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Traitor

Written by Rory Clements

Published by John Murray

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Traitor

RORY CLEMENTS

JOHN MURRAY

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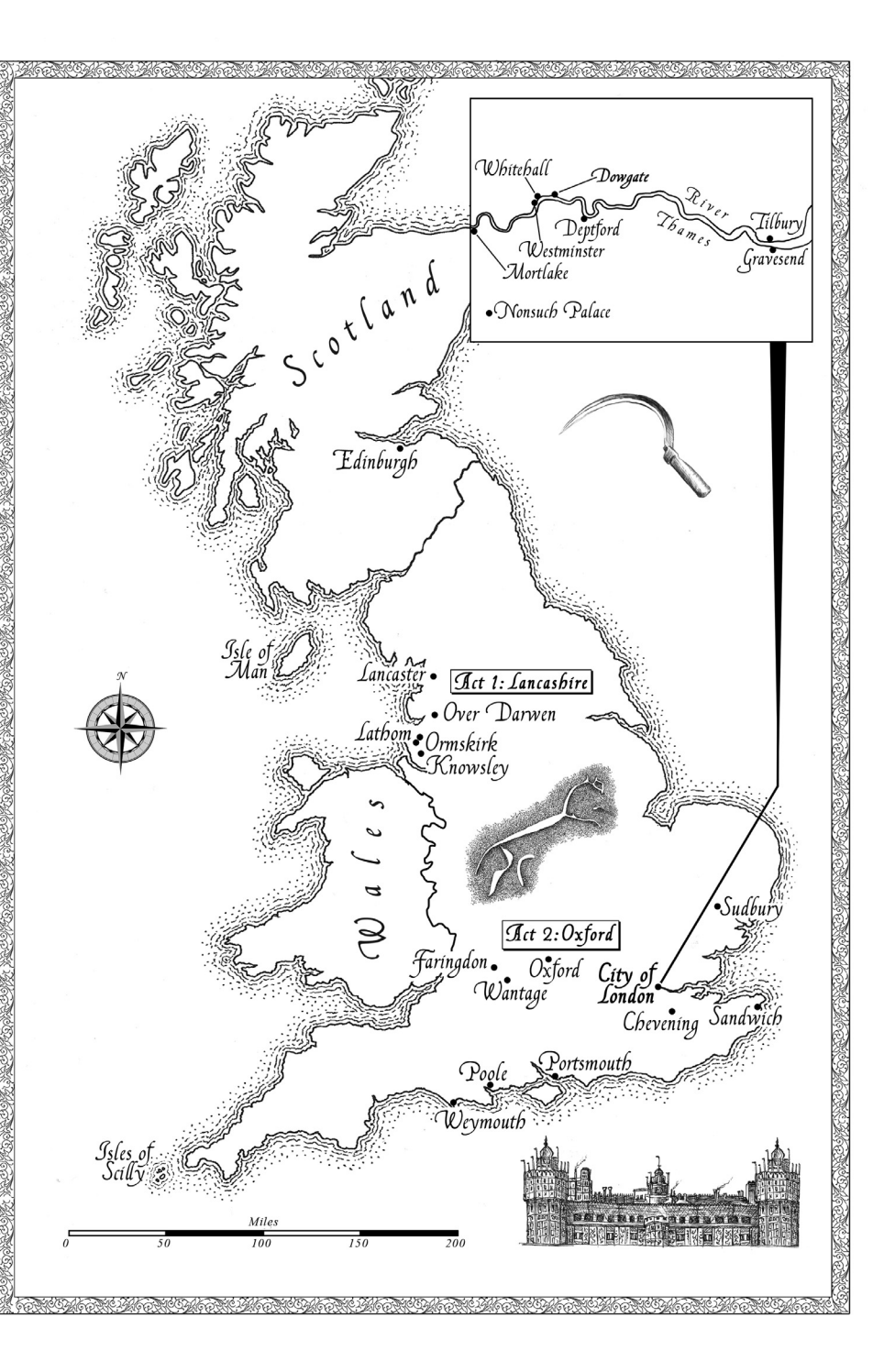
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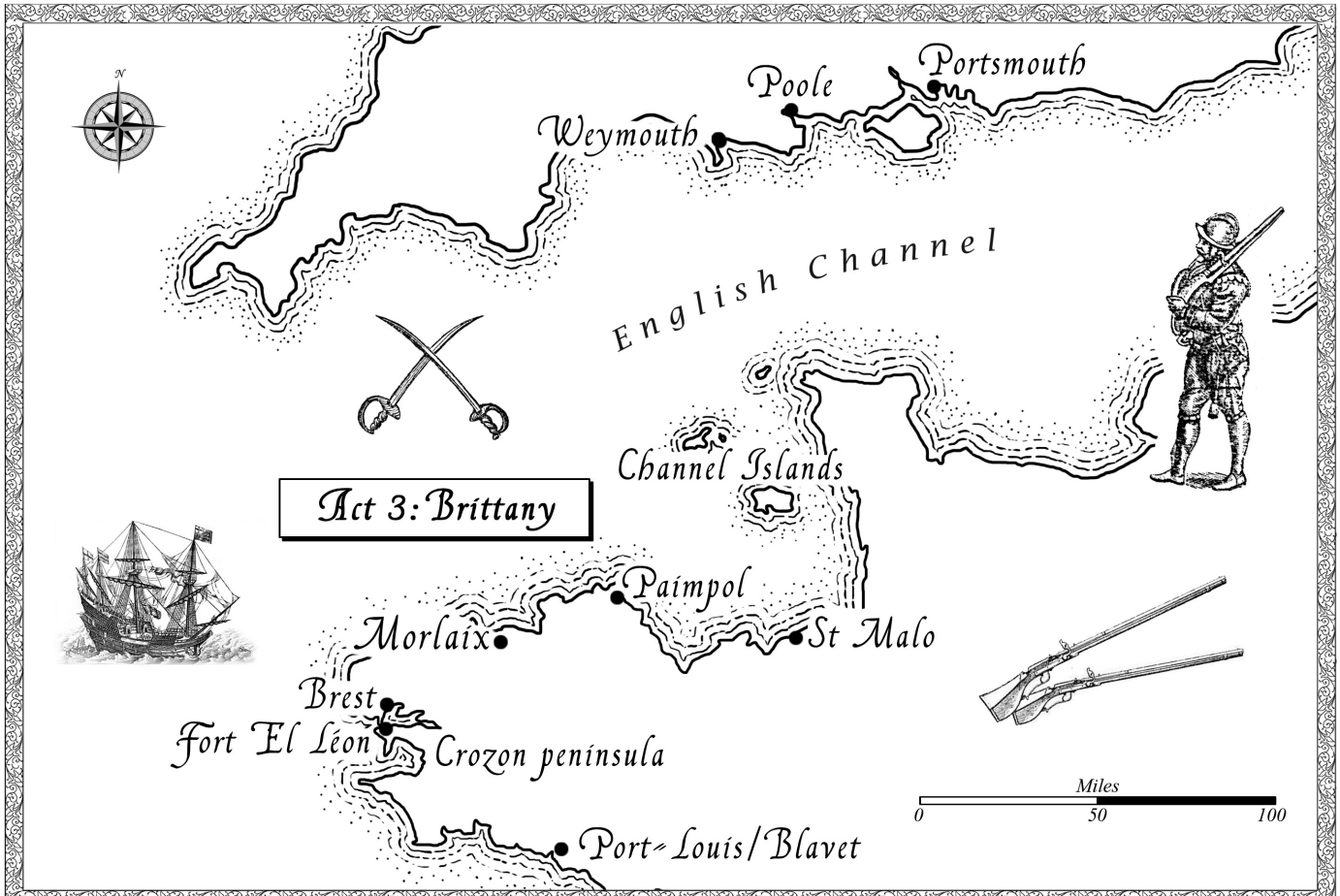
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Act 1

