!” He raised the sword to strike, but from the pit came the exasperated groan of a writer witnessing all his dreams collapse.

“I can’t watch this. Have them move the duel offstage. I give up.”

Henslowe’s exasperation would have stopped the heart of a lesser man. “We will continue, gentlemen! From the top of the scene!”

Thomas Kyd returned to his mark, fully aware all the while of the watching pair of eyes from the gallery. The moment Ned had begun again from the top, Henslowe crossed with quick, bitter steps to the lowest gallery. The playwright awaited his coming with a disinterest that, from the aura of ill will the director carried with him, could not have been wholly genuine. Henslowe swept into the gallery and cornered his poet, standing barely two feet from him.

“I know you think yourself invincible,” Henslowe said, his voice no less threatening for its low volume. “I know you think you can do anything because of who your patrons are. You may be right,” he went on, and took two deliberate steps closer. One finger pointed at Marlowe’s chest – if he leaned forward, he would have touched his ribs. The poet did not flinch. “But I have a company to run, and there is no room in it for men who cannot control what they say. Do you understand me? I don’t care if you work for Walsingham or Mephistopheles, you go on this way and trouble will come of it. I’m not so desperate that I need to entertain every half-penny poet who knocks at my door.”

The playwright watched Henslowe's performance as if it were a particularly dull comedy. The corner of his mouth twitched into a wry smile, but otherwise it was as if the director had not spoken. "I appreciate the warning," he said, matching Henslowe for volume but twice as self-possessed. "But do me one favor and hold out on your opinion for three weeks. I'm curious to see how you feel after my plays take the stage. I think you'll be rather more inclined to keep them."

Henslowe's second speech would have been significantly louder than his first, but Marlowe was not interested in waiting for a response. In a moment he had alighted into the shadows and was gone. The director sighed again, a motion that had recently become habitual.

Writers. If he had his way, the whole pack of them would be rounded up and hanged. Or at least banished from the company of reasonable people.

XXVI

19 December, 1588

It was a dull winter's day, but the reflection off the drifts of snow on the rooftops and in the gutters of Norton Folgate compensated for the faint, thin sunlight. Winter made early risers even of poets, as the natural light would be gone before the middle of the afternoon. Neither of the two men made any move to stoke the dying fire back into life. There would hardly have been room for one of them to rise, even if initiative had served. The small Shoreditch apartment was economically convenient for two men, but the logistics were difficult, particularly when each of the lodgers required a writing desk as they required air. Kyd tilted back in his chair so that it reared up on its hind legs, and in so doing nearly hit his flatmate from where he sat flipping through pages of manuscript. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair again. The theater was not known for financial security, nor London for reasonably priced housing. He was grateful to Marlowe for having proposed the arrangement, though he was sure the idea had not sprung from wholly charitable motivations. Still, there had to be an easier way to go about this.

“Be honest,” he said flatly. “You think it’s terrible.”

Marlowe passed back the five or six sheets covered in Kyd’s precise script, developed over years copying out legal documents for a living, and picked up his own pen again. The uninitiated observer might have thought it remarkable that between the two men, there was hardly a moment that someone in the room did not have a pen in his hand. For the poets, it was a matter of course. Hands were for writing, at least while daylight held. “I don’t think it’s terrible,” he replied, as his pen traced

easy circles across the page. “I think you need four more acts, is what you need. It’s a revenger’s play, but what else do you have? The father’s son’s been murdered. So. What then?”

“What do you mean, what then? He kills the murderer, and the murderer’s accomplice. And then he kills himself. It’s hard to add more once the entire cast is dead.”

“Granted. But why does he kill himself? And why does he need to murder half the court? It doesn’t seem *rational*.”

Kyd rolled his eyes and shuffled the pages back into order. “It’s revenge and politics. It doesn’t have to be rational.”

Marlowe shrugged. It was hard to argue with death as a motivator. “You have a point. But I still think it needs something.”

“Forgive me if I’m not desperate enough to ask you on bended knee for advice,” Kyd said. He bit the end of his pen in thought. “Just because Henslowe’s taken you on commission for a third play doesn’t mean you’re the greatest man to spin verses since Dante.”

To Kyd’s relief, Marlowe didn’t press the point that his advice had been solicited not ten minutes ago. “I made no claims on Dante. Too much on heaven for my taste. Hell is more interesting.”

“And when you arrive, you’ll send me a message and let me know how you like it, won’t you? You might be careful, you know, the way you go on. Strangers might listen differently than I do when you suggest God’s a farce and write ruthless tyrants who destroy their subjects because they can.”

The warning was well meant, but Marlowe continued his abstract sketching on the page without seeming to hear. Kyd shook his head and returned to his own blotted lines. On his own head be it, then. The man could not be unaware of the voices that followed the crowds out of the Rose after the last actors had taken their bows. It was a miracle how some of his lines had slipped past the Master of Revels, who had doomed men to the Tower for saying less. After the Armada, perhaps regulations had loosened, or perhaps Marlowe had more connections than he let on. There was no other way to explain why he had stormed the stages of Bankside with such dizzying speed.

Six months ago, the man had been no one with nothing, searching for someone with similar qualifications to share the rent of a run-down Shoreditch apartment. And now, look. Not rich, perhaps, but certainly not no one. His name shouted itself proudly from all the playbills of Bankside and in all the bookstalls of Saint Paul's. Risen from a family that couldn't even read. It wouldn't have seemed out of place in one of his plays, known for the dramatic and the irrational. If Kyd had known that agreeing to take up with Marlowe would leave him flatmates with London's most popular playwright, he might not have agreed so rapidly. He would never have admitted it to Marlowe, who was insufferable enough without praise, but Kyd would have given an arm and a leg to make his own verses land the way his did. It was not helping the development of his nascent Spanish tragedy, working across the room from the author of the *Tamburlaine* saga whose lines spilled onto the page almost without needing to think about them. That was, if his current practice of drawing vague lines and circles across the back of his latest draft was any indication.

His train of thought was interrupted by the sound of a woman's voice speaking loudly and with no good humor from the floor beneath. Neither could make out the specific words, but the sentiment was clear, and whoever was on the receiving end of the tirade could not have been enjoying it. Kyd cringed and rose from the desk. He took up the fire poker, half to restore their weak source of heat and half in a twisted version of self-defense.

"By the sounds of it, Mistress Talbot's got her claws on fresh meat," Marlowe said unsympathetically. A loud *thump* from the floor below made Kyd jump, and a shower of sparks rained from the kindling as he jerked the poker. "The poor bastard. Do you think we ought to go down there and stave her off?"

"You want to commit suicide, you be my guest," Kyd said flatly. "If I never spoke to that woman again, it would be entirely too soon."

Marlowe grinned. "Clearly you didn't have the privilege of growing up with my mother and sister. The landlady's a kitten in comparison."

“So long as we get her the rent in good time, she ought to let us live. And on that note.”

“Which note?”

Christopher Marlowe was the most celebrated poet in all of Bankside. He manipulated the English language like Michelangelo sculpted marble. It was, Kyd thought, entirely impossible that he had not understood the hint. “The note of the rent. Your half of which I’ve covered for two months now. You might ask that Watson for an advance, you know. God knows you spend enough time doing each another favors.” The sounds from the second bedroom when Thomas Watson the Fleet Street lawyer frequented the apartment were neither denied nor frequent subjects of conversation. It was something that happened. Discussion would neither persuade Marlowe to change his ways nor garner any further acceptance on Kyd’s part. As far as he was concerned, his approval or disapproval was irrelevant. Marlowe could have been James of Scotland in disguise, so long as he paid his rent on time. So far, his success in upholding this unspoken contract had been moderate at best.

“Don’t worry about that.” Marlowe certainly did not seem to be, though he left off his sketching and thoughtfully set the pen aside. He looked instead out the window at the empty snow-covered street, almost pensive. “I’ve an enterprise coming in that should more than take care of what I owe you. Give it a little time.”

For a professional weaver of fiction, this was a terrible excuse. He might as well have claimed he had to see a man about a horse. Kyd meant to say so, but the sudden and insistent rapping on their door cut him off before he could begin. The last thing he needed was Mistress Talbot storming into their sanctuary and demanding payment. He took several steps toward the interior door that opened to his bedroom, adjacent to the center room they had designated as a workroom. He did not have time to fully disappear before the visitor, not waiting for a response, let himself in.

Marlowe glanced lightly at the man now looking distastefully at the shabby apartment, its water-stained furniture and dusty window overlooking two taverns and a butcher’s shop. Neither of them had seen the man before, but Kyd knew instantly that the visitor was not here to see him. There

was an element in his face that he had come to know well over the past few months. That blankness, that perfectly composed anonymity that slipped past your consciousness without your being aware of it, so that you could sit beside a man like that for hours and when you arose you would not remember what he looked like. He knew that expression. He had seen it on Marlowe's face what felt like hundreds of times. If there was something about his "enterprise" that he was not saying to Kyd, this visitor knew all about it.

"Christopher Marlowe?" the man asked. If the face had been nondescript, the voice was not so. Kyd didn't know what in it soured his imagination, but it took only five syllables for him to decide that this was not a man he wanted to get to know better.

"Yes, sir."

"I would have a word with you."

"You've had several," Marlowe replied, straight-faced. "I charge by the line."

"A word in private." The man plainly expected his tone would be enough to occasion absolute obedience. He had not bargained on the extent Marlowe's developing identity as a man of the theater had made him indifferent.

"He's not listening," he said, gesturing at Kyd, who had not needed the cue to slip into the bedroom and close the door behind him. The walls were not of good enough quality to block the sound, but he would seize any opportunity to put distance between himself and the man who slipped through the door like a ghost without a name. He sank down onto the edge of his bed, unable to fully explain the cause of his apprehension. Something was wrong. As he sat there, gripping the edge of the bed in his hands, the voices of Marlowe and his visitor drifted through the crack beneath the door. It was the new man who spoke first, in that voice that unnerved Kyd without his being able to explain why. He had never been more thankful for the presence of walls.

"I do not intend to stay long," the man said coldly. "I come only with a message from my lord Cecil. My name is Richard Baines."

He might have reversed the order of the names he dropped, Kit thought. Only the first mattered, though the second at least saved him the trouble of having to address him simply as “man.” So Sir Robert Cecil was sending messengers directly to Shoreditch now. He had expected to hear from Walsingham days ago. It had been some time since he had been in communication with the Lord Strange in Derbyshire, and though he welcomed the opportunity to write without being disturbed, he knew it could not last. A commission from court regarding his patron could not be far in the future. But he had never seen this Baines before. And he had never received a messenger from Cecil.

“The pleasure, I’m sure, is mine,” Kit said with as much condescension as he could manage. He enjoyed the way his remaining seated, leaning his chair on two legs against the desk, irritated Baines. It was time Cecil and his men realized it would take more than a cold voice to intimidate him. “I’ll save you the trouble, I think I know your point. When do I leave?”

Baines narrowed his eyes. He had been ordered to deliver a message, not endure taunts and sideways remarks. “Thursday,” he said coldly. “We’ve arranged your presence at his gathering for the Christmas holidays. You will remain until Sunday, and then return here with your report.” Christmas was less than a week away. Lost in his work, he had forgotten that. “My lord wished me to remind you that your purpose has not changed, and that you are to maintain your standing in his esteem to the best of your ability.” From Baines’ expression, his estimation of this ability was not generous.

Kit leaned forward until his chair fell flat on the floor and stood at last. The power differential had shifted out of his favor. Disdainful calm no longer felt like a winning strategy. “I was not aware that your master was in the habit of passing me messages,” he said. “Am I to interpret that my own cannot be bothered to confer with me?” What’s happened to Sir Francis Walsingham, he meant, and would have asked it outright, if the weak, half-plastered walls of the apartment had not reminded him of the likelihood of being overheard.

Baines’ look would have skewered him on a spit, were it able. “Your master is ill,” he said. “The tides are changing. Be very careful how you direct your sail, Marlowe, or you might find yourself

on shore when the boat's left without you."

III. Sir Francis could not be ill. The idea was ridiculous. Sir Francis would take one look at illness and it would run for cover. He had grown older, it was true, and the silver-topped walking stick could not be dismissed out of hand, but Sir Francis could not be so ill as to turn over his authority to a Machiavellian politico like Sir Robert Cecil. This had to be strategic. There had to be more to it than Baines was saying. And as for directing his sail, he could not have been less concerned. He was useful to the crown. The moment he stopped being useful, he would be dismissed, regardless of whether or not he kept a civil tongue in his head. His fate was not, and had never been, in his hands. Keeping a careful public profile was a waste of time and energy. It was more important to him that Cecil know however Christopher Marlowe was commanded, he could not be enslaved.

"I appreciate the friendly advice." His tone made it clear there was nothing he appreciated less. "You may tell your master I have received the message and will act as is appropriate under the circumstances. He can count on that."

"I hope he can," Baines replied coldly, and turned to leave. "I will tell him so." The sound of his heavy tread on the stairs eventually disappeared beneath the steady noise of Mistress Talbot from the first floor.

