

ONE

Friday, May 28, 1593

Christopher Marlowe pulled his cloak tighter around his torso and pushed himself back into the alcove as the wind gusted around him, kicking up the debris from his confines, the sounds of the street were magnified as they reverberated around the stone niche. He had been cramped in the limited space for more than an hour. A few yards away, there was a blazing fire; gathered around the warmth were men, women, and one or two children easing the chill in their bones over the inviting flames, every now and then the men would stamp their feet, to make the blood flow to chase the aching chill away. Christopher (Kit) longed to just step out and join them, but he needed the concealment as he was after the foulest form of treachery. A traitor! Someone who had not only betrayed his country but his own roots, his own heritage.

Great Britain and Spain had been fighting each other in sporadic limited actions on the high seas for years, and yet neither side was willing to openly wage war. Queen Elizabeth I publicly decried the privateer attacks on Spanish shipping and secretly shared in the plunder. Sir Walter Raleigh returned to the Thames on more than one occasion, with chests bursting under the weight of Spanish gold for the royal coffers, and received royal accolades for his efforts. The attempted overthrow of Queen Elizabeth I, by the Spanish Armada, just five years previously, was the closest the two powers had come to all-out war. Spain had learned a valuable and costly lesson in that disastrous exercise.

Someone was passing information about Royal Navy ship movements to the Spaniards, and Marlowe was trying to find out who it was and stop them. The only information he had was that the courier would be in the theatre district at the Quill & Ink coffee house on May 28, just before dark. Marlowe knew the sort of people who frequented the house, he was looking for that which didn't fit, and having worked with great success on the stage as an actor and playwright, he knew the many types that paraded by his seclusion.

As the night closed in, the streetscape began to change from the washer women, cleaners and hawkers to the folk who came out at night – the street barker trying to get customers into his theatre, the lamplighter, the crier, the burglar, the gambler and the women of the night – and in this part of London at this time of day, the ordinary coming and going. The sound of the avenue changed from boisterous day to that of the muted, almost secretive night. There was a background hum from the humanity that strolled by, and it added a kind of music to the fragmented and sometimes ugly ballet the street carnival displayed.

Further down the street, the barking of a dog roused Marlowe from his observations and speculations – the same dog had barked at him as he had walked by and went silent seconds later, and had remained so until now; why? A man in rough woodcutter's clothes had turned into the street; crude cloak, large-brimmed hat, and even at this distance, the cut of the boots was as distinctive as the sound they made. The boots were made of heavy leather to protect his shins and feet from axes, and echoed with each footfall as the man walked, which marked him as a woodcutter better than if he had been carrying an axe. Marlowe noticed the footwear was unscathed, and the clothing looked... far too clean, it hadn't been worked in. Behind the man, a private carriage clattered passed the junction. Why? There were no new plays opening and the locals did not own private carriages, and the dog was still barking.

Just before the man stepped into the pool of light cast out by the lamp and the fire, he pulled the collar of his cloak up around his features so the eyes could see out but no-one could see in to the shadow-draped face. A gust pulled hard at the man's cloak, swirling dust in a low spiral around him. No matter how hard the wind blew, it could not rid the streets of the low stench created by the human mass. The stranger made for the Quill & Ink, and before the public house door had closed behind, Marlowe had his hand on the edge pulling it open, catching a glimpse of the man's neck, in the yellow light of the tavern; it was perfectly white – that piece of skin had seen very little sun.

As he entered through the heavy wooden portal, the heat compared to the unseasonable biting cold outside hit the playwright as if it were a physical blow. The next assault was on the nose – wood smoke, fresh coffee, stale tobacco and unwashed humanity. The latter was more noticeable to Marlowe because he was one of the very few in London who considered bathing every day hygienic and necessary. Those who knew of this peculiarity expected him to be dead within the year from a variety of ailments, all brought on by his excessive washing. All around the semi-gloom of the den, muted voices spoke on many subjects, ranging from the latest play; the rising price of bread, a new theatre, or the Queen's advanced age and the fact that she had no heir and had not named a successor.

The mystery man stood at a table in the darkest part of the coffee house, and after a few seconds exchange with a person on the other side he produced a heavily-sealed missive and passed it across. After a cursory look at the seal, a heavy purse was handed back and the man heaved it to feel its weight. Satisfied with what he had been given he deposited the weighty sack inside his cloak, touched the brim of his hat in salute and walked straight towards Marlowe, all the while keeping his features hidden in shadow.

Just as the bogus woodcutter reached the door, it opened from the outside to admit a good friend of Marlowe's. "Will here, have your supper on me and watch everything that happens in that corner – everything," he stressed and pointed. "If they leave, you follow." Marlowe pressed a silver guinea into Shakespeare's hand and left.

"Thank you very much kind sir," called Will to the closing door as he turned full circle. "Landlord, bring your best blend with your best bread and cheese! And candles that we may view the bounty set before us," he said as an afterthought, as he swaggered to a nearby booth.

Marlowe needed to hurry and at the same time he needed to be cautious; if the courier suspected he was being followed, Marlowe knew he could end up dead. *No*, thought Kit, *the courier would end up dead*.