To Lancashire

Chapter 1

William Ivory tossed his cards across the table and picked up the coins. Three shillings, a sixpence, two farthings. He was aware of the resentful glares of the other players, but did not acknowledge them. He had all their money now; there was no point in staying. Without a word of farewell, he thrust the coins into his jerkin pocket, already bulging from the rest of his winnings, and strode to the doorway. It had been a long night and the tavern was heavy with the stench of smoke and ale.

At the doorway, he stopped, surprised by the glare of the dawn sun. He took a deep breath of the fresh air. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he looked about him. He resisted the temptation to pat the side of his dun-coloured jerkin where the perspective glass was secreted, tied hard against his ribs with leather straps. The street was busy, but his keen eyes told him no one was watching him.

The alehouse stood in a narrow alley close to Portsmouth docks. It was wedged between a broad-fronted ship-chandler's shop with sail lofts on one side and, on the other, a noisy whorehouse where mariners paid for stale flesh with the spoils of their long months at sea. Ivory walked to his own house, in the next street. He lived alone, close to the bustle and noise of the dockyard. It gave him the anonymity he needed and the

gaming houses he craved. He took out a heavy iron key to open the door, then changed his mind. He would eat before sleeping.

It was a cool morning, braced by a breeze blowing in from the Channel. He should have seen the watcher. At sea, he could spot a Spanish ship on the horizon hours before other men, yet here on land his senses failed him. He did not detect the presence of a predator ten paces away, nor did he see the pistol he held in the capacious folds of his cloak.

Ivory drew on a long, ornately carved pipe, filled with rich tobacco. He had acquired the pipe from natives on the coast of *La Florida* back in '86, in a trade for a common English knife. He exhaled a thin ribbon of smoke, which was instantly gone on the wind. With a last look about him, he stepped back out into the street and headed down towards the quayside to buy herring and bread. A man in his mid-thirties, he wore long whiskers and combed his straggling grey-black hair forward across his brow. He looked what he was: a man of the sea. With his lean chest, his weather-lined hands and salt-engrained cheeks, there was little to pick him out from all the others in this seafaring town. His gait was rolling like all the rest of them: bodies that could never quite forget the pitch and heave of the ocean swell. Only the precise sparkle of his luminous, cornflower-blue eyes set him apart.