It took Thomas Kyd several minutes to reassure himself that the silence from the other room was not temporary, and that the visitor had indeed disappeared. When he opened the door again, he saw Marlowe standing several steps away from his chair, alone. He was looking at the shadowed staircase through the door that hung forlornly ajar, but he did not appear to be seeing it. But Kyd could not demand that he tell him what any of this meant, this talk about masters and commissions and changing tides. He did not understand the stream of letters Marlowe received and sent, the constant brief disappearances without explanation, and he did not understand Richard Baines' sudden visitation, but even if all of these were intimately linked, it would do him no good to ask about it. If Marlowe's mood was any indication, these were secrets he was better off not knowing.

What he did not know could not hurt him. Telling himself that brought some comfort.

~*~

“I hope you are not offended I did not request a masque from you to entertain my guests.” Ferdinando Stanley took a long pull on his pipe and exhaled luxuriously. A perfectly round smoke ring drifted into the library, until it dissipated against one of the shelves packed end to end with Tacitus and Cicero. The masters of Cambridge would have sold their souls for such a library, but they would never have permitted a man to smoke in it. Perhaps the smell of tobacco mixed with the leather of the chairs and books to create the atmosphere that at last let Kit feel at his ease. He had not relaxed this much since he had arrived. “I did not think my wife would appreciate your brand of the dramatic.”

She was not the only one. Kit knew how to play the mood of a room, but four days were not enough to win over the company assembled at the Lord Strange’s manor house in Derby. The friends and peers of the earl were not likely to see the somewhat shabby poet keeping to the edges of their company as anything more than an interloper. And that was without him even having spoken. Small wonder that Strange had pulled him into the library for some private words. It was difficult enough to speak seriously without judgmental eyes glaring at the back of your head. “I rather appreciate the holiday, my lord,” he replied. He leaned over the arm of the leather-upholstered chair to accept the small bag of tobacco the earl passed to him, and filled his own pipe gratefully. “It’s a pleasant change to watch someone else do the work that usually keeps me up at night. Writing for a living is different than writing for pleasure, though there is pleasure in it.”

“Well spoken,” Strange replied. “Though it appears you have settled into your profession, from what I hear. Is it true you’ve convinced Philip Henslowe to keep you on regular commission?”

The earl rose from his chair and removed the stopper from a crystal decanter of cognac that sat atop the wooden desk. Kit twisted to watch him over his shoulder. The setting sun caught the faces of the crystal through the window, sending a shower of glittering sparks across the desktop as Strange poured out two glasses. Kit had been deliberately avoiding the countryside for years. He forgotten how

much brighter and cleaner it was. Winter was different here, with the snow quietly drifting outside the library window and the smoke curling through the air inside. He politely refused the glass that was offered him – much as he would have enjoyed the leisure of brandy and a smoke, he could not forget that while this was a holiday for the earl, it was business for him. Tobacco he could manage, but not with drink. “Henslowe has given me reason to believe so, my lord, and I owe him much for it. He is a reasonable man at heart.”

“By which you mean he is perfectly willing to accept anyone who can help him turn a profit,” Strange laughed. He returned to the chair opposite Kit, glass in hand, and crossed his left leg over his right. “I can hardly fault him for it. He is a shrewd businessman. From his ledger-books, one could reconstruct all of London from the ground up. I am glad he sees the same potential in your verse as I did.”

Kit did not mention that Strange had seen no potential at all in his work before Sir Francis prompted him to look for it. There was no call to be impolite, not when he rested all his hopes on the earl overestimating his trustworthiness. And besides, the tobacco was better than anything he could have afforded. “It was profit more than potential that convinced him, I think,” he said. If Strange kept apace of theater news, he would have known this. London had taken so quickly to *Tamburlaine* that Henslowe had demanded a second installment within months. Which the public ought to have received with a handful of salt rather than a grain, he mused. His best work did not come on a deadline, and it had not been easy to conjure up ten acts’ worth of new and horrible ways to kill people. Fortunately, public taste was as fond of blood as of poetry. He was fully capable of both on short notice.

“I am not surprised,” Strange said lightly. “But I will admit, Marlowe, of the poets I have supported, and there have been several, you are by far the most bitter. It is Christmas, and I still get the impression you are contemplating dramatic ways to murder all of my guests.” Kit calmly blew a strategic smoke ring. He would neither confirm nor deny the suggestion. “Is it impossible for you to write a play I can bring my wife and daughter to without fearing for their constitutions?”

“You mean to tell me you wouldn’t invite Tamburlaine to supper, my lord?”

“Not unless I intended to be eaten. Your imagination frightens me on occasion. Between your men boiled alive and your emperors in cages, the ghosts that must live in your mind would cause a lesser man to stop functioning.”

The evening’s comfort shuddered and faded. Kit rose from the chair and paced across the library to the window, where the dying light caught the snowdrifts across the buried gardens. “I am flattered you think me able to function, my lord.” If he had known the half of it. The Lord Strange could not know how difficult it was for Kit to sleep in this unfamiliar manor, surrounded by words that said one thing and meant another, listening for a mistake and trusting he would know it when he heard it. He did not know which of his nightmares came after dark and which he was forced to live through again, in still another county and with still another unsuspecting victim. If this was normalcy, he hated to think what he would have looked like mad.

“May I ask you an impertinent question, Marlowe?”

He turned away again from the window. Strange remained with a glass of cognac in one hand, the other resting on the arm of the chair. Kit had not yet had cause to notice the way the Lord Strange’s eyes could communicate more than his words, but that black regard held him fixed. He had spent days enduring festivities at which he was not wanted and jumping at shadows. At last they were to come to it. “Sir, your generosity feeds, clothes, and employs me. I am not in a position to deny anything you ask.”

“It may seem a trifle,” the earl hedged, with that same look, “but men in my circle who know of my patronage for you have expressed to me certain... certain doubts.”

“Sir?”

Strange paused a moment. Framed in the armchair facing the window, the man looked like a sculpture of justice, weighing the relative merits of asking and not asking in his invisible scales. And, like justice, so blind. At last, he seemed to decide that nothing could be lost from speaking. He took a

long breath, then let it out again, swirling the brandy in his glass without looking at it. “What is your religion, Marlowe?”

Kit did not know what to say. He had waited since his arrival for the proper moment to turn their speech in this direction. Any mention of religion from a man whose doctrinal waverings were as open a secret as the Queen’s evenings with the Earl of Leicester led exactly in the direction Walsingham and Cecil were after. But the conversation was not supposed to be about him. There was nothing to be gained by discussing him. “My religion, sir?” he repeated. “The crown’s religion. As soon as it decides once and for all what that is.”

The dodge would not prove that easy. “Forgive me, I did not know I endorsed an equivocator.”

“One of the best, my lord.” He remained standing, though of a sudden it felt as though it were the earl who towered above him with the authority of a punitive schoolmaster. All the warnings and wry jokes about his faith over the years, and no one had ever asked him the question outright. He felt strangely chastised at the divergence of the conversation. He did not have time to consider his own damnation. It was none of the world’s concern what he believed.

“There are some who express... anxiety at your faith. Or, I suppose,” Strange corrected, “your lack of it. They would urge you to write a play that is more conventionally moral, that would less upset the crowd and the crown equally. There are only so many commandments you may break on stage before some begin to wonder.”

“You mean to say they lay the charge of atheism against me, my lord.”

Strange shifted under the pressure his poet placed on the phrase, as if it were a death sentence. He took a small sip of brandy and crossed his legs the opposite way. “If you wish to be so direct, yes, that is what they charge. And how would you answer it?”

Kit smiled. Even a divergence like this could be useful. He was speaking about himself, but nothing he said was ever about him. Every playwright knew that what a character said reflected as much on the audience as it did the speaker. “My lord, I would not dare to answer such a charge. There

are men who will take any response as a confession. But I will say, trusting in your confidence,” he went on with a carefully conspiratorial look, gaining confidence of his own, “that a man who can watch the old religion cut down in a moment, to be replaced by a new religion, to be replaced by the old and then again by the new, and does not take pause to ask himself what it means, is like the man who stumbles into a hole because he is too busy watching the stars. In my mind, it is better a man have no religion than a false one.”

“And how much infinitely better a true one than a false.”

“Indeed, my lord.” And the bait had been taken. It was that easy. His expression did not change – the trick of the spy’s eternal mask was not something one forgot. He let out another breath of smoke and crossed to the bookshelf, where he ran one hand along the spine of a bound volume of Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* that, despite his preoccupation, still filled him with a jealous longing. He needed to appear disinterested, lest he give everything away. It struck him suddenly how little pretending that took.

“I think you are a man I can trust, Marlowe,” Strange’s voice said from the chair behind him. His eyes did not leave Ovid. The earl would continue to speak if he would. If not, so. “I am convinced you are a man of whom I can ask a small favor.”

“I am yours to command, my lord,” he replied. He could not avoid his eyes any longer, but the figure of the Lord Strange seated in his armchair smoking and watching him, judging his receptiveness to the coming speech, sparked no reaction at all. What did it mean, that the dreams tormented him after dark but the man himself left him cold in daylight? It wasn’t that he didn’t care. His success depended on doing what he had been told and not delving any further into it. If he thought about where this would lead, the dizzying sense of déjà vu would send him reeling. He could only listen, as Strange continued blindly to dig his own tomb.

“You are aware of the difficulties of being far from London at a time like this. The winds are changing so quickly after the defeat of the Armada that a man scarcely knows which way to turn to catch the tide. You are a poet. You hear men’s voices, both the powerful and the quiet.”

“I make it my business to listen, sir.”

“Which is why I need you to listen specifically for development of the crown’s plans in the Low Countries, and tell me what you hear.” Strange had set down his glass on the end table and now gripped one arm of the chair with each hand. His anxiety was evident, only heightened by the total indifference with which it was received. “I am engaged in a business venture in Rotterdam, which is expected to rise to a head within the year and bring me not inconsiderable profit.” In his eagerness to provide an explanation, he did not notice that the poet in his library did not appear to require one. “I would rather have the occasion to pull out my capital before events escalate to a dangerous level, if I have the capacity to be warned of it. I think you understand me, Marlowe.”

The Earl of Derbyshire had business in Rotterdam, and Kit was Jonah. No, rather, he was the whale. Three years ago, he would have racked his brains for the fastest way to deliver this revelation to Whitehall. But things had changed. He had heard exactly what he was meant to hear. All the council needed was a time and a place, and now he had it. And yet he felt nothing. He wanted nothing more than to return to London, away from this house. There was nothing for him in Derbyshire, nothing but these phantom hands and whispering voices. He bowed slightly, perfectly calm.

“My lord, I understand you perfectly.”

The Lord Strange smiled, the relief evident. Marlowe had not asked impertinent questions. He had grasped what was required of him. There was a tangible benefit to patronizing young artists in need of money, which went far beyond the pleasure of their verse. “There must have been a divinity that brought you to my attention,” he said, and rose again to the desk to fill his empty glass. If he saw the way the poet’s brow furrowed slightly at this, he attributed it to the charges of atheism that, no doubt, still troubled him. He did not know the name of that divinity as well as Kit did, nor what kind of covenant had already been made. “Now, I insist. Have a drink. It *is* Christmas.”

Kit took the glass of brandy offered to him wordlessly. Tobacco would keep him focused while careful words still mattered, but he had gotten what he had come for. The library, though comfortable,

felt bitterly cold, and the warmth of drink in the pit of his stomach could only help. He turned his back to Lord Strange and faced instead the window, where the snow that had briefly paused now resumed its wonted practice of eliminating all traces of life outside the manor. The gardens were buried. Even the tracks of shivering animals had been filled in until nothing remained but a clean white powder, which would tell no stories and leave no trace. Kit sighed and, to Strange's surprise, tossed back his glass of brandy in one. Soon he would be permitted to leave. Soon he would be in London.

It was Christmas, after all.

XXVII

15 April 1590

“To the play!” Ned raised a hand to the lilac-tinted sky. He had left the stein of sack at the Mermaid, but the implied toast was clear, and the words were as intoxicating as drink.

“The play!” Their voices were too loud, out of tune but in proportion to the elation that spilled off the stage and into the streets. Kit stumbled over a loose stone in the pavement, and Will reached out a hand to catch him before he fell. Freshly blown in from Stratford, the actor had not yet learned to turn himself loose to London liquor, and so upheld the soberest edge of the quintet. But Kit was hardly troubled by the way the world seemed to tilt to the left. Drunk already on verse, a little more barely made a difference.

“The play’s the thing,” he said, laughing, as he righted himself. “Turns a man into a god.”

“All of us, a company of kings!” Drink was a great stimulator of Thomas Kyd’s self-esteem.

Tom laughed and let the collective “us” pass. If he did not deal directly with the literary divinity ruling over Kit Marlowe and the Lord Strange’s Men, at least he was enmeshed in their company enough so as to have them all fooled.

“You’re the king of the London stage, Marlowe, the bloody emperor. They’ll have nothing but you now.” It was high praise from Ned, who ordinarily would have reserved the title of Emperor of the Boards for himself. Occasionally, Kit remembered to be surprised that their less-than-cordial beginning had evolved into something like this, but there was no denying Ned was the best he had. And when he wrote all his best roles for him, maybe the development was not so unexpected. One that note, it was

odd that Ned had not put up more of a protest at his most recent death scene. The opportunity to play the audience's sympathies like Apollo's lyre had apparently been worth the trouble he put him through. He had to admit, there had been a significant amount of trouble.