Luck was on Kit's side as the man had not reached the end of the street, and as he hugged the walls of the buildings in pursuit, a chilling gust of wind whipped up the edges of his cloak, making Marlowe pull it tighter. It was growing quickly darker and if he could not get a clear look at his quarry, his work thus far would be wasted; the only light he could count on was the irregular lamplight and that of a three-quarter moon as it played hide-and-seek between darkening clouds.

The man turned right at the end of the street, Marlowe took a gamble and turned into a lane that would take him in the same direction parallel to the courier. As he hurried he was propositioned by several women, most of whom he shrank from in more ways than one, and he thought they must be freezing considering how much they weren't wearing. One in particular was in for a very bad chest cold, as she displayed much of an unusually large chest. He rushed by as they called after him offering prices for their favours.

Taking the next turn to the left, Marlowe came out on to the same street. The mystery man should be coming towards him, and only after searching the shadows did he find the traitor again, as the man was avoiding even the palest of light, but halfway down the footpath there was one bright pool thrown up by a lamp and a blazing fire that the man could not avoid. Marlowe knew he must pass through it if he was to continue his direction.

Pulling the collar of his cloak up over his nose and ears, Marlowe took his brandy flask from his pocket, splashed some over his clothes, and took a swig. Determined to know who this traitor was, he staggered towards his quarry. Those gathered by the fire looked around at Marlowe and gave him no more consideration until he stumbled into one of them; he was cursed, and pushed roughly off, into the path of the stranger, amid a barrage of abuse.

Marlowe bellowed unintelligibly at everyone, the man tried to sidestep, but Marlowe grabbed at his cloak, spun him into the light, and knocked his hat off, giving the spy a perfect momentary view of the traitor's well-illuminated face. For his troubles, Marlowe received a savage, teeth-jarring blow to the side of his head – he had what he needed. A face that betrayed good food – too much good food – a sallow complexion and not the face of a man spending long days in the forest cutting wood in all weather. In hindsight, the force of the blow surprised Marlowe because the face did not speak of the body having that much strength.

“Out of my way you drunken lout!”

There was no country burr in that voice.

Marlowe recognised neither face nor voice.

“Par'on,” slurred Marlowe as he staggered back to the shadows in mock drunkenness.

Returning to Quill & Ink, Kit found Will Shakespeare halfway through a large pastie. The remnants of a chicken lay to one side, along with a thick coating of breadcrumbs that would have kept a family of sparrows happy for days.

“Ah Kit, my benefactor! Come, come sit thyself down. Landlord, bring coffee for my friend! And not that Arabian muck either! I tell you Kit, not even the camels would drink Arabian coffee.”

The noise in the coffee house had risen considerably since Marlowe had left, and no-one would attribute the intensity of discussion in the room to the coffee, as no-one had yet discovered the caffeine in the coffee or its effect on the human condition as a stimulant.

The innkeeper delivered the order, stoked up the fire and retired to serve more of his beckoning patrons. Kit Marlowe sipped at the strong hot coffee and watched over the rim of his mug as he tried to pierce the dark corner with his eyes. The collage of sound in the coffee house slowly became nothing as Marlowe concentrated on the mysterious corner, and its occupant.

Slowly, as the warm liquid chased the chill out from within, he believed that he too was being watched. At first he could only feel the eyes, he sensed no danger, and there came to him a perception of inquiry, a searching. In the puzzling corner, a candle moved just enough to let the flame of it flicker in the searching eyes, like tiny stars in a dark sky. Marlowe's eyes unhurriedly entered the partial gloom of the corner and saw those that studied him. Penetrating, emerald green; the candle moved a little more and showed a hand moved beside the candle to turn palm up. The slender fingers folded to the palm, one slight finger – gloved in black Spanish lace to the third joint – beckoned to him just once, in a gesture of request and not of command. Marlowe put his mug

down slowly. Showing no haste, he moved with deliberation, considering each move, each step, and with this measured approach drew near to the woman with slender fingers and captivating emerald eyes.

“You have been staring into my seclusion for longer than polite society would deem good manners. Who are you and what do you seek?”

Marlowe would normally have been offended by someone in the theatre district not recognising him instantly, but he wasn't.

My name is Marlowe... Kit Marlowe, actor and playwright,” he bowed deeply. “And this,” he said, waving an arm to the room, “is not polite society. I meant no offence.”

“I take none,” she said softly. “What woman, young, raven-haired, oval-faced, slight nose, and small red lips that widened as he studied them into a captivating hint of a smile to show perfect white teeth. were you seeking in your determination to penetrate my private darkness?”

Marlowe caught a hint of perfume and knew it to be French. “I am intrigued to sense a hint of France and to see a piece of Spain in an English coffee house; I wondered who could be so bold.”

“Bold, me sir? No, not I. And you are mistaken – the fragrance is Dutch. The lace was bought from a merchant who swears he bought it from the last of Sir Walter Raleigh's Spanish pickings. So you see I am not so bold.”