He remembered with a laugh the stunned looks of the groundlings as the newly-dead Edward II, washed clean of blood and death and shame, had strolled from the Rose side-by-side with a resurrected Gaveston and Mortimer, the unreal threesome scooping up a poet and a Fleet Street lawyer on their way to the Mermaid tavern for a pint or five. The line between play and reality was so blurred that Kit, for the first glass, had wondered if the king and his councilors had not risen from the dead to join him for a round of sack. After the first it no longer mattered. The elation that turned his blood to quicksilver would not fade, driven instead to new heights by Kyd filling his glass.

It was one thing, reading over the words on the page, or voicing a passage to both his Thomases to test the sound of the verse. Lurking in the background of Henslowe's rehearsals was closer, though the director made it clear how much he loathed the practice, but still not close enough. It was not, was never until the opening that he really felt his words, there in the pit, pressed shoulder-to-shoulder with Londoners who hung on every word that dropped from his pen into their ears. He had entered the theater at Walsingham's orders, at least at first. But from the moment three years ago that he'd watched Robert Armin and Henry Jonson take the boards as Cosroe and Mycetes, he had found a drug that turned his head more surely than wine ever could. So many names and professions had been attached to him over the past few years that he had nearly given up hope of finding one that stuck. But the theater changed all that. London had embraced him as a surrogate mother, sheltering him in the cheap, rat-plagued lodgings of her womb before delivering him anew, reborn and re-invented.

Christopher Marlowe, poet and playwright.

The sun was beginning to set over the Thames as they abandoned the Mermaid for the open street along the South bank, and the pastels of the spring evening wrapped the fetid water in pale pink and delicate blue-green. Even the city had decided to take up the costumed glory of the player. Saint

Paul's steeple, oddly visible from the heart of Southwark, loomed in quiet disapprobation as Ned and Will began tossing stones in the river, as idle and easily entertained as children. Let the church judge as it liked. A different congregation ruled south of the river.

Their original intent had been to return home. The play's opening did not disprove the fact that they had another performance the next day at two. But even as they stepped onto Southwark Bridge, Kit knew he could not do it. Crossing the river meant abandoning the evening's glow for the propriety of Cannon Street, where respectable people went about their business. Not yet. Not so soon. He leaned against the railing and tilted his head back to watch the downy, feathered clouds that brushed like paint-strokes across the sky. He kept his back to the Thames while Will leaned his elbows on the railing to face it, tossing a small pebble from his hand over the side. Its ripples spread outward to brush against both banks.

"You know," Will said thoughtfully, "I reckon I might send Henslowe that play of mine. It could run. I really think it could run."

Too tipsy to consider the possibility of Will making anything of himself as a playwright, Kyd laughed loudly. "My friend, by all means, with my blessing. But be careful you don't put all your best work into five acts. Best save something for the sequel, lest you find yourself come up short after a first success."

That was why he had not begun to resent sharing an apartment with Thomas Kyd. He had been hesitant at first to take up with another writer, but the wink at the lonely if resounding success of his *Spanish Tragedy* proved that he could manage both the stage and a healthy level of competition at once. If he could not live with Tom, not without drawing attention neither of them could well afford, he would accept quick wit and discretion about thrice-weekly midnight visits as an inestimable second.

"You've another iron in the fire yourself, haven't you?" Tom asked him. The conversation drifted along easily, while his hand on Kit's hip ignited a second current. But no eyes fell on them, not that night.

“If you can call one lonely line an iron. I’ve had half a verse scribbled down for a month. ‘Hamlet, revenge!’” He raised a hand to the sky dramatically, then let it fall. “And that’s where I end.”

“You need six more syllables,” Will reminded him drily.

Kyd rolled his eyes. “Thank you, Master of Verse. You know so much, why don’t you write it.”

The two playwrights continued to bicker, with Ned leaping in now and again to arbitrate the difference with enough flair to stage a hundred Tamburlaines. Tom and Kit had slipped out of the script into an aside, still visible but outside the reality of this half-staged space. Tom’s knee moved forward into the space between Kit’s legs. He felt a sudden illicit thrill at the idea of the public space as the hand Tom had left on his hip inched backwards and down. They were celebrating. They were drunk. They were young still, mostly, almost young, and certainly stupid enough to make up for it. After the first run of *The Jew of Malta*, Ned himself had kissed Kit flat on the mouth after a few drinks. In front of a surly Ben Jonson, no less, who was doubtless taking notes to add to his armory of slander and libel against poets and playwrights that were not him. Men were not responsible for what they did after they had been drinking. They could risk anything.

“You’re a madman, you know that,” Tom whispered. Kit shivered with the pressure of Tom’s thigh against his groin. “I genuinely think you’re mad.”

“You know if any of us has lost his wits, it’s not me,” he responded under his breath. “It’s Hieronimo who’s mad again. Have you heard him? He’s still going on about that bloody *Hamlet* of his. As if he could pull the thing off.”

“It’s only your words I’ve heard tonight. I can’t believe you wrote that.”

“Wrote what, exactly?” Tom leaned in farther, and Kit twined one leg around his in return, pulling him harder against his hips. No matter how much his work and Tom’s discretion kept them apart, he would never tire of tormenting him like this.

“You know what. You were on about it from the beginning. You were subtle when you started, describing Tamburlaine as an Achilles with stars in his hair or what have you for seventy lines. Then

there was that nonsense you never finished about a lecherous Poseidon leaping out of the sea to run his hands over Leander.” Kit laughed. He had almost forgotten that. “But this time, right from the first line without even pretending it’s anything else. *Sweet prince, I come. These, these thy amorous lines might have enforced me to have swum from France, and, like Leander, gasped upon the sand, so thou wouldst smile and take me in thy arms.*”

“You memorized me,” Kit murmured. “I’m flattered you took the time.”

“You’re ridiculous. It’s dangerous, you know that, even if you did...” The closeness of their bodies prevented Tom from explaining exactly what Kit’s pen had done to Edward and Gaveston in that penultimate scene that made him gag and forced him to turn away. It had been a blind, he knew that much. The most spirited and thoroughgoing punishment of sodomy from one who so enjoyed its effects. But the audience had to have heard the power of the lines, singing out from the heart in the way only a Marlowe play knew how. They had to know.

Tom had seen the smile on Kit’s face before. It was the same look he had worn after swiping a full decanter of communion wine at Cambridge, or more recently when he had told Kyd that his flatmate’s commission for a poem on Saint Paul at Damascus was the same as writing an epic about a charlatan pushing pig’s bones as saint’s relics. It was the smile of a man who knew that what he was doing could come to no good, and yet had been persuaded that a safe, quiet death alone in a comfortable bed was worse than a hot and passionate damnation.

“Did you expect anything else?” Anyone might see, if they wanted. Kit had not staged this play for nothing. “Know you not who I am? Your friend, your self, another Gaveston.”

“Don’t quote yourself at me. It’s not becoming. And if you’ve any sense at all, don’t model us off that pair. I’d rather have a... a happy ending.”

Tom grinned at the sharp gasp his hand had pulled from Kit, before he stopped his mouth with a kiss. He could not think of the three men on the bridge, not then. Thomas Kyd knew more than he might say about Marlowe and Watson from those nights in Shoreditch, even if he did maintain a self-

serving selective blindness. Anyone coming from *Edward II* at the Rose might have drawn conclusions of their own. But drink lowered their caution and their concern. When they could no longer tell what was a street and what a stage, was everything not open to transgression?

“Come now, my boys,” Ned taunted, “drink is the great corruptor of men’s souls. To the priest, the both of you, and do your penance.”

They separated with some reluctance, all movement slowed and elongated through the evening’s glow. He wasn’t sure whether Ned thought their drunken revels had broken a few commandments beyond the norm or his moral compass was more capable of winking than the church’s. But the actor was bright enough to bridge the gap between play and playwright.

“I don’t reckon we’re the only ones in need of a priest,” Kit retorted easily. His hand had not left Tom’s hip. “Your wife might have a few requests herself. She’d rather you ended up on your knees in the service of God and not of some Eastcheap whore.”

Ned groaned. “For God’s sake, don’t mention my wife tonight. Let me have one night out of the sphere of her influence, lest you bring her down upon me with your summoning.”

“It’d serve you right if she did find you here, lost among this hapless crowd of miscreants.”

“Sir? You’ll be the man they call Marlowe, sir?”

“Speak ‘miscreant’ and messengers come running,” Kyd said under his breath. From where they stood, they could see a boy of perhaps fifteen hurrying toward them from Cannon Street, a folded piece of paper in his hand. In a moment, Kit was as coldly sober as any morning in Lent. He did not know the messenger, nor did he care to. Years spent in London within reach of Whitehall had reinforced his mistrust of letters. If it could not be spoken freely, he did not want to know it.

“I might be, from time to time,” he said, “depending on who’s doing the asking.”

The boy stopped a few feet from where Kit and Tom stood. He did not think he was imagining the sidelong glance the messenger threw at the pair. “I come from Mistress Talbot, sir.”

He still did not allow himself to relax, but he forced his anxiety down half a notch.irate

landladies he could manage. “Well, boy,” – he turned to the messenger – “you may tell my radiant landlady I have bent London to my will tonight, as I promised. And when I return, she will receive her rent in full, for the next two months, on the instant. You may give her my word as a poet on it.”

“And as for the word of a poet,” Ned remarked, as if an aside, “doubt not but that it will at least sound sterling to the ear.”

“It’s not that, sir.” The boy looked at a loss for how to respond. The better part of men he came across daily did not speak or behave like this group of players, not yet shifted back into the roles of ordinary men. He held forth the paper in one trembling hand, and Kit felt his stomach fall as he looked on it. He knew that seal well. “A letter is come for you, sir. I am told it’s urgent.”

“And who from?” Tom asked. The question was a formality more than anything. Confronted with the look on Kit’s face, he knew too well who from.

“I don’t know, sir. A gentleman, she said. Anxious for a quick reply.”

“Can’t you give him one night?” Can’t you give *us* one night, Tom wanted to say, but could not manage it. They had had one brief moment away from the memories of this other life he would much rather have drowned in the river. For at least a few hours, Kit had been permitted to forget, and he along with him. The dreams still appeared more often than Tom thought he could stand, though they spent together only three nights out of the seven. Always those dreams, that time spent sleeping in fits and starts, names and shouts through the darkness until he shook him awake, panting and wild-eyed. The play might have done it. The play spoke to the man he might be, not the man he had been. But Tom knew what letters from unnamed gentlemen meant for Kit. There was always a third person in every relationship, mediating their movements.

“Come, then.” For the players, they might have thought Kit suddenly ill, or touched with passing madness. “Your message. Let me have it.”

The boy hesitated. “I was told ‘tis a private matter, sir, and ought to be read alone.”

“A private matter? Nothing of Kit’s is private. Everything he’s ever thought rings from the

boards once a week.”

“Please, Ned. Let me be.” Kit nodded to the messenger. “I’ll follow you, then. I’ll see the rest of you in the morning, before the show.”

The boy set off for the north bank, leaving Kit no choice but to follow. They were barely out of Southwark, but the air of Cannon Street felt different. The revelry so welcome on the stage could expect nothing more here than a frown and a disapproving look. If he could spend his whole life below the river, he would have done it. You could drown respectability there and live free. The boy led him off the main road and into a small alley between two buildings, out of the way of prying eyes, before thrusting the sealed envelope into his hands. Plainly the messenger could not wait to be rid of it. Anything touched by a man with a title both frightened and intrigued him, with the former outweighing the latter. Let the mad playwright deal with the contents. He would have none of it.

Kit’s hands trembled as he broke the seal and unfolded the letter. The paper and ink looked the same as any sent to him in London, but the handwriting was different. There was no addressee – for the writer of this letter, it was better if its recipient did not exist.

“It is with remorse and deepest sadness that we report the passing of Her Majesty the Queen’s most noble, most loving, most devoted servant, asset to the realm and right hand of her sovereign majesty’s authority, Royal Secretary to Her Highness, Sir Francis Walsingham, this sixth day of April, in the year of our Lord 1590, of natural causes derived from an extended illness, which Our Good Lord saw fit to end with the granting of His grace, mercy, and eternal rest.

In the interest of filling the lamentably vacant post of Royal Secretary, Her Majesty has appointed as his successor a man of noble bearing and capable understanding, a gentleman and a loyal servant of Queen and country, the right honorable Earl of Salisbury, Sir Robert Cecil. With Her Majesty’s full confidence and trust, the Earl will assume all duties and responsibilities of his predecessor, effective immediately.

In light of recent events, it has been decided that your involvement with the strange and

uncertain matters with which you are well familiar merits no further delay, and your immediate action is requested. You will report to the appointed location on the morning of the sixteenth of April, where you will meet your partner in the endeavor, one Richard Baines, who will serve as translator and assistant in your work. All further information will be granted you upon your arrival.

With the expectation of your compliance,

Sir Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex.”

“Will there be a reply, sir?” the boy asked. The silence that followed as the man read the message through, then again, trying to make the words into something resembling sense, pressed hard on his nerves, and he itched to be off.

“No,” Kit said. “There will be no reply.” He dropped a penny in the boy’s outstretched hand, and the messenger took to his heels as if the devil himself were after him. It was a wise choice. Anyone who could afford to put distance between themselves and such letters was well within their rights to do it. He folded the letter in half, then in half again, before placing it in his pocket and stepping into the street, back toward the river that was rapidly shedding the pale colors of sunset in favor of the cold grey of twilight. Of all the men in the world Kit expected to outlive, Sir Francis had never been one of them. He was a man who sent others to meet the devil. He had been old, it was true. Baines’ words came back to him, stranger now they had proven themselves. “The tides are changing. Be careful how you direct your sails.” But he could not age like ordinary men, could not fall ill, could not... His mind failed to provide the necessary word.