Marlowe guessed that if she were telling the truth, the perfume had been smuggled across borders from France, was relabelled as Dutch, and traded legally. She could be telling the truth about the lace. He didn't think she was telling the truth. The perfume was French, she was bold, and he was not mistaken.

Gently lifting her gossamer-laced hand, he brushed it with his lips, “My lady, please forgive my importunities. I am Christopher Marlowe and I am at thy service!” “And what service could that be?” she said, slowly retracting her hand.

“Perhaps a dragon to slay? A slight against thee to be defended? A simple escort to thy door?”

From the shadows at her side, a man appeared and whispered in her ear. She waved her hand at him and stood up, pulling her cloak over her bare shoulders, and tying it at her neck. “Dragon slaying is not very kind to dragons, and as you can see I need no escort to my door.” The green eyes flashed in the poor light.

“Before you go, might I know thy name?”

The green-eyed woman walked through the hazy, stuffy room escorted by two unknown men and stopped to turn only her head to Marlowe, her eyes glinted from the lamp light and fire light. “My name is Juliet.”

“Will I see you again?”

“Tomorrow, here at this hour,” she called over her shoulder and was gone. Marlowe stared after her for some time; was there a note of plea in her voice? All noise and scene of his surroundings were still excluded as his senses drank in the fragrance that was she. Marlowe’s heart had seen and heard something that the keenest eyes and sharpest ears never could.

A pulling at his sleeve brought Marlowe back to the here and now. “I can see that the evening chill has gone from thy loins, and I’ll wager the coffee has had little to do with it. Now Kit, close thy mouth and come join us, you’re blocking the door,” chided Will Shakespeare, as he guided the slightly befuddled spy to the booth.

Marlowe looked to his friend and rested his arm across his shoulders, “Will you have a gift for... stating the obvious,” he laughed.

“If that be the case where is the sonnet you promised me for my pretty Caroline? You know she won’t give her favours without the wooing of poetry.”

“You shall have your wooing words soon.” Marlowe sat down beside Will as they returned to Shakespeare’s booth at the rear of the coffee house, where the caffeine cacophony was less intrusive. “Why don’t you write your own words for Caroline?”

“I did that once and she fell off the bed in a fit of high mirth. Come to think of it, it was your fault that the women here about now want poetry before they consider any kind of wooing. I have actually seen men queuing up at Poets Corner just to get a few lines so they can bed their sweethearts. The poets don’t mind but it is costing the men dearly. I heard it said that if the poets keep putting up their prices it’d be cheaper to go down Strumpet Lane. It was when you courted Bernadette that all this started.”

Marlowe knew that most of what Shakespeare was saying was only empty conversation. It was true that the women were eager for sweet words rather than grubby hands, and he had started a craze among some. *But those that the craze was in were crazed to begin with*, he thought, *especially Caroline*. “Where is the play you promised me too?” asked Will as the landlord brought another candle and more coffee.

“That’s all I am to you, nothing more than your writing machine – sonnets, plays. What next, love letters? Marlowe poured the last of his brandy into the coffee. “Will, you have a passable career as an actor; surely you could make a fair living on the boards?”

“Aye, I probably could but there is one impediment that is wreaking havoc on my stage career.”

“What is it?” Marlowe was seriously concerned.

“There is nothing the leeches can do for me.”

“What is this mystery ailment?”

“Oh no, I cannot...”

“What is wrong with thee?”

“Promise you will not tell another soul?”

“I promise.”

“Well,” Shakespeare leaned across the table and whispered, “I am bone lazy.”

Marlowe sat back laughing, “Now if you could write like that, just the way you drew me in, you would have your fortune in no time. But seriously Will, you are a dullard at times.”

Shakespeare roared with laughter at the bluster that Marlowe had thrown up to mask his embarrassment.

“Will, shut up and tell me what went on with Juliet after I left?”

“Nothing, she stayed concealed in the corner. Her bodyguards roamed in and out but other than that she did nothing?”

So the letter was still in her possession. Was she to deliver it elsewhere? Was someone to come and collect it?

“Kit, why do you let me have your writings so that I may claim them as my own?”

“You wouldn’t understand. It’s personal. Creatively personal.” Marlowe never told anyone that he gave Will his work, just to know that the work was accepted for the work’s sake alone; as he said, it was creatively personal. “Now that’s deep,” said Shakespeare as he supped.

Marlowe sipped at his brandy-laced coffee, musing on the courier. Obviously noble, low in rank but still a noble. Probably penniless or in serious debt, he must be connected to the parliament in some way to get the information he had.

“Will,” said Marlowe suddenly. “I must take my leave. Finish your feasting, gather friends about, and take thy ease.”

“Aye that I will, after all you did pay for it. Now who was it that called me a dullard and who is it that is venturing out into the cold?” Shakespeare laughed.

Marlowe resolved to report to Lord Burghley, as the unknown face haunted him as something familiar, but only fleetingly so.

As Kit walked along the dark London streets, the chill winds had grown colder, and the skin over his face tightened, causing the recently-awarded wound to ache as the stretching layer pulled down on the bruise. Marlowe touched the ache with his finger. *No matter, I’ll soon see thee at the end of a rope.* Traitors were hanged and not given the noble execution of beheading. Marlowe thought beheading was more appropriate in this case, as it was usually a bloody event and hurt more.

He hailed a cab and as he climbed in, he caught a furtive movement out of the corner of his eye. Marlowe sat hard in the shadowy corner of the cab and looked carefully out through the small rear window. The cab immediately behind pulled off the kerb and was following.

“Cabby, how would you like to earn a shilling?”

“Gawd ‘oo do I ‘ave ta kill?”

“All you have to do is drop me at the Green Garden without the cab behind seeing you do it. You can’t stop and you have to lead them away from there.”

“Gawd, that all? Hang on ta your ‘at.” The cabby cracked his whip, “Ginger, step up girl, step up!”

Marlowe felt the cab lurch forward as Ginger responded to her master’s call, and was soon racing through the cobbled streets of London. He looked back to see they had gained distance, but the following coach was now also galloping.

“You ready? Garden’s just ’round next corner.”

Marlowe tossed the agreed sum up to the driver and looked back; as they turned, the trailing cab was momentarily out of sight and Marlowe rolled onto the grass verge and into the lightless patch.

The following cab rattled by; something told Marlowe that it too was now empty. Pulling himself back against a tree, he began to carefully look through the graded gloom with every sense at his command. With every faculty working to its uttermost, Marlowe heard the subtle swish of a cloak against a leg and marked with eyes and ears exactly where it had come from. Drawing his dagger with great care, Marlowe remained absolutely still, hardly breathing, waiting for the other person to move.

Because he had stayed, eyes wide open, unblinking for more than was normal, one of his eyes suddenly demanded moisture and watered of its own accord; it was a little painful and very irritating; all Marlowe could do was close it and wait. He moved the good eye over the dark seeking the tracker. As suddenly as it began, the eye stopped weeping and Marlowe was able to open it. With the sight of both eyes, he saw fleetingly a dark figure crouched as the clouds allowed the moon to cast its watery light through the mottling tree canopy.

Knowing they had been seen, the person sprang viciously out at Marlowe, two bodies crashed, rolled once, two opposing blades glinted briefly in the moonlight, and one became buried to the hilt in its victim. Marlowe felt the warm ooze of blood over his hand as he pulled the weapon out. He looked at the face of the dead man and closed the startled unseeing eyes. Kit did not recognise him, but he had to be one of Lord Devereux’s men, as his lordship wanted Marlowe dead and if Marlowe was not exceedingly careful, Lord Devereux would get his way. As Marlowe stood, a burning pain flashed across

his left side, he felt down and touched his own scarlet fluid. Scrambling through his pockets, Marlowe found a handkerchief, padded it over the wound, and left the body where it fell.

Lord Burghley kept a large house on St James Square and, as he was Marlowe's employer, there were rules for calling and they had to be strictly met. Any lapse in this security could lead to the death of the careless agent, Lord Burghley himself or any number of agents. The key part of the security surrounding Lord Burghley was the taking of a circular route to the square before making the final steps of approach. Marlowe did this, all the while checking behind.

Some of the higher nobles employed spies for their own purposes, and the state of politics in England seemed to produce more of the personal kind. Lord Burghley did use his espionage network to further his own ambitions, but the main aim of his spy system was to make sure that government policy, both domestic and foreign, continued in England's best interests.

Coming up to St James Square from the west, Marlowe slowed his gait, listening intently for sounds from behind. Not satisfied with what his ears weren't telling him, he stopped and turned to look, and in the light of the three-quarter moon saw nothing, and on the cold gusting winds heard nothing. The wound in his side ached a little, but had stopped oozing.

A sixth sense, an itching of the scalp, a tingling of the skin, told Marlowe that there was in fact someone else there, following, watching; but he doubted if they had been working with Devereux's man; if they had been in concert, Marlowe felt the outcome of the previous knife fight would have been far worse for him. He crossed the street, purposely passing through the moon strip, and on down a lane away from Lord Burghley between the London homes that contained some of the richest and most powerful families in the land. As he walked, he could feel the follower's presence grow stronger, but he could still not hear anything. *The person must be part cat*, he thought as he sought to find a way to draw this intriguing person out.

Marlowe's confidence in his own ability forbade the thought of being wrong, and following the only action he could think of, he slipped silently to a wall in total darkness and waited, hoping that curiosity would make the follower betray their movements – which of them would flinch first?

At the mouth of the lane, there was a large pool of light that covered both sides of the path. Two large fire grates burned brightly, casting their brilliance in a wide circle. Marlowe knew they had been lit for the night patrols that would begin their rounds soon. As he studied the illuminated pool to its edges, he

knew that whoever was following him would have to come through it or wait for his return – *or*, thought Marlowe, *come around some other way!*

The playwright-come-spy turned just in time to see a dark figure blend into the blackness against a distant building and was impressed; although he had seen the figure, they made no noise and knew their craft well. *It's a pity I will have to kill him*, he thought as his hand flexed over his dagger handle.