Sir Francis Walsingham had never cared for him personally, nor had he felt any great surge of affection for the royal spymaster. Theirs was a professional arrangement, master and servant, nothing more. But while he had dominated Kit’s sphere of influence, he had been protected, if in the most liberal sense. Walsingham had lifted him from the imprisoning walls of books and piety of Corpus Christi. He had believed there was something of value in him, and it was only thanks to his faith that he had somehow arrived at the triumph of that afternoon, leaving a London theater still ringing with

the echoes of his words. He owed him almost everything. He had been under no obligation to arrange a meeting between Kit and the Lord Strange, nor to encourage Henslowe to give him a chance. He remembered Sir Robert Cecil as he had seen him in Northampton, seated on the edge of the bench, waiting for the axe to fall. His work, his play, his life, now all under the jurisdiction of that man.

Kit began to walk, dream-like, back toward Southwark Bridge, but it was too late. The night had been lost, and would not come again. He turned instead to walk the edge of the river, mere inches on his left from a drop into the mud and filth of the Thames water. If the passerby on their way home or to the cathedral noticed his preoccupation they did not show it, and moved past him as if he were a ghost. Sir Francis could not have died from anything but illness. Nothing could kill a man like that but himself. He had already tried to imagine a universe in which any mortal hand could dispatch a force of nature, and he could not do it, not then and not now. So you, the scourge and wrath of God, shall die. There was a kind of justice to it, one that a God might have smiled to think of.

Let earth and heaven his timeless death deplore; for both their worths will equal him no more.

Kit had not prayed in years, not since the fever had taught him that God shrugged off pleas from the damned with an absolute and frightening indifference. Besides, if his own soul were bound for the fires, how much more did Walsingham have to answer for. But the breath of his own verse was the best blessing he could manage.

It would have been enough, without the rest. Despite the ratio of insinuation and hints to actual information, the Earl's message could not have been clearer. "*The strange and uncertain matters with which you are familiar.*" Essex must have enjoyed the pun, though it was clear from the unnecessarily circuitous prose he was not destined for greatness as a poet. Walsingham had, consistent with his habit, waited for the precise moment to close his nets on Strange, but Cecil did not have his predecessor's patient disposition. The implications of Strange's remarks on his "enterprise" in Rotterdam could no longer be ignored. The Low Countries. Holland. With Richard Baines, God help him. And, as it appeared, tomorrow.

Why had he written verse of banishment and separation? Why did the theater still echo with the cries of a man torn from his native land and those he loved? The next morning, Christopher Marlowe would disappear from the face of the earth. The poet's pen would be silenced. The theaters would perform the plays of a man no longer there to hear. In his place would grow a stranger, wandering a land he did not know, under the command of a man he could not trust.

He would have to tell Tom, and quickly. If he could only have told him anything else.

Kit removed the letter from his pocket. As the sun settled behind Saint Paul's behind him and shadows began to lean forward from the buildings to lick at his heels, he tore the page into strips, then each strip in half, and let them flutter from his hands. They floated on the surface of the Thames for a moment, before the tepid filth of the water soaked them through and they sank, feather-like, to the muddy bottom below.

XXVIII

20 December, 1592

Even before the ship had left harbor, he knew he was going to be ill. It was only his second time at sea, and if the voyage from London to Rotterdam were any indication, the reverse would be no more pleasant. Then again, the trip had not been designed with his comfort in mind. The hold of the *Neptune* was cold, and more troublingly for a vessel meant to be seaworthy, it was wet. Frigid seawater lapped against the toes of his boots, and the cold iron manacles around his wrists sent a chill through his whole body. He leaned forward and took his head in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. God help him when he got back to London.

Meeting Sir Robert Cecil in the Star-Chamber as a common criminal was hardly the best way to raise his credit with the new Royal Secretary. Without the subtle support of Sir Francis, support he had not appreciated until he lost it, he had no idea what to expect. Was his life, to Cecil, worth the risk of having him caught deep in Holland with his hands in the wrong pockets?

He could have killed Baines for not defending him against the Lord Sheriff. Some help he proved to be, making the passage back to London above-deck while he shivered and froze below. All it would have taken was a few well-placed words and an alibi, and Kit would have been free. Baines was a spy. It was laughable to think he was not capable of the deception. One more reason for him to believe (though he knew he believed it without proof) that the arrest had been Baines' doing all along. It would be so like him, using Kit's arrest to raise Cecil's confidence in his own skill, even if it meant laying a trap for his own man. When he decided to hate men on sight, he was accurate in his judgment.

All that work, all that time, all that risk, and what was he arrested for in the end? Counterfeit coin. Of all the wastes of time and effort. Cecil would be perfectly justified in having his head for this. Counterfeit coin. Jesus Christ. They didn't know the half of what they could have arraigned him for, in that public house in Antwerp. The dagger they had confiscated at his arrest could speak eloquently of the sudden disappearance of three priests, a deacon, two soldiers, and a groomsman unfortunate enough to mistime his presence. Surely they were worth more than a handful of knocked-off shillings. (*Shillings*. He hadn't even had the gold to make it worth his while.) The Lord worked in mysterious ways, choosing which crimes he would be brought to account for. And if it was the Lord's intervention, he had quite a bit to answer for. It was as if God enjoyed being deliberately unhelpful.

Kit sighed and buried his fingers in his hair. The iron had begun to chafe against his bare wrists. He could feel the skin breaking and scabbing as he moved. It was so cold, even without the leak, and the chattering of rats had kept him awake all the night before. The nervous energy of the man fearing the rope kept him alert, a skittishness only worsened by his desperate need for tobacco. He'd have given anything for a smoke.

God, what it would be like when they docked in London. What was he supposed to say to the council? He shivered – what was he supposed to say to Tom? He had told him to expect an absence of five or six months, hinted that it was linked to his work in the theaters, and reassured him that there was nothing to worry about. What if the next time Tom saw his face, Cecil and the council had made sure only his head remained? A man who could not escape the law could not be trusted.

“Ik heb jou eerder gezien, heb ik niet?”

He lifted his head from his knees and looked over, surprised. Though he did not understand a word the man hunched beside him had spoken, he could tell from the tone he had been its intended audience. The speaker was an old man, old for a city wracked with damp and cold and disease. Weather and a lack of attention had tangled his long grey beard, and he was dressed simply in a grey traveling cloak – at least, if it had not begun grey, it was now. Kit wished he still had his knife. Not

that he intended to stab a stranger on such a provocation, but giving strangers the benefit of the doubt was a luxury he could no longer afford.

“*Ik versta je niet, ik spreek een beetje Nederlands.*” It was one of the few phrases he had learned, but it made up for it in usefulness: his strong English accent made the phrase onomatopoeic. I don’t understand, I speak very little Dutch. That much should be obvious.

“*Het spijt me,*” the man went on, still in the back-of-the-throat cough that constituted native Dutch. Whatever horrors waited for him on the banks of the Thames, at least that familiar Londoner’s English would be there to welcome him, with its sufficient proportion of vowels and consonants. He had endured enough of the sound of Dutch, where even saying “good morning” sounded like the onset of an acute respiratory illness. “I apologize, sir. I say that I think I have seen you before.”

He felt his pulse beat faster against the iron pressing down on his wrists. “You’re mistaken, sir,” he said, and instantly regretted it. He had not thought to mask his purpose by responding in French or German, and it was too late now. “I’m sure we’ve never met.”

“I did not say we have met, I said I have seen you before,” the old man said. “I have seen you in London, at the theater. The Rose? You are the man who writes such marvelous, bloody plays. I know you.”

Modulated through the old man’s self-translation, he knew the adjective was not an oath but description. Certainly his scripts had kept the stage boys running constantly to the butcher’s shop in Hog Lane for blood and entrails. The most conservative staging of *Tamburlaine* had used the remains of an entire ox. But if his words were to reflect his thoughts, the only test of honesty, he would have to dye the stage red, night after night.

“It was your Jew they burned? Your Edward they... *dan*, you know what they did. Marlin, *hé?*”

Marlin. Like the damned fish. So much for worldly fame and fortune. Still, the two syllables were too close for comfort, only a consonant and a vowel away from a name he had been so careful to avoid. A name that could send him straight to hell, were he discovered. Anyone could be listening.

Anyone could have already heard the mention of Malta, of Edward, and put together the missing pieces to identify the silent Englishman chained in the hull of a Dutch trading vessel. He was in enough danger already without consolidating his fractured identity.

“You are mistaken, sir,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “I am English, but no writer. My name is Baines. Richard Baines.” That was a risk, but if it meant Baines reaped the consequences of Kit’s indiscretion, he could think of worse outcomes. Damn your name, then, as you’ve damned mine. You’ve little enough to lose. “But...”

It was self-indulgent, it was indiscreet, but he could not resist. The pull of hearing someone discuss him under his own name and in his own words was as irresistible as a swift current in a cold river, pulling him into the dangerous open dark of the sea. To think that his plays were still taking the stage in Bankside, while he had been here choking on false names. Had *Edward* run throughout the summer? Had Henslowe picked up the *Massacre at Paris*? What had become of Marlowe’s ghost in London?

“But I’ve heard of the man you mean. I go to the theater, from time to time. What do you think of him, this... Marlin?” His tongue tripped over the name, but the Dutchman did not notice it.

“Ah, I like his work, very much. Men who write on the continent are so afraid of blood. They do not go as far as they must. Marlin, he shows life as it is.”

Life, exactly as it was. A man who could create lives and words for others, who could release men with a drop of ink but could do nothing to save himself. It was only a matter of time before he was called on for the reckoning after escaping his bill for years. However confident he spoke in front of Baines, he knew what was coming. He could only remain a free man, if this was freedom, for so long. There was nowhere to hide, not if the earth opened its jaws and swallowed him, not if the stars drew him up into the mist that hung heavy and close over the port they left behind...

O soul, be changed into little water drops, and fall into the ocean, never to be found...

“*Alles goede?*” Kit started so suddenly his chains rattled against one another like a restless

ghost. *Is everything all right?* He did not know how to answer. Of course not. Everything would never be all right. But the flash of inspiration in his second mind, the one known by the Dutch prisoner and not Whitehall, had suddenly struck him blind. Imagination was brighter than lightning, and occasionally as painful. But more important than returning to the palace, more important than pleading his case before Cecil, it was imperative that the moment he touched English soil he find a pen and paper. If he did not birth to this thought that, had he known it, had been couched in the back of his mind for years without the words to express it, he would miscarry the job, and everything would fade away undelivered. It was a greater risk than any of the others. There he had hinted. Here he would sing. But he couldn't leave the words unwritten. The devil had dared God to cast him from heaven. If he had known the Lord would one day reject him, was his rebellion an act of sin or of self-preservation? He was the devil's thrall, but that didn't mean he couldn't make something of it.

My God, my God, look not so fierce on me! Let me breathe awhile!

Prophetic, inexorable, the *Neptune* proceeded across the North Sea with the stately passage of a royal train, towards the mouth of the Thames.

As it sailed, a man wrapped in a dark green traveling cloak sat apart in the darkness of the hold, face half-illuminated by the embers of his pipe, his eyes never leaving Kit Marlowe.

~*~

He had imagined the Star-Chamber would be bigger. Considering the image the Queen cultivated in her subjects' minds, a ghost in gold silk looming over England, the room ought to have been made to match. A ceiling painted in swirls of blue and gold glittering like the cosmos, a Star-Chamber to hold the royal sun. But most prisoners escorted into the room did not have Kit Marlowe's taste for the poetic. They would be occupied enough by the chains keeping their hands behind their backs, the ever-present threat of hanging or worse just out of sight. The room's guiding star might have been the divine light of the Queen. It might have been the falling star of the Devil. You would never know until your case had been tried. And by that point, it was too late.

Kit stepped forward hesitantly. The floorboards creaked and gave slightly beneath his weight. A faint light streamed through the room's two windows, both narrow and paneled over with crossed lattices that divided the weak sunlight into diamond cells against the floor. It was just like the stage, he thought. Hit your mark, speak your lines, and pray that nobody ventures off-book. As easy as lying. It should have been less frightening than a play. Here, he performed for an audience of two.

“This is the man you spoke so highly of, Mister Baines? The agent you promised me could be trusted?”

“I am, Your Lordship, unfortunately as susceptible to disappointment as the next man,” Baines said smoothly.

Occupied by the prospect of facing Sir Robert Cecil in the tribunal chamber that had sent hundreds on hundreds of men to test the truth of heaven and hell, Kit had hardly noticed the company Cecil kept. One look at Baines seated comfortably at the end of the room beside the new Royal Secretary set his blood on fire. The devil damn him to hell, the traitor. If he could have crossed the room and cut that smile from his face, he'd have done it.

Cecil, to his credit, did not respond. He turned his sharp, narrow eyes on Kit instead, who met his gaze without looking away. What did he have to lose by shunning humility that was not already lost? His reputation as a man of trust had been shattered, and he had never been known either for his deference or his silence.

“Spy,” Cecil began coldly – Kit bristled at the denial of his name, the one thing being in London was meant to restore – “do you recall my advising you to return without having succeeded in the elimination of the Lord Strange's Catholic conspirators, chained like a slave in a Dutch galley? Did I give you the impression that what I was after was a spectacle?”

“With all due respect, my lord, I had hoped for a better homecoming myself.”

“I would give a good deal,” Cecil went on, as though Kit had not spoken, “to learn how Sir Francis selected his agents. So many nameless common men, not one of them with a gentlemanly

understanding of *subtlety*,” – he ticked off the faults of character one by one – “of *craft*, of *circumspection*...”

He had forgotten since Cambridge how deep that sneered “common” could cut. As if he were worth two-thirds of a man like Cecil because his father had made shoes. To hell with prudence and humility. Lack of sleep, nerves, and the strong desire to knock Richard Baines unconscious formed a kind of madness that scorned caution. “My lord, allow me to venture that I understand the nuances of ‘circumspection’ better than you might think. A man with a coat of arms six hundred years old is hardly the best way of securing it. Your men are common, my lord, but they are far from ordinary.”

Cecil laughed and looked at Baines with the condescension that came part and parcel with an earldom. “He speaks well for a London rat, does he not? Like he’s swallowed a book of rhetoric.”

Kit forgot for a moment that his hands were chained behind his back, that he had been brought back as a criminal from Antwerp and might well be hanged for the capital crime of coining false money, that Sir Robert Cecil was the last person he should be antagonizing. There was a line, and Cecil had taken a step across it. “I should hope I speak well enough to please Your Lordship. London does not pay to hear words unless it is worth its while.”

“They pay to hear you speak, boy? I should think they would pay a considerable amount to keep you *silent*.”

Kit deliberately ignored the hint. “They pay passing well, my lord, and what’s more, they listen. You might have had the occasion to hear my words yourself.”

Baines made an indignant sound, but Cecil took the initiative. Allow a common spy to have the last word, and where would it end? Mobs outside the palace? “I rather doubt it. I am not known to frequent the theater.”

Kit’s tone better suited one seated in a drawing room than one who faced drawing and quartering. “Come, sir, you go to the theater. Every man goes to the theater. And as far as your gentlemanlike subtlety counts, I have seen you there myself.”

“Very well, granted,” Cecil said tightly, “but I do not indulge in base *city comedy*.”

Kit was incensed now. He knew Cecil did not know his name, nor his position. He knew how to direct Walsingham’s men, not who they were. But to treat him like a doggerel poet was too much. “The last play you saw, sir. The matter.”

Cecil sighed. Was it a sign of weakness, his agreeing to indulge the man in this charade? “A morality piece. A Machiavellian Jew, undone by Christ and justice.” If Cecil heard the prisoner’s stifled cough, he ignored it. Christ and justice? Had he actually heard the play? “Witty enough for its own sake. I daresay you have little enough in common with the author of *The Jew of Malta*.”

It was rare that reality gave Kit the chance to indulge his taste for the grand coming-together of the fifth act. “No, sir,” he replied. “precious little indeed. Save the name.”

Cecil had not expected this. “You expect me to believe that Sir Francis employed a poet whose name is shouted from playbills from here to Eastcheap? How much of a fool do you take me for?”

“It’s best I don’t answer that question, my lord. But I thank you for admitting that you’ve heard of me.”

Baines leaned over as if to whisper in Cecil’s ear, though he did not try to keep his voice down. A parasite on the edge of the spider’s web, hoping for a scrap to fall into his lap by proximity. “I’ve said it before, my lord. A spy who attracts attention is worth nothing but trouble in the trade.”

“You,” Kit said testily, “may be silent. My lord,” he went on. The words just barely missed the mark of respectful, veering instead toward patronizing. “Am I not the last person you would suspect? So much so that you employ me and did not expect it? I am a poet, sir. I make men into people they are not for a living. What’s one more, added to my charge? Things are best hidden in plain sight.”

“Though if they remain in plain sight without chains in the bargain, that might be helpful,” Baines remarked.

“And many thanks to you for that, I’m sure.” Kit would have said more, but Cecil held up a single, weary hand, and he fell silent again. An uncomfortable beat followed, just long enough for Kit

to consider what he had said and how risky a time it was for him to have said it. Then Cecil addressed the guard standing before the door.

“Enough. Enlarge him.”

Kit could hardly believe his ears. Neither, it appeared, could Baines. He spluttered an incoherent protest as the guard took Kit’s manacles roughly and snapped them open with a small iron key. Suddenly unanchored, his arms felt unreal, detached from his body, though he could still feel the painful, throbbing rings where the iron had torn against his skin. He gently rubbed one wrist with the opposite hand and winced. So this was what freedom felt like. Somehow, he did not feel exonerated.

“But you will report to the Privy Council at eight o’clock in the morning on Monday next, and every Monday following until you are instructed otherwise. You’re a devil, Marlowe.” Cecil’s eyes looked him over searchingly, reassessing. “Useful, but not to trust.”

“A very demon, my lord,” he agreed. The idea of probation as an alternative to hanging remained transitory, a gossamer pardon that could be snatched away at any moment. “For where I am is hell, and where hell is, there am I ever.”

“A pretty phrase. From what dead man did you filch it?” Clearly his interview had done little to earn him a place in the new Secretary’s good graces.

“I, sir? Why, myself. Who better to quote than my own pen?”

“Is it not better he stop his mouth, my lord, before he finds it stopped for him?” Baines to the last, searching for opportunities to crawl farther toward the sun on the backs of others.

Kit did not allow Cecil to respond. “If we are finished, sir, am I free to go? His presence offends my stomach. Much more of his conversation will sicken my mind.”

Three years ago, Kit might have fished an unwilling smile out of Sir Francis with that. But Cecil’s brow remained stormy. “Go, then. But remember what I have said.”

Kit bowed low at the dismissal. “I will think of nothing else, my lord. I believe the word was ‘circumspection.’”

XXIX

Whitehall, April 1593

The side door to Cecil's study closed the moment Arthur Gregory and Robert Poley entered through the other. It was so well timed that the two doors settling into their frames formed a strange harmony, a two-note ballad of one man clearly avoiding two more. Cecil was seated at his desk, which was hardly uncharacteristic. His position rarely called upon him to stand before anyone other than the Queen, and rising for his own employees was a senseless exercise of his legs and knees. The desk was buried in papers, pages of ledger-books and trade maps, and what, perplexingly, appeared to be the frontispiece of a new quarto from the bookstalls in Saint Paul's churchyard. Somehow, Gregory could not imagine Cecil whiling away the hours with literature. He took a seat in a chair with its back to the empty fireplace. The choice had been deliberate, and he was rewarded for it by now being as far as possible from Poley, who lounged easily on the couch. "Are we interrupting, sir?"

"Hardly." Cecil shook his head. "I fully intend you to come when I call. You've just missed another charming interview with the Master of Revels."

"Tilney's been here again?" There was something in the way Poley sat, both arms spread across the back of the couch as though it were his study and not his master's, that set Gregory's teeth on edge. He had never been on particularly intimate terms with Walsingham's men, but considering those Cecil was steadily replacing them with, he found himself clinging to the old holdouts with both hands. These swaggering peacocks like Robert Poley, they were the worst of all. When espionage was entertainment instead of a necessary profession, the opportunities for mishandling were too high for his comfort. But

he could not speak about his misgivings. Cecil's fear of compromised loyalties meant those from the old administration, however battle-tested, were automatically suspect. He would have to settle for avoiding Poley as much as possible.

"It is my belief that if we could burn down every public house south of the Thames, London would be none the worse for it." Cecil said drily. "Certainly it would curb the spread of the pox. But I must monitor that mad spy in the theaters, and if he insists on shouting from the rooftop three times a week, then..."

"Forgive me if it's a liberty, sir" – it was, and Gregory's glare let Poley know it – "but I have difficulty imagining you passing the afternoon in Bankside."

"Which is why I rely on Master Tilney to keep me abreast of his movements. You do not think I would rub elbows with the plague-ridden crowd to ensure Marlowe doesn't do anything idiotic."

"What's he written now, that the Master needs to warn you of it, sir?" Gregory asked. Edmund Tilney, in his current role as Master of Revels, had been forced to lower his standards for what drama might escape royal censor, thanks no doubt in part to the constant barrage of insolence and scandal that Christopher Marlowe had taken to leaving in his wake. Besides the violence and cruelty to be expected from a playwright with Marlowe's background in espionage, Tilney had already brought before the Secretary scripts with eight deposed monarchs, an extended onstage sequence of burning scriptures, three instances of literal or implicit sodomy, and a staged anal castration with a white-hot poker of an English king, each written in Marlowe's hand. At this point, it would take a great deal to surprise them.

Cecil picked up the quarto and tapped its spine against the inside of the opposite palm. "Apparently now he's conjuring the Devil."

Gregory looked at Cecil blankly. "He's conjuring the devil."

Poley sighed and tilted his head back. He stared up at the ceiling as the crown of his head rested against the couch. "What, Lucifer in person?"

"Incantations, anagrammed scripture, and all. It seems we watch him sign a contract for his

soul in blood.”

“A contract.” Gregory was not an artistic man. The interpretation of poetry was as heretical and magical a waste of time as the Catholic Eucharist. But a contract, that he could understand. It was impossible not to think of the collection of papers in the Secretary’s strongbox, locked and then secured in the very desk at which Cecil now sat. Papers half passed to him from his predecessor, half new-selected from his own circles, identical save for the signatures. Some looping, some scrawled, some mere lines and crosses, all legally binding and as perpetual as hell. Arthur Gregory. Christopher Marlowe. Robert Poley. And only Cecil knew who all else. A contract giving you eternal power to move and act and kill as you pleased, until your lease was up. It did not take a scholar to place the demon soul-broker Mephistopheles in the world of England. He almost had to admire the audacity.

“We cannot afford to let this piece play,” Cecil said, and set the quarto aside. “The masses flock to his plays, as much proof of their bad taste as his danger. Everything he writes creates conversation. And when he begins writing like this, conversation is something we cannot afford.”

“I take it that Your Lordship has heard the rumors, then.”

Gregory looked at Robert Poley with disgust. His own relationship with Marlowe had been as cordial as could be expected, considering that each held the other a fool and an ass. Besides, he had still not forgiven him the loss of his purse that first winter. But they were of a kind now, both survivors of the former regime quickly finding their usefulness misprized by the new. Both usurped by men like Poley who could flatter their way into the trust of any lord and the skirts of any lord’s wife. If Marlowe’s reliability had taken a hit since Rotterdam, Gregory’s value had not survived the changing of the guard without losing a limb or two. Loyalty was not the word for it, friendship farther from the mark, but if he were asked which between the two he would rather condemn, he would not have chosen Marlowe.

Cecil sighed. “What have I not heard. Heresy, atheism, lechery, forgery, counterfeiting, murder. I’ve heard everything about Marlowe except that he keeps a tail hidden under his jacket, and for that

it's a matter of time.”

“In a role defined by discretion, my lord, he garners quite a bit of attention,” Poley said smoothly. “People are beginning to recognize him.”

Cecil's eyes narrowed. He interlaced his fingers and tapped them against the surface of the desk. “Recognize him? He lives in London, does he not? It's hardly a novelty to be recognized.”

“I am not speaking of London,” Poley replied. Gregory pressed his fist against his lips to dissuade himself from striking the speaker. “Did you have me watch him in the Low Countries for sport or suspicion? An old Rotterdam prisoner in that damnable galley knew him from the theaters. Called him Marlowe, right to his face. What did he think brought a playwright to Holland, I wonder. And what might people who matter think? That's without mentioning these plays, sir.”

Gregory brought his fist down on the chair's arm – this was too much. “Plays? They're only plays, Poley. Don't be ridiculous. He's under the cover of a poet, it hardly matters what he writes.”

“There's danger in words, my lord,” Poley went on, undaunted. “You remember *Tamburlaine*? One king after another falling beneath the hand of a peasant slave? You remember how he spoke to you after his arrest, you know Marlowe's incapable of keeping his place. And now this, at the least blasphemy, and what men might call atheism... Was not the Queen of Scotland executed on a less serious charge than this?”

Cecil leaned back in his chair, thoughtful. Since Marlowe had been brought chained and guarded before him in the Star-Chamber, he had reported to the Council once a week for several months, then fortnightly since, exactly as he had been ordered. Cecil had stopped attending after the first two months – his duties did not leave excessive amounts of time available for such trifles – but the council's reports suggested that the humiliation of arrest had not improved Marlowe's manners. And it had not been his decision to set one of his spies in the theater. Walsingham had had his reasons, but it did not follow that they were good ones. So far the spy's relationship with his patron had been productive, his finger on the pulse of London had been useful. But Cecil's suspicions of the danger of

secrecy through speech were beginning to prove prophetic. A liability was a liability. People were beginning to talk. And with this business of blasphemy and contracted souls, it seemed Marlowe was beginning to talk as well. Sir Francis Walsingham may have been foolish enough to develop a sentimental attachment to his servants, but there was no room for sentiment at court.

“You will prove to me that he has become unreliable,” Cecil said coldly. “I want indisputable, ocular proof. The last thing we can afford is outside eyes prying into our business, not when that business is secrecy itself. When news of our actions reaches the people, it must be justified. And that means, at the very least, two witnesses with corroborating evidence. Your opinion is not enough.”