Crouching for a long time was beginning to make Marlowe's wound ache more, but he refused to move. Motion across the lane caused him to suddenly stop breathing. A cat! Marlowe took breath. Feeling around the ground for a rock with his foot, he found one and threw it at the unsuspecting alley dweller.

The creature erupted briefly with a startled feline cry and fled. Moments later, the dark, agile figure detached itself from the blackness that had hidden it perfectly, soundlessly; they were studying the place the cat had come from and not where Marlowe was secreted.

Marlowe could see the person plainly, dressed all in black and travelling with a lithe, fluid motion, an unattached shadow, and fleetingly thought – *woman?* As the figure came directly opposite his place, facing away, he launched out. The silhouette twisted itself in a tight-folding turn and deflected Marlowe's dagger, snapping a foot around and up into Kit's ear, knocking him down. Marlowe rolled with a ringing in the smarting place to stand, shaking the pain from his head. Kit's opponent stood in the lane, feet apart, knees slightly bent, left arm forward, fist clenched, right arm back, fist clenched, and they were covered, head to foot, in black. Again Marlowe thought, *woman?*, and stepped in to attack; the shadow swung in a sweeping motion, pivoting on the left foot, knee bent with the right leg extended. Marlowe went down hard on his back, the attacker sprung over to land a final blow when Marlowe raised his dagger, and halfway through the upward thrust Marlowe caught a hint of France, opened his dagger hand, letting the already blood-stained blade slip through his fingers and fall harmlessly to the ground. The force of the strike knocked the person over to the side. Marlowe knew who it was even before he spun her around, as the scent was familiar to both nose and heart.

Taking firm hold of her waist, he lifted her, spun, and tore the masking scarf from her face. She was gasping for air but it did not stop her from scowling and flashing the green fire from her emerald eyes to show her anger.

Marlowe stood, and as he was about to speak heard the heavy tramp of many boots on the cobbles of St James Square – the night patrol! Taking a little squeeze ball from his pocket, he put it beneath her nose, squeezed, and as she

drew an inward breath the tiny white cloud from the ball went with it, she slumped back, unconscious. He caught her up and threw her over his shoulder, snatched up the fallen dagger and retreated quickly from the approaching troops to a nearby public garden.

Looking around through the patches of light that dotted the garden for signs of other people, Marlowe removed a small vial from another pocket, uncorked it, and waved it under her nose. As the ammonia vapours took a little while to cause a reaction, he patted her body in search of the couriered letter. Slowly she woke with a groan and felt Marlowe's hand on her right breast; by the light of the infrequent moon, she could see him above her, slapped his face hard, and went to rise only to feel the point of his dagger sharply against her left breast. She slumped back.

"Why are you following me?" he said, holding the side of his face.

"That is not my concern! You were fondling me while I was unconscious, how dare you!"

"Juliet, I can see clearly that you are cold, now shut up and answer the question."

She slapped him again, harder, and covered her chilled chest as best she could with an arm. "How can I shut up and answer questions?" Juliet felt the dagger come just a little closer.

"Answer the question."

"I was not following you, I was..." Juliet felt the knife come slightly closer. "Juliet, one more lie and I will finish the job and dump your body in the Thames. Now why were you following me and who do you work for?"

Juliet could see that she had no choice, she had already seen him despatch one person and was convinced that Marlowe would plunge the dagger if she did not answer truthfully. Marlowe, on the other hand, was not at all sure what he would do.

"Baines – Rector Baines. I pass information to couriers from him and to him, and as you well know, I am not carrying any weapons. I meant you no harm."

"Why – money?"

Rector Baines was a would-be spy in the employ of Lord Devereux. Marlowe thought it very strange that Baines and Devereux would be helping the Spanish. If he could prove it, they would face the axeman's block and he would be rid of two of his most powerful enemies.

"No. My father had been picking up pieces of information from the nobles, acting as a go-between or courier for years, and when he died I vowed to end it, but Baines kidnapped my brother and has threatened to... 'One limb, finger and

toe at a time,' is the quote I was given, if I don't continue my father's business, at least as the go-between."

Marlowe studied Juliet. He could see the fear in her face and the quivering of her bottom lip as she spoke. His mind told him to kill her and have no more trouble, but his heart had other ideas that overruled his *raison d'être*. This had never happened to Marlowe before, and for a reasonably intelligent man he was a little slow on the uptake – he had not yet realised that matters of the heart were at work within him and had been from the moment he met the green-eyed, raven-haired beauty.

"I believe you," he said, removing his dagger from under her breast. "The letter that was handed to you in Quill & Ink, I must have it now and I know where it is so if..."

"You would like that." Juliet scowled as she moved her tight-fitting garb and produced the letter. "You do realise that if that does not reach its intended reader, my brother will die a horrid death."

"He, at the moment, is not my concern. What were your orders concerning me?"

"I was told to follow you and report where you went and who you saw."

"To Baines?"

"Yes, he was greatly animated about your movements. It would seem that he does not like you at all."

"I assure you that the feeling is mutual. Tell me, did you know that the other person was following me, were you working together?"

"No, I was sent by Baines. I had no idea that there was another until you killed him." Juliet was now shivering from the cold.

"Hmm, it was probably Devereux's man." Marlowe shifted his weight a little. "And now I must beg thy pardon for what I must now do, as I do not trust you... yet." Marlowe squeezed another ball under her nose and she just had time to scowl at him before she passed out again.

Marlowe now had to move fast – *a cab? No* – he could explain her unconsciousness but he could never explain a woman dressed as a man. He had to get her to his gallery before she woke. Although his place was not far away, it was of sufficient distance, with his wounded side to make carrying her unwise. Marlowe needed to remain unseen and unrecorded while he moved the sleeping woman dressed as a man through the London backstreets.

Across the park at its perimeter, Marlowe saw a man pushing a market barrow, and it was empty save for a rough cloth cover thrust to its bottom. Calling to him as he came under a lamp, the man stopped.

"What is thy charge for the hire of yon barrow?" he said as he walked over.

“My Lord,” said the man pushing his big hat back. “Six pence would get me and my barrow til the cock crows.”

“That is truly a good price, but what say you to twenty pence for the barrow and you take your ease at a tavern of thy choice, where the barrow will be returned to thee well before the cock crows?”

“And the barrow will be returned before sunrise you say?” The man stroked the thick black mat on his chin.

“To the tavern of your choice,” said Marlowe, rattling coins in his hand.

“I say a bargain is struck,” he said, extending his great paw-like hand to Marlowe. “I’ll be at Three Candles, do you know it?”

“I do, and here be thy pay in full. Might I trouble thee for the use of your hat til the barrow returns and we can be about our business?” Marlowe was still feeling his shaken hand throbbing as the blood returned to it slowly.

“Stranger, the hat be yours to keep.” The man dropped the battered old work covering on Marlowe’s head, and walked away jingling the money.

The hat was several sizes too big for him, but it didn’t matter, Marlowe pulled it down tight to cover his face and hurried over to the sleeping Juliet, looked fully around, and seeing no-one close enough to notice, picked her up and laid her down in the barrow, covered her with the tarp in the bottom and wheeled her away through the darkened streets of sleeping London.

Marlowe needed to get to Isle of Dogs on the bank of the Thames before the effects of the sleeping draft wore off on Juliet. His apothecary had said three doses might be lethal – four would certainly be, and killing her was not his intention.

The place he was heading for was his residence and laboratory where Bartholomew Fleming, inventor, apothecary, and far-sighted thinker did all and more of the things just listed.

Fleming was a young man, considering the learning he contained, and while his longish face still showed signs of youth, the grey eyes held the wisdom that came with the learning. His blonde hair had already begun to thin from the centre out, giving him at times the appearance of a monk. He was truly a man born too early for the time fate has set for him in which to live.

The sixth sense that had told Marlowe of Juliet’s approach now told him that all was clear; there was no-one following or watching. It was safe to enter the converted warehouse, and as Marlowe clattered and bumped the heavy barrow through the double doors near the stables, he could see an illuminated area at the far end of the long gallery. “Bart, lend a hand here if you will!” His wound was becoming painful.

“I was wondering when I would see you, I have...”

“Tell me later – help me get the girl out of the barrow.”

“A girl? I told you I would have no part in turning this place into a bawdy house for you. Not after what you did when I gave you the sleeping balls for the first time, I can still hear her screams as she awoke, naked in your bed – and the scratches took a long time to heal didn’t they?”

“Shut up and help, and that was field research on your behalf, and this not what you think. I need to get her secured away from all of this until I know more about her.”

“We can put her in Beechum’s room, he has...”

“Resigned just like the others,” finished Marlowe. “You are really hard on the hired help, but I must admit he did hold the record. He lasted the longest by far. Three months wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Bart took Juliet’s legs, mused over masculine clothing but said nothing, while Marlowe took her arms and they carried her through the gallery to a room at the rear. As they laid her on the bed, she began to groan as the sleep-inducing vapour began to wear off.

“What did happen to Beechum this time?” asked Marlowe as Bart lit a candle.

“Err... Um... he err.”

“You went messing around with lightning again, didn’t you? I would have thought the last time would have been enough! You completely destroyed the last place we had, almost killed both of us, and let’s not to mention all of my clothes, the blast was horrendous!”

“I had no idea that several bolts would hit at the same time.”

“Oh, you might have had a clue from all the steel rods you stuck on the roof!” Marlowe looked at Juliet and saw that she had lapsed back to sleep. “So where is Beechum?”

“He... he has gone to a better place?”

“Oh you didn’t get him killed?”

Bart nodded, “Sorry, I thought that the safest place for him was inside the collector, while I monitored the strikes outside.”

“The collector?”

“A stone structure with copper rods in its roof, set below ground...”

“Enough, enough uhhh! Blown to pieces or cooked to death; a horrid way to die.”

“Vaporised actually,” said Bart flatly.

“Well no more, the fiddling around with lightning is over – do you understand!”

“But if I could harness the power of lightning bolt...”