“And how does Your Grace propose we begin seeking ocular proof?”

Cecil looked at Robert Poley with the ultimate expression of distaste. He had chosen nearly all of his remaining associates. How was it possible that he despised so many of them? He indicated the door with a motion that scorned subtlety for effectiveness. *“His presence offends my stomach. Much more of his conversation will sicken my mind.”* He could not have put it better than Marlowe had. He was not present, but his words had a way of traversing oceans and walls. It was as if he knew he was being discussed. “I leave that to your discretion. I know you to be resourceful.”

The two men bowed and took the hint. Gregory closed the door quietly behind him and rounded on Poley, who had neither expected nor been bothered by the dark glare his associate fixed him with. There was no one in the hall, but Gregory kept his voice low nonetheless.

“I assume you have a plan, then,” he said darkly, “to bring him to the rack. Did you have it in mind before you mentioned it to Cecil, or is this a spur-of-the-moment betrayal?”

“Now, is there any reason to be so melodramatic?” Clearly the concept of melodrama was not a foreign one to him – Poley himself would have done well on the stage. “You don’t need to be involved, if your conscience is so tender about a day’s work. I have people all over London that are perfectly willing to help me find what I need. In fact...” The gleam in his eyes sent the hairs on the back of Gregory’s neck on end. “I think I know a man who will serve perfectly. Possibly even two.”

~*~

“Sir, do we look like two gentlemen as would lead you astray by any means?”

Henry Middleton knew the man was not waiting for an answer, but if pressed he would have given an affirmative. He didn't know what else he had expected. When the meeting had been arranged at the George and Dragon rather than High Street or the Strand, it was clear something was not entirely above-board. The house was not the kind of place anyone respectable would ever think to frequent, which boded well for its discretion but not its legitimacy. Still, Middleton couldn't afford to be particular. Not when he was a week from personally exploring the finer points of debtor's lockup. Surely the tavern's location not two hundred feet from Ludgate made good leverage for most of their clients. It was working wonders on him.

“Forgive me, sirs,” Middleton managed. “I have no reason to doubt you, but... the debt isn't a small one, you understand...”

“Which is why you've come to us,” Frizer agreed, his brilliantly white teeth flashing into a smile. He leaned his elbows forward on the table, the picture of self-assurance. “We know our reputation, Mister Middleton. We are the very best at what we do. You have debts to be paid, and I doubt you want either the constables or your wife to find out just how much. We promise you the balance on loan and in commodity, for a fee, and we are men who keep our promises. Do you imagine a pair of criminals would keep that kind of credit?”

Middleton found himself stammering. His business was with the law, and he knew the punishment if he did not settle with his creditors. Four hundred pounds. How had he managed to owe four hundred pounds? Not when a good year brought in seventy. And if he were to end up in prison...

“Certainly not, sir.” His voice had returned at last. “You have my word and my bond, if you will dispatch my creditors. I trust you as gentlemen of honesty.”

He did not like the smile that crossed the two men's faces. He did not like it at all.

“A wise choice, sir. Now, if you would grace us with your signature here, and here...”

Middleton took a deep breath. Better to do it now than to run the risk that came with waiting. God save him, if this ended well, he would never gamble again. Ever. He reached forward and took up the pen Frizer offered him, dipping its tip into the ink.

“Apologies, gentlemen. I didn’t realize I was interrupting.”

The unexpected third voice made Middleton’s hand jerk, and the deviated curves of his “M” slashed a line through the contract’s terms. The two bondsmen had quickly risen from the other side of the table. The dirty-blond Frizer with the wolf’s smile glared at the man who had just entered without knocking, while the second, silent man stood without betraying recognition. In unapologetic contrast to the resourceful, razor-sharp poverty the agents wore like a crown of thorns, the stranger was a gentleman. He was dressed well, cleanly if simply, and spoke with the accents of someone who has received a thoroughgoing education and enjoyed its social benefits. The gulf between the bondsmen and the stranger was enormous, and yet Middleton was less afraid of them than this nobleman. His conscience had been right. He ought not to have come.

“What are you doing here?” Frizer demanded, without so much as a “good afternoon.”

“At the moment, looking for you both. As soon as you’re finished with your client, if you would grace me with your time. We need to talk.”

Middleton did not require a second invitation. He pushed the chair back as though the room were on fire. “We’ll be in touch, gentlemen,” he said hastily. Within a moment, he had slammed the door again behind him.

Frizer flung himself backwards into the chair. “God’s death, Robert, was that necessary?” he snapped. “Did you know what he was worth for us? Forty pounds. Forty pounds and half his estate to boot. We could’ve eaten for half the year on forty pounds.”

“Ingram, it’s not that I’m not sympathetic,” Robert Poley said smoothly. He crossed the George and Dragon’s private parlor to stand with his back against the latticed window. His shoulders were broad enough to block the light beyond what came from the weak fire, changing the mood by his

presence. "I understand you need the money as much as any common bawd. But I assure you, my job promises better compensation than if you fleeced the poor lawyer for all he's worth."

"A job," Ingram Frizer repeated. His tawny lion's eyes had lit up, and he leaned forward again. "What kind of job? It's got to be a big one, if a peacock like you needs my services."

"In fact, painful as it must be, my friend, it isn't your services I've come for," Poley said with amusement. "It's his."

Nick Skeres looked at the noblemen, uncomprehending. "Me?" he repeated. From his cornered position backed against the hearth, the syllable conveyed everything. I don't know who you are or what you want. Nobody comes for me. The last time Nick had heard a gentleman speak to him like that, it had cost him a fortune and his reputation. It was safer if he allowed Frizer to do the talking while he faded into the shadows. Notoriety brought nothing but trouble.

"I'm sorry, Mister Skeres, I've forgotten my manners. Robert Poley, at your service." Nick pressed his back against the side of the fireplace, intent on keeping as much distance between himself and Poley as possible. Granted, except for the apparently worthless years at Cambridge, he had spent his whole life in London. But if this Robert Poley somehow knew him, why come seek him out now? He was a university graduate with no assets beyond a family history of gentility, a degree certifying that he could read and write Latin, and a thriving underground business as a bondsman. If he had friends in high places, they might have turned up when they could have done some good against the court. Not now, when every day was a fight against disease and hunger in the seedy underbelly of Southwark.

"There's no need to be surprised, Nicholas," Poley went on. "Knowing things is my profession, and you fall under the heading of 'things.' I've heard of your meteoric rise out of Cambridge, and your subsequently meteoric fall. Ironic, that you've taken to improving your own fortunes by bleeding debtors and gamblers for all they're worth. I think those of your learning call that 'poetic justice.'"

It had been so long since Nick had spoken to someone of genuine learning that the speed with

which his guard lowered took him almost by surprise. Was he only after a moment of sympathy, however snide? And besides, there was that remark about *compensation*. If he could only find the money, he could leave Frizer behind, begin some respectable trade his degree qualified him for... A post in politics, perhaps, or a seat as a barrister... The cornered look in his eyes began to fade, and he took a small step away from the safety of the wall. Frizer looked on from the scuffed table in surprise. Usually Skeres was the silent organizer, while Frizer's quick tongue tied up the loose ends. It would be interesting, and perhaps profitable, to watch him attempt to get by on his own.

"How do you think I can serve you, sir?" Nick asked, cautious but intrigued.

"I don't think you can serve me, Mister Skeres," Poley said. "I know you can." Frizer turned between the two, a spectator uncertain of the direction of the action. "I only require a small amount of effort on your part, though the reward will not be inconsiderable. All I need is information, and, if you are willing, a signature."

"Information?" Frizer repeated, incredulous, but Nick raised a hand to silence him. He did not know anything he would not willingly part with. He would give anything he knew, whatever that might be, to put as much distance between himself and Ludgate as he could. Looking at his present circumstances, he could not afford to be puritanical.

"What kind of information do you need?"

Poley grinned. He had been prepared to use arguments, threats, even to enact those threats if need be. He had forgotten the influence a man's stomach could have on his conscience. "Nothing untoward. Just facts. Correct me if I'm mistaken, but you received your degree from Corpus Christi College in Cambridge some years ago, did you not?"

"I did." Was that necessary, throwing salt into the wound?

"And while there, did you ever make the acquaintance of a student of your age, named Christopher Marlowe?"

Nick couldn't help it, the question was so unexpected: he laughed. "What, Kit Marlowe? Of

course I knew him. He's not the type that lets you forget him. God, I haven't seen Kit in years, not since he started whoring himself out with the theaters. What do you want with him? He's nobody."

"On the contrary, Mister Skeres," Poley said seriously, the twinkle of anticipated fulfillment in his eye, "he is very definitively somebody. And therein lies the problem."

"What kind of problem?" Frizer asked bluntly. Seated between the two near the middle of the room, he had still not decided which way to turn.

"As to that, I rely on you to confirm it," Poly replied. The apprehension that had tainted Nick's original reaction returned full-force. He would have backed away, had he not feared the consequences of losing face. There was a right and a wrong answer to what would follow. "There have been rumors about in the city about Marlowe's... trustworthiness concerning the Crown. Can you speak to this?"

Nick stared. "Trustworthiness? Treason, you're talking about?" Poley did not respond, but merely stood before the window with the smile of a serpent sunning on a rock.

He harbored no illusions about Marlowe's candidacy for sainthood. He remembered those dark nights in Corpus, smoking and talking along with Tom Watson and listening to the poor scholar rail against the Trinity and the logistics of how, specifically, one would go about making the Word Flesh. That wasn't even to mention what he had always suspected went on those nights he went to bed early and left Watson and Marlowe to themselves. But *treason?*

"What proof is there of all this?"

"My master has every intention of finding proof. We know him to be unreliable, but my word on the matter is not sufficient."

"What do you mean," Nick asked carefully, uncertain whether he wanted to hear the answer, "when you say 'your master'?"

"My patron and director. Sir Robert Cecil."

Nick's breath hissed in through his teeth. Sir Robert Cecil. He might not have known the name a few years ago, but in the world of underground investments, it was not one he could afford to be

unacquainted with. Whatever Kit had done to get on the wrong side of the Royal Secretary, it had to be serious. And the payment a royal official could offer him would be enough to leave this rats' nest for a house somewhere in Yorkshire, Cornwall, Lisbon for all he cared, so long as it was far from London. He and Marlowe had not spoken in six years. He was hardly more than a name, now.

"I always said that Kit Marlowe would come to no good," he said at last.

"Did you?" Poley's eyes flashed. The room was plunged into midday semi-darkness as he drew the curtains over the parlor windows. He drew up a chair and joined Frizer at the table, gesturing for Nick to do the same. "Would you be prepared to sign to that presentiment?"

Before Nick knew what was happening, he had taken the seat at the table left vacant for him, and Poley had procured a sheet of paper covered with the formal script of a professional copyist. His eyes flickered across the page, catching phrases here and there without managing to absorb a full thought. "Regarding the damnable beliefs of Christopher Marlowe –" "So that the mouth of so dangerous a man might be stopped –" "That the first goal of religion was to keep men in awe –" "That if there were any God or good religion it was the Papists, for all Protestants are hypocritical asses –" Nick's head was reeling. It even sounded like Kit. Had he written his own accusation?

"I hope you don't mind that we took the liberty of writing out your declaration for you," Poley said. "It was matter of expediency. I trust it is no more than you will swear to before a court, should the need arise."

Nick closed his eyes and took a long breath. One name. It was worth the loss of one name. The less he thought, the sooner it would be over. Once he'd signed, he would not have to think. He would not have to see. The pen, under Frizer and Poley's watchful eyes, moved deliberately across the page.

Nicholas Skeres.

Before the final curve of the "s" had been made, Poley whipped the paper away. Only the scratched and worn tabletop bore witness. "Your service to the crown will not go unrewarded, Master Skeres," he said. The glimmer had disappeared from his eyes. It was merely business again. "But I

must ask you another favor. Your word alone is insufficient proof, just as mine is. For an accusation to hold weight, it must be matched exactly. Fortunately, I have another man in mind who I suspect may form opinions of a similar nature. Thomas Kyd. Poet, actor, and flatmate with Marlowe until recently. With your help, gentlemen, do you imagine he'd have anything worthwhile to add to our case?"

So it was not over. Nothing was ever that easy. Falling into obscurity was easy, but climbing back would take more time. His name across that paper made him a party to it. He could not refuse now to go farther.

"You know," Frizer said, grinning, "I reckon he might. With some persuasion."

~*~

"Please, I haven't done anything, please! You've made a mistake, I don't know what you want..."

"Oh, but I think you do, sir. This isn't my favorite part of my profession, but as you can see..."

"My God, please!"

"As you can see, I'm not much troubled by it." Frizer lifted his hand from the rack and placed them both in his pockets, to be sure the man knew this was his chance. The light from the torches in each corner of the room colored the man's body almost red-gold, with ever shifting shadows across his sweat-slick face. His chest rose and fell with desperate breaths, his ribs protruding from his chest as the manacles pinned his arms above him. They could not hear movement from above through the stone ceiling. It was as if the rest of the world had disappeared. From the corner, as far away as he could manage, Nick flinched with phantom pain. But he could not look away.

"I've told you everything –"

"I sincerely doubt that, sir. Now, let's begin again. Perhaps an easier question. When you lived with Marlowe, what religion did he profess?"

"I don't know... I don't know..." The man's words came in short, desperate gasps. His chest heaved with each repetition. "I don't know... please..."

Frizer shook his head and sighed in a parody of distress. “I confess myself disappointed, sir. I was told you were clever.” He drummed his fingers against the ratchet’s lever. The man writhed in his bonds, knowing what was coming. He could barely turn his head to see, but the movement was clear. “But sooner or later, you will tell us.”

“I don’t... I don’t know...”

What followed was not a word. Human beings could not make that sound. All of Nick’s nerves were on fire, as if the chains were fastened on him. He needed to run, to scream, anything. His body cringed away against the wall. His eyes screwed themselves shut. But there was nothing he could do to escape the echo of that *snap*, like the crack of a whip. Or the inhuman wail that followed, gradually sinking into a low, keening whimper.

Frizer released the tension slightly and placed both his hands in his pockets again. “Well, sir. Shall we recommence?”

The man’s eyes were closed, his breathing heavy. He no longer strained now, but hung limp and useless in his bonds. “Whatever you want.” The words barely pierced the thick silence, but they were all he could manage. “Whatever you want.”

“I don’t know why I haven’t come to you sooner,” Robert Poley said under his breath. He leaned against the opposite wall with his arms folded. “You’re wasted as a bondsman.”

Frizer did not respond. He turned back to the man, who shuddered despite his closed eyes. “Now then. Our charges? How would you answer them?”

“Anything.” Silent tears fell from the man’s eyes, blending with the sweat on his face. He could barely speak. Nick felt himself about to retch. “Traitor. Atheist. Murderer. Sodomite. Anything.”

Poley raised an eyebrow but did not comment. Sodomite. That was new.

“And you will be willing to sign to all of this, and testify to it if you must? That Marlowe is a heretic, an untenable risk, and a manifest danger?” The man did not respond. The previous gasped words had drained him of something essential. He was fading into the room’s moving shadows,

embalmed under the red-gold light. Frizer's hand began to drift toward the ratchet again. "You will swear it?" he repeated.

The man's eyes flew open. He looked like a corpse raised from the dead. "Yes," he panted. "Yes. I swear it. Whatever you want."

Frizer flashed his wolf's smile. "You've been most helpful, sir." He held an outstretched hand toward Poley, who tossed him a small iron key. It glimmered through the torchlight, turning over and over until Frizer snatched it out of the air. "You see how much more quickly things proceed when we work together? You help me, and I'm more than willing to help you. I think we'll leave the matter of your declamation and signature for another day. Don't go anywhere in the meantime."

The key slipped into the lock and turned. Poley nodded toward the door, a gesture that Frizer caught immediately. There was nothing else to be done here. But the Secretary in his office above would be more than interested in what they could now tell him. They took the stairs two at a time, their shadows soon disappearing around the corner. Whitehall, four floors above, staged masques and held tournaments, theorized war and dispatched death. Left in the dark, Thomas Kyd slipped to the stone floor and lay where he fell, his left arm crushed beneath him and his right pressed protectively over his chest. His left leg cocked out at an angle no leg should ever form, and the ivory flash of bone glimmered through the skin beneath the knee. His rough, halting breathing blended with the quiet music of the torches. Nick bent over him, his face as white as a corpse three weeks dead.

"Are you... can I..."

"Skeres, damn you, are you waiting for your turn?"

Nick leapt to his feet and bolted. The only sound left amid the darkness was the rhythm of Thomas Kyd's ragged breathing, rasping through the back of his throat, and a quiet, keening whimper with each exhale.

What you didn't know couldn't hurt you. He had forgotten they didn't care whether or not you knew it.

XXX

Bankside, 29 May 1593 - ten minutes to midnight

Through the window, the night was dark. What stars remained to replace the new moon flickered cold and distant above the Bankside rooftops. There was something fitting about the darkness, Tom thought. Too much starlight would have been intrusive. Even from this close, he could barely make out Kit's face, only the body lying beside him that, despite the spring night, felt cold against his skin. It should have been enough, that night. Kit was back, and they should have been able to forget, as they had before, that anything existed beyond them. But Kit's gentleness had frightened him, prevented him from losing himself entirely. When he touched him, it was as if he were afraid Tom would break, or too sudden a movement would make him disappear. And now, instead of the soft midnight glow he remembered from before – how long ago? – Kit lay on his back and stared at the ceiling, the blanket slung carelessly about his hips, looking at nothing. His face was pale, almost ghostly without the dreamy cast of starlight. Tom, to pull him back, nestled closer against his side; the motion seemed to startle him. “Are you all right?” he asked softly.

“No.” Kit paused. He did not look away from the ceiling, as if coded messages were hidden in the cracks. “No, I'm not.”

Tom closed his eyes and let fall a long breath. They said that time healed most things, but whoever they were, they had not seen this. Kit's time in Holland had only made it worse. “What can I do? Just tell me.”

He suppressed a shudder. “Just stay here. Talk to me. I feel as if I'm not here. Like I'm

watching someone else pretend to be me. I don't know who I am, or where I am, or..."

"London," Tom said firmly. He leaned up on one elbow, but Kit did not move. He barely blinked. God alone knew what faces he saw in the ceiling. "You're in London. With me. With me and no one else." He wished, as he said it, that he could have believed it. True, there was no one in the room but them. True, the darkness was enough to shield them from the eyes of even imaginary interlopers. And yet true that the idea of being alone was madness. Not when the air itself hummed with spirits.

Kit closed his eyes let the breath pass from him in a long sigh. "Do you think" – his empty tone made it so he could as easily have been addressing the air – "that it's possible not to believe in God, but still be damned?"

The question made Tom wince, though he could not identify the place of the hurt. It would have been easier had he not remembered the other nights they had lain together this way. The Kit who had laughed without fear of being overheard, who had made the darkness sing with loose flirtation and threats of erotic sonnets, how had he become this pale, quiet man who dreamed of midnight damnation? He loved Kit and would do anything for him, but it had begun to slowly grind away at him, these words. The infectious melancholy frightened him, most strongly because he could do nothing about it. "I think that's the way most go about it," he said, as if it were the theoretical blasphemy of Cambridge. "But it's no good talking like that. I know you..."

"You know I what? Keep the faith? I think of heaven and I feel nothing. Heaven's a lie, but hell, hell's a promise."

"What kind of doctrine do you call that, if there's only hell, and we're all born to be damned? *Che serà, serà?*"

"The opposite of hell isn't heaven, it's nothingness." Kit spoke with a hollowness that made Tom shiver: the voice of a sleepwalker. He sat up slowly, staring at his knees beneath the blankets. "The best I can hope for is to disappear, without leaving anything behind. If I could be sure we're like

any stupid animal without a soul, that when I die there's the end of it. But I think I have one, and only hell's interested in it. Do you know what it's like to think about that, the sound of 'forever' ..."

"Kit, Kit, stop." Tom could not listen to this any longer. He cupped Kit's chin in one hand, gently piloting it up to his own face. "I'm losing you. Come back. Keep your eyes on me. This —" His hand shifted, moved to take Kit's, pressed that cold hand against his own cheek. "This is real. This is here. This is you. Not those thoughts, those shadows. *This*."

Kit looked at him with the wide eyes of a drowning man somehow breaking the surface. It was the jerk out of a nightmare, without the comfort of sleep. "I'm sorry," he whispered. He closed his eyes and bit his lower lip, torn between shame and fear. Tom didn't know who initiated the embrace there in the cold unreality of starlight, and it did not matter. They both knew what they needed, and only the other could give it. It was not an embrace between two people, it was a shipwrecked man clutching to the mast and a captain holding the wheel as it slipped beneath the waves. "I'm sorry," he murmured again, as he pulled back halfway. "It's worse at night. It fades by morning."

Tom shook his head quietly and let his arm travel down to take Kit's hand. They sat close beneath the blankets, with the one's left thigh resting against the other's right. "I can't believe I'm saying this," he began, "but have you... have you thought of going back to a church?"

"A *church*?" Kit repeated, harshly incredulous. "Brilliant. Call on God. 'Forgive me, O Father, for I have sinned.' Where do you think I would start? The priest would have me arrested."

"Be serious. It's not too late. Think of what Paul did before he repented, and Augustine. We hold them up as saints, not the damned, and they were murderers and torturers and fed men to lions."

Kit shook his head. "Don't, Tom. It's too late. It's too late. I've tried. Imagine it, if you can, me trying. But how can I repent if I know no one can hear me? How can you beg forgiveness of a God that doesn't exist?"

"You don't know God doesn't exist, any more than you don't know He does."

The audible presence of the capital letters only made Kit more sober. "If God did exist and he

let me live as long as I have, I don't want anything to do with him. The other end of prayer is silence. The other end of life is hell." He laughed ruefully and flung backward onto the bed again, landing with a soft thump to gaze back at the haunted ceiling. "And you wonder why I can't sleep."

"You need to rest," Tom said. This was not helpful, but he had expended his supply of words he thought could help. He lay back beside him and rested his head on the small space between Kit's ribcage. He could feel the steady heartbeat against his ear. "Remember what tomorrow is."

"Wednesday?"

"Yes, Wednesday," Tom deadpanned. Never too dark or too late for Kit to revel in missing the point. "The day Henslowe and company opens *Faustus* at the Rose. Bankside's talked of nothing but you for days."

Kit groaned. He put one hand to his head and raked his fingers backwards through his hair, leaving his palm resting on his forehead. "Ah, Christ. Is that tomorrow."

"It is." It was not an exceptional memory that kept this date in Tom's mind: this *Faustus* was the first play Kit had written in years, indeed possibly ever, that he had not read before it was staged. Tom's opinion had held more weight than his profession as a lawyer justified. The comments of the Mermaid tavern theater crowd like Kyd or Alleyn or even that ass Jonson were brushed aside in favor of what Tom Watson said was good and what was not. But not this, this *Doctor Faustus*. Since he had returned from Holland with a hard silence and a vicious work ethic that did not suit him, Kit had kept his notes close. God knew what he planned on doing on the stage the next day. If he could speak of the horrors at the end of *Edward II* but not this, it could not be good.

Kit hesitated a moment. "Tom, I don't think I can do it. Not like this."

"What?"

The longer Kit wrote, revised, rewrote, the more difficult it was for him to speak coherently. Yet even as he failed to explain it he knew he was right, that it was impossible for him to stand in the pit of the theater and hear Ned and Will and the rest speak his words. "It's... it's too much. Let it play."

Henslowe will run it for most of the summer, he has faith it can turn a profit. There's time later, next week, or next month. Besides," he said, with deceptive calm, "I've already made an appointment."

Tom rolled over onto his side to look at him critically. "You know I hate it when you make appointments." When Kit disappeared for an *appointment*, he came back eight months later, scars half-healed on his wrists from prison chains and new series of dreams to shatter his sleep. After what he had just heard, the last thing Kit needed was another appointment.

"It's not like that," Kit said, with a lightness that fooled no one, "not this time. I'm not going far. Just Deptford. Some minor business. Nothing, really. I'll be back before seven. Eight at the latest."

"You'd better." Tom was not placated for an instant, but he knew how to play this game. "I'm hearing a debtor's case in the morning. Father of eight. It's going to be awful. I was hoping you could take my mind off things afterwards."

"You know, I could resent being your after-hours whore, if I'm not careful."

"Just promise me something." Tom propped his head on one arm bent at the elbow, the other resting easily on Kit's shoulder. "Promise me you'll sleep tonight, and you won't dream. It's late. I'll stay right here tonight, and everything will be fine."

"And your debtor's case?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

"If I'm ten minutes late, it won't make a difference. It's not as if they can start without me." Besides, he added silently, I think I know where I'm needed.

Tom stayed that night until the sun broke over the roofs and streamed through the bedroom window. Kit watched him rise and dress in the golden light, but closed his eyes when he felt Tom turn to look at him. Let him think he slept still. They would talk that night, after the play had run, after he had returned to Bankside. But that morning he felt himself haunted by the letter he had pressed between the pages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, currently resting on his desk. Tom closed the door softly on his way out, and Kit sighed as the morning light steadily erased the room's shadows.

Deptford. Very well, then.

XXXI

30 May, 1593

The Strand was no different than any other street in London. The smell of salt water mixed with sewage and dried fish, the shouts and curses of the dockhands sang out as they took hammer and nails to the bare skeleton hulls half-finished in the harbor, feet away from where the Queen had knighted Sir Francis Drake for his audacious circumnavigation of the globe. He was used to this by now, this poverty mixed with industry, economy alongside behind-the-back dealing. It was what he missed when he was sent away, the communal danger of the urban streets, the feeling of two worlds sharing one space. Bankside was the same way. The theater as an institution relied on crushing the English social order into twenty feet of stage and seeing what came of it. It wasn't any of this that made Kit pause in front of the door. It was something different. A feeling without a name.

He had never welcomed these meetings. When they had begun to happen less and less frequently, it had been a cause for celebration rather than anxiety. But Cecil's unexpected demand that he appear here, a handful of miles outside the city, to "evaluate new and sudden developments in the Crown's security," did not bear the same stamp as his previous encounters. If it was so new and sudden, why meet him here, not in Whitehall? Sir Francis had adhered to the strategy of hiding best in plain sight, but Cecil did not leave court unless he had no other choice. Kit glanced over his shoulder down the street, but saw nothing that did not belong there. Still, he had not made it so long without trusting his instincts. He could feel the cold pressure of his knife from its resting place in his boot, with all the comfort of a mother's embrace. If not today, it would be tomorrow, next month, next year.