“It would revolutionise the world as we know it, yes, I have heard it all before, and it stops now, understood!”

“Understood,” said Bart grudgingly.

Juliet chose that moment to open her eyes. “Where am I,” she said groggily, looking around and sitting up.

“In my hands,” said Marlowe quietly as he looked around to her.

In the flickering candlelight, Juliet looked from Marlowe to Bart and back, looking for the meaning behind his words. “Are they safe, honourable hands?”

“For the moment.”

“And when the moment ends?”

“It hasn’t ended yet; I need to know the answer to one question before that happens.”

“And that is?”

“Can I trust you? Are you really who you say you are? Have you told me the whole truth?”

“That’s three questions.”

“If I get the answer to the first, I will have it for all of them.”

“I swear I have told you everything.” Juliet’s bottom lip quivered again.

Marlowe studied her eyes for a moment. “Alright,” he said gently. “You have nothing to fear from me. Tell me where is your brother being held and what is your family name?”

“He is somewhere in Kent, that is all I know, and my family name is Parker.”

“Bart, can you please take the barrow to Three Candles, along with this hat and my personal, but anonymous, thanks. You can’t miss the owner, as big as a house and shaggy. Please be quick as I must leave again soon, and until I know more of you my dark-haired Juliet, I must lock you in.”

Bart went off with the barrow and Marlowe went upstairs to his apartment. Half the length of the building upstairs was given to it, with a large stairwell and long passage connecting each end, Bart’s slightly smaller apartment was at the land end. Walking through his lounge room, and entering his bedroom, Marlowe began throwing his clothes off, and when he had finished he drew water from a tap above a washbasin and began to wash himself down, paying particular attention to the knife wound. It looked like a glance rather than a stab wound, and it was not bleeding. Standing before a full-length mirror, naked to the waist, Marlowe tied a bandage over it and felt mildly better for the wash. He was disappointed at the loss of a silk shirt, as he looked back at the blood-stained garment on the floor.

With the sponge bath done, he went to the walk-in closet that covered half of one wall and took out a fresh shirt, pants, and shorts that would not find acceptance as men’s under-fashion for about four-hundred years. The pants were designed from a pair of trousers Kit had seen his friend, Sir Walter

Raleigh, wear when he was aboard his ship. Raleigh claimed that they gave greater freedom from snagging on the shipboard accoutrements, were far warmer when at sea, and looked better than the breeches and puff pants that were the fashions of the day for the nobility.

Marlowe gathered up his discarded clothing, threw them into a cane basket, found the traitor's letter and a few other pieces that he needed and returned to the ground floor to see if Bart had returned.

The two met at the bottom of the stairs.

"The barrow and hat have been returned sir."

"Good man, now I am in dire need of tea and food, and I believe Miss Parker would like some as well."

Bart made the tea and found cheese, bread and cold meat. "Sir," he said as he prepared the meal. "I have noticed that you were in difficulties tonight, that communications with me might have made things easier. As you won't carry a pigeon, might I suggest this?"

Marlowe sketched the face of the traitor as Bart talked.

He produced a book of about mid-size, opening the cover he showed Marlowe an array of small rockets, each a little longer than the span of a man's hand.

"I am sure you will tell me what I am supposed to do with them."

"Don't tempt me," mumbled Bart.

"What?" said Marlowe looking up from his sketch.

"Yes sir, I will attempt to. As you see, each one has a coloured band attached. Red for north, white for south, blue for east and yellow for west. Each colour represents a different section of the city, so if you are west of here you would fire a yellow rocket and so on."

"And how will you keep watch on the city at all times?"

"Sadly that is not possible, but if I know you are out I will station myself there at my work bench. The mirror on the wall is in line with a parabola of mirrors in the central skylight, and there isn't a patch of sky that isn't covered."

"How will you know exactly where I am?"

"I won't, but I will have a starting point close by. If you give me twenty to thirty minutes and fire another of the same colour I will find you."

Bart was always coming up with new ideas for Marlowe to try; a lot failed before they got out the door, and it was with some reluctance that Marlowe tested anything Bart offered, especially after the lightning bolt disaster, but this seemed different and Marlowe could see another use for the little pyrotechnics.

"Very well Bart, I will take them and give them a field test."

Marlowe took the tea and plate of food with gratitude, for he was starving. Bart took another to Miss Parker, which she accepted with as much gratitude and a far prettier smile.

When Bart came back he poured himself more tea and sat down at the breakfast bar.

“Sir, there is one more thing I would like to speak to you about. My name.”

“Your name?”

“Yes sir. I want you to refer to me from now on as ‘A’.”

“‘A’? Whatever for?”

“‘A’ is for Alpha, the first. I am the first of my profession, the first espionage scientist and it would aid security if my real name was suppressed and I was known only as ‘A’.”

“Very well ‘A’,” said Marlowe, stressing the vowel. “Your views on security are valid and we will adopt them for your sake,” said Marlowe, controlling the urge to laugh while he humoured his valued servant.

“I can see that in years to come, my successor will be known as B and his will be C and his D all the way down through the ages to L – M – N – O – P – Q and so on.” Bart seemed to swell as he imagined the future.