Whatever Cecil meant to demand of him, whatever was so secret that not even Whitehall could know of it, he would have to take it as it came.

“You waiting for a personal invitation from Her Majesty to go in?” The man glared at Kit, who quickly stepped from the way of the door to allow him entrance. It was a good question. What was he waiting for? If he expected a sign, the heavens did not have a record of being particularly forthcoming.

The sky was beginning to darken, thick grey clouds rolling in from the south, over the river. It was going to rain. He glanced once more over his shoulder and stepped into the Bull and Boar. The Strand outside did not even notice he had left.

He had not expected to find the tavern full, though its proximity to the docks made sense when he thought of it. The floor was packed too close with tables, men nearly pressed back to back, talking loudly enough so that no one could be heard. Hidden in plain sight. There was a reason spies mistrusted places with a good reputation. Anything could be said here with perfect impunity. He stood for a moment at the room’s edge, an ill-at-ease observer, until he felt a small tap on his shoulder. It was impossible not to think of the White Stag, years ago in Cambridge, but this woman, presumably the landlady, was everything Mistress Howard was not. Slim, small, dark-eyed, with a Puritanical severity that defied all logic of the room. And it seemed she had been waiting for him. Without a word, she indicated a table in the room’s far corner, around which three people were arranged. He didn’t know how she recognized him, but she was right, as he nodded his thanks and wove through men eating and drinking. One glance at the man who sat facing the door, and he knew where he was expected.

Cecil was not present; he recognized that at once. But the way that man sat with his eye on Kit, the way he kept both hands in his pockets with the air of one not simply holding his money close, the look of a human bird of prey scanning the heath, all this together was more than enough for Kit to recognize an agent of the crown when he saw one. The second, who twisted in his chair to look at him appraisingly as he approached, was a stranger. He would have remembered the rangy-looking man, with his mane of unruly tawny hair and an unnervingly sharp smile. But it was the third man that made

him catch his breath. Time changed people, visibly and in more subtle ways. But six years were not enough to make the third man unrecognizable.

“Nick?” he said incredulously. “Nick Skeres?”

He wanted to laugh, it was so absurd. The world Nick belonged in was so far from Deptford, so far from anything to do with Sir Robert Cecil, that he could not even remember his previous thoughts of caution. Nick belonged in some country manor house, doing whatever mundane things people born with money did, not hanging about with men like these. Or men like Kit, for that matter.

“You sound surprised.” Nick gestured at the vacant chair across from him, and Kit took it. The other men watched him carefully, but he had no eyes for either of them.

“I think it’s justified. What are you doing here? I didn’t even know you were in London.”

“Never been anywhere else,” Nick replied bitterly. “We keep different circles.”

“Apparently not so different.”

“Touching as this reunion is,” the first man, Cecil’s man, cut in smoothly, “we do have business to attend to, Marlowe. I hope meeting here did not bring you too far out of your way.”

He could not afford distraction. He could not afford to take his attention off this agent, not for a second. “What kind of business? Why was I sent for?” The voice was back, the cold authoritative voice that admitted no contradiction. Another skill of the intelligencer: the ability to switch between voices the way actors did between roles.

“These matters are best discussed in private. If you would join us upstairs? I think you understand better than most the importance of secrecy.”

Kit looked around the room. Despite Nick’s presence, he felt more comfortable in public. Other men’s eyes, once a source of fear, were now his greatest security. But the party of three had already risen, waiting for him to follow suit. Kit placed both hands on the tabletop and pushed himself up. It was not until then that he noticed the strange feeling against his ankle, the phantom remembrance of a pressure that was no longer there. His knife was gone. The tawny-haired man caught the realization in

his eyes and smiled. He leisurely held something hidden in the pocket of his jacket.

“Well, sir?” he asked. “Will you come?”

“It strikes, it strikes! Now body, turn to air, or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell!”

Onstage at the Rose, Faustus looked despairingly up to the darkening sky, where a single flash of lightning cut through the shadows shrouding London. His hands reached aloft in prayer, but soon fell again to his sides. Prayer was no good here. Perhaps earlier, perhaps before, but not now.

The stairs ended at the door of the parlor, a small and simply furnished room. Kit did not see anyone lock them in, they were too clever for that, but he heard the distinctive click of a turning key from behind him. So it was to be that way. He was careful to keep his back close to the far wall, though he knew it hardly mattered. A defense like that wouldn't help, not if they were intent on putting him at a disadvantage. But this was the way it was meant to happen, here, with his back against the wall, on his feet. Never from behind. He thought of Arthur Gregory leading him through Corpus Christi that day in September, and his instinct for locating exits without being told. But that skill was only useful when there were options. The only way out of the Bull and Boar was by the door that had been locked behind him.

“Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner,” the agent said. He stood in front of the parlor's fireplace, unlit in late spring but still littered with the ash of previous blazes. “Robert Poley. I think we are employed by the same gentleman.”

“I think we're employed by the same lady,” Kit said coldly. The rest was implied: *I work for the Queen. If you try anything, you'll have Her Majesty to answer to.*

The stage doors opened, and a horde of masked men, hands and arms smeared with coal and filth from the Bankside docks, poured onto the stage. Their clawed arms stretched for the kneeling

Faustus, whose back was to them. He could not see them, did not know when they would arrive. But he knew, he had to know, he had always known, that it would come to this.

Poley caught the silent meaning with a smile. “And my associate, Ingram Frizer, businessman of South London.” The tawny-haired man, now directly in front of the door, bowed without letting his eyes leave Kit. He knew what kind of businessmen one found in South London. Blackmailers and black-market dealers, con men and knife fighters. Cecil was calling in Southwark entrepreneurs now. It took a certain kind of ill repute to become an agent, still another kind to wring a man dry by playing his debts like a harp. Small wonder Cecil had chosen to delegate his rendezvous. Imagining him in the same room as Frizer was impossible.

“Nicholas Skeres I believe you’ve already met.”

“We’re acquainted.” If there was anything left for him, it was Nick standing there, arms loose at his sides, behind the table. He knew Nick, or he had known him, once. What he was doing there was a mystery, but Nick would be on his side, were something to happen. Their friendship had been odd, but it had been strong. He caught the thought almost before it was completed. Idiot. Counting on a university friendship, in this world where loyalty meant nothing. There were only two kinds of men anymore: those who worked with you to undo others and those who worked with others to undo you. “Why am I here?”

“That, Kit, is where the story becomes interesting.” Kit had decided he would despise Ingram Frizer’s voice before he’d heard it, and he was not wrong. Hearing his name slide off the man’s slippery tongue was sickening; he felt violated in some way. “You see, His Lordship has requested we keep a very close watch on you. He was quite clear about how much faith you deserve. Useful, he said, but not to trust.”

He had heard those words before. In the Star-Chamber, dragged fresh from the boat, the feel of chains against his wrists not yet vanished. This man had heard Cecil’s words. And if Cecil gave an

order, it would be executed. Frizer was a criminal and a villain, but he was not a liar.

“Oh soul, be changed into little water drops and fall into the ocean, never to be found! My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!”

The words of a crucified Christ who had never known God’s presence and could not consider his absence a sign of being forsaken. Men who could not be forgiven, for they knew exactly what they did. The demons pressed closer, Mephistopheles at the head, his expression one of long-standing suffering. You knew exactly what you brought on yourself, when you signed yourself over to me. I did not want it to happen this way. But you left me with no choice. You cannot cheat the devil, for he is the best artificer and the best double-dealer, better by far than you are. You cannot outdo the devil at his own game.

“We’ve heard some interesting tales about you in town,” Poley went on. “How you rail against God and Christ. Your interesting theories about Scripture. Some even go so far as to call you an atheist, which doesn’t seem to hit too far from the mark.”

His knife was gone. The door was blocked. The window overlooked a street twenty feet below, a hard fall to the unforgiving stones. He heard his heart pounding in his ears, a steady rhythmic warning. *Get out. Get out.* But there would be no getting out. Not from this. Cecil had warned him. It had been his choice not to listen.

“And then, there are the rumors that profoundly concern His Lordship.” Poley took two steps forward. Kit could not retreat but did not flinch. The wall pressed up against his back, as if to push him into Poley’s reach. “There are those who would testify to your engagement in, shall we say, less-than-savory activities. False identities. Extended disappearances. Sabotage. Murder.”

“You can’t pretend Cecil doesn’t know about that.” Kit’s voice was oddly level; it surprised even himself. Whatever happened, he was not afraid of them. “What I’ve done, I’ve done only on his

orders. Nothing more than that, nothing less.”

“It’s not what you’ve *done* that matters,” Frizer explained with devastating patience. “It’s what others say you’ve done. It’s what people *know*. What good is a spy when his beliefs become unreliable, his writings turn to treason, and the crowds recognize him by name?”

One of the demons, the most ambitious, or the most desperate, tore at the hem of Faustus’ robe. He rose, but the hand would not release, no matter how he twisted away. The faces in the pit craned upward at his anguished cry, the futility of calling on a God that did not exist against the forces that so clearly did.

“Adders and serpents, let me breathe awhile! Ugly hell, gape not! Come not, Lucifer!”

“Your worth is falling, Christopher Marlowe.” Poley was less than a foot from him now. Kit could have reached out and touched him. “Your worth is falling fast.”

It happened too fast to react. One moment he was standing, the wall pressing up against his back, and then the next he was on the floor, the breath knocked from his lungs, brain reeling from the blow. Instinct was the same for men and animals. Neither went quietly. He felt the wet drip of blood against his fingers as he raked his nails across Poley’s face, but the man seized his wrist and twisted it backwards with a snarl, until Kit’s arm was bent double behind his back. He heard himself cry out, through the fog he felt the crunch that was the bone in his arm breaking. The edges of the room blurred out, the blackness at the edges sharpened. But Poley dragged him to his feet again. His fingers groped for his knife, closing on empty air. Remembering a second too late. Poley took hold of his other arm, pinning them both behind his back. Everything was moving too fast. Frizer left the door, behind which he knew no one was listening. No one was coming. There was no point in calling for help. They knew already, downstairs. But he couldn’t help the moan that escaped as Poley drove his body forward, slammed him face-first into the heavy wooden table, and again –

The demons pressed closer, a swirling mass of teeth and hair and flashing eyes through the soot. All that remained of Faustus was a single arm, reaching up from the horde towards the sky. A rolling thrum of thunder carried with it a voice that cried until it would break the heavens:

“I’ll burn my books! Ah, Mephistopheles!”

The knife in Frizer’s hand shone like a serpent’s fang in the sunlight. That glittering smile came closer, the shimmering white teeth outdone by the blade. There was nothing else. All that remained was the knife, and that smile.

And Nick’s howl rose alongside another scream as the knife stabbed through Kit Marlowe’s eye into his brain.

The body collapsed to the ground the moment Robert Poley released his grip. Its limbs buckled beneath its own weight, its form crumbling in on itself. The knife lay beside it, a silent, scarlet witness. Nick didn’t know what was done or said in the moments following. He had lost all control of his movements, and stood blank, silent, staring. He did not look up, nor did he think of running. They would be arrested – that was part of the plan. They would be arrested, tried, and pardoned for killing an unarmed man in self-defense. Men following the orders of Sir Robert Cecil, Royal Secretary and head of the Queen’s intelligence agents, did not die for their loyalty. But there was only one pardon that could have saved Nick Skeres, and it did not come from the court. No payment could erase those dark, desperate eyes of Christopher Marlowe, eyes that had looked out at the last and seen nothing but hell.

The stage’s trapdoor opened, and in a moment Faustus and the demons had vanished. Mephistopheles remained a moment longer alone on stage, his eyes scanning the audience, searching silent faces, waiting.

Who’s next?

And then he turned on his heel and disappeared through the gates of Hell, the actor's doors, and the stage was empty.

There was a beat, an audible blink, before the applause descended strongly enough to shake the walls of the Rose. It had been a brilliant play. London had never seen anything like it. It had been so vibrant, so powerful, so immediate that, for a moment, they had almost thought it was real.

Tom Watson stood apart, a silent observer amid the applause. It was not, for him, the end of a role well played. He knew the cast would not return for a bow, an apologetic prologue. Kit would have done anything rather than allow the illusion to break with an apology. Ned Alleyn would have to enjoy the addition of Faustus to his reputation from below. He turned from the stage and pushed his way to the exit. The thunderous applause still echoed behind him as he paused for a moment, just a moment, in front of the yellowing paper nailed to the post.

“The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, by the right honorable members of the Lord Strange’s Men. Written by Ch. Marlowe.”

No one was watching him. All eyes were on the stage, awaiting a man who would not return. No one would see. Before he could ask himself why, Tom gripped the bill and pulled it loose from the nail. He looked it over as though he expected the letters to suddenly say something different, before folding it into his pocket.

I’ll burn my books! Ah, Mephistopheles!

When they met again in Bankside that night, they would have to speak about this. Kit would be back before midnight. After seeing what he had seen, this was a night neither of them ought to spend alone. Tom stepped into the freer air of the near-deserted street, the applause lingering on his heels, a ghost that did not know what kind of man it was haunting.

The thunder rolled again, followed by another flash of lightning. And then at long last, the storm broke, and it began to rain.