“And how would you designate people in my line of work ‘A’, by number?”

“Precisely sir! But as there are more of you than there are of me, I would suggest we start with something like 001 – 002 – 003 and so on.”

“So I would presumably be double 0 one?”

“Exactly. I must admit sir, you are taking this a lot better than I expected. You have tended to ridicule and snigger at my security ideas in the past. I will look at the numbering idea for your profession to see if there are any hidden problems and let you know.”

“Very good ‘A’, you continue your work and report back to me. Here, do you think we have this face in our rouges gallery?” asked Marlowe as he turned the finished drawing over to Bart.

Bart took the sketch and looked it over carefully. “I think so,” he said after a moment as he walked to south-eastern corner of the studio, lit a gas lamp and opened what appeared to be a blank wall. Instead there were rows upon rows of sketches of people all about six-inches square, on the back was written their name and what they did.

“Ah! Here he is,” said Bart, selecting one of the hundreds of pictures. “Sir James Burgess, he works through your friend and mine, Rector ‘burn-‘em-alive’ Baines, as one of Lord Devereux’s sycophants.”

“Thank you Bart, err, sorry, ‘A’. Please keep an ear out for Miss Parker, I must leave.”

“I will sir,” said newly-named ‘A’, very glad that he had not been laughed at.

If Juliet were to be believed, Marlowe was about to infuriate a man who already hated him. The Rector, Richard Baines, was all purity and light in his outward display as a man of the cloth, but within, Marlowe knew him to be a vile and cruel person.

Lord Burghley needed to know of Baines' activities and Marlowe needed to give the name of the traitor he had been stalking to his master so that his access to further information could be stopped, and so going back across the sleeping city, Marlowe adopted the same circular approach to his lordship's St James Square residence.

Knowing beyond any doubt that he had not been followed and was not under watch, Marlowe entered a stone stables immediately opposite his master's London home, and with only the odd snort from the horses lodged within, went to the harness room, and with the aid of his eternal match to light the way, found the knot in the timber lining of the wall, and when he pushed it, a panel in the floor slid noiselessly back to expose a shaft that went straight down. Marlowe dropped to the bottom of the ladder quickly and found the lamp that was always there. If it wasn't it meant the tunnel was not safe for some reason. Marlowe ignited the lamp, and the light revealed a passage just wide enough for one man, running under the street above leading to a secret door in his lordship's personal library. Marlowe's footfalls echoed off the stone in a reverberating ring.

Easing a small eye-sized panel back just a little, Marlowe confirmed that Lord Burghley was the only occupant of the book-lined room. The peer was standing by the fire warming his hands over the low embers, dressed in a floor-length dressing gown of red and gold-flecked, hand-painted Chinese silk, and although only thirty, he had the stance of a much older man due to a slightly hunched back – he had suffered from this defect since birth.

“Marlowe at last! I'll wager you've been consorting with your strumpets half the night while I am forced to wait for vital intelligence! You should have been here hours ago!” Lord Burghley eased his distorted frame into a high-backed chair and poured himself wine, offering none to Marlowe.

“That would have been a wager you would have lost, my lord. I have the information you require, I have the letter that was to be passed and I know the name of the man that did the passing, Sir James Burgess.”

“You are certain of the man you saw?”

“I am my lord.”

“I feared as much. Sir James Burgess, no money, no brains, and now it appears that he has no loyalty. He works for anyone who will pay him for whatever information needed, but usually aligned with Lord Devereux. I fear

the whole family is the same; it's in their blood. You leave that one to me, now the letter, let me see it," he said, snapping his fingers.

Marlowe passed the heavily-sealed document over and his lordship picked up a dagger, heated the edge of it over a candle, and levered the seal away without breaking the thick wax disk. "I'll see Burgess hang for this!" he said, waving the letter at Marlowe. "If this got into Spanish hands we might well have lost one of England's greatest sailors! This could have been the end of Raleigh!" Lord Burghley gave the page to Marlowe.

He read quickly. "My lord, I suggest that this was not merely intended to destroy Sir Walter, but to force her majesty into openly declaring war on Spain."

"You're right Kit; if the Spaniards had killed him in ambush the Queen would have had no choice. He is a favourite of hers and of the people and the people would have cried for Spanish blood!" "My lord we might use this to our advantage by supplying another message saying that Sir Walter will be here as opposed to here," said Marlowe, using different positions of his hands to illustrate his meaning. "It will then be Sir Walter's pleasure to do the surprising."

"And," added Lord Burghley, "it would cause the Spanish to doubt a link in their espionage network. Can you arrange the necessary for all of this?"

"I can my lord, but I will need the original to copy the handwriting. One other thing, Baines is holding someone in Kent to force their family to do his message carrying. Could your lordship inquire about this and let me know by carrier pigeon as soon as possible where the man is held?"

"Consider it done. There are only a few places in Kent where this could happen."

"Very well my lord I will take my leave of you and find Sir Walter."

"He will be aboard the Ark Royal."

Marlowe went back the way he had come, leaving the lamp in its proper place.