All around him there was noise – traders calling wares, seamen singing shanties as they hauled at cables, gulls cawing as they swooped for manavilins of fish, whores and gossips screaming oaths at each other, idlers laughing. Who could hear a heartbeat or a footfall above such a din?

The man with the wheel-lock pistol shuffled forward with the crowd, protected by it. He was unremarkable and stocky, totally enveloped in a cloak that billowed about him like a top-gallant sail and cowled his face. His weapon was loaded and

primed, ready to kill. Not quite yet, though, not here, not now. Not with all these people about. His present name was Janus Trayne, though that was not his real one. He had had many names in his forty years.

He followed his quarry down to the quay where men from a laden smack were hauling their catch ashore. He watched Ivory bargain for a pair of fish, all the while puffing at his strange pipe, then followed him to the baker where he bought a two-pound loaf and some butter.

Janus Trayne was not from these parts. He was in the pay of Spain, though not a native of that nation. His mission was to prise something from William Ivory, some instrument that he kept about his person at all times. Trayne did not understand what it was, nor did he care. All that mattered to him was that his masters would pay handsomely for it – two hundred ducats of gold.

He held back twenty yards from Ivory. His chance would come soon enough.

From the baker's, Ivory walked on a little further, to the cookhouse that stood in the front bank of houses, close to the harbour. The low sun was blanked out by the towering forecastle of an armed merchantman, moored for refitting before its next voyage. At the cookhouse window, he handed over his two fish to a large, sweaty goodwife for scaling, gutting and frying. She tried to engage him in conversation, but he ignored her and walked down to the water's edge to smoke his pipe and wait.

Less than ten minutes later, the drab called to him and he collected his food on a wide trencher, paying her a penny. He settled down in a quiet spot at the waterside to eat. First he laid his smouldering pipe beside him, then, with a sharp blade, he cut into the tender flesh of the herring and released the

succulent juices and savoury smells. He ate slowly, chewing at hunks of bread and butter between bites of fish, taking his time, enjoying the food and the perfect day.

The events of the next minute happened at bewildering speed.

There was the hard touch of a hand on his left shoulder, then the cold muzzle of a pistol at his right temple. Ivory dropped the trencher from his lap and tried to scramble back from the assailant.

'Give me the instrument.' The voice was low, growling. 'You know exactly what I want, Ivory.'

So they had come for him at last. But it was not him they wanted, it was the glass.

'I do not have it,' he said, wrapping his arms around his chest as he leant away from the pistol. 'Not here—'

'Then I will cut it from you.'

And suddenly there was the shadow of another man, bearing down on them like a clawed demon. The demon's talon-like right hand pulled the assailant's pistol down while the left arm came past his neck, across his chest. Trayne might have been strong, but the demon was quicker. Clenching a blade, he thrust upwards into Trayne's wrist. The man gasped with shock and pain as the sharp steel sliced up through tendons and flesh, into the very bone of his right arm. His gasp turned to a deep howl. The wadding and ball rolled harmlessly from the muzzle of his pistol. His finger pulled the trigger, igniting powder with a flash and a loud report. Fire spat out and smoke billowed, but there was no shot. The gun fell from his weakened grasp.

Ivory watched in fascinated horror. Within the space of a few seconds a man had held a pistol to his head and now that very man was squatting there with a knife protruding through his wrist, a knife thrust into him by a second assailant.

The wounded man leapt to his feet with surprising agility. Gritting his teeth, he wrenched the knife from his wrist. Blood gushed forth, splattering across the harbour wall. He hesitated a moment, instinctively shielding his face, then he ran, followed by a trail of blood drops.

Ivory watched him go, mouth agape in astonishment. Then he looked at the man who had saved him. It was a face he had not seen in many years, not since they had sailed the world together. A face he had had no interest in seeing again.

'Boltfoot Cooper! What in the name of God are you doing here?'

'Saving your life, Mr Ivory. Saving your worthless, poxy life.'

Chapter 2

'In daylight? On the quayside where anyone might have seen what he was doing? Christ's tears, Mr Shakespeare, your man Cooper has surpassed himself this time.'

'It was necessary, Sir Robert. The man was about to blow a hole in Ivory's head.'

'Gunfire, blood all over the quayside . . . If this reached Her Majesty's ears, she would be most unhappy. She will not have men knifed in her towns and seaports in full view of passers-by.'

'It was *necessary*, Sir Robert,' Shakespeare repeated, slightly too sharply. 'In defence of the realm . . .' His voice trailed off, wondering whether he overstepped the mark in talking to Elizabeth's first minister in such tones. 'Forgive me for speaking plain.'

Sir Robert Cecil laughed, a dry little laugh. He was small in stature, not much over five feet tall, with a hunch of the shoulder that he tried to disguise by pulling back his head. He had a tidy spade of a beard and dark, inquiring eyes. John Shakespeare, six feet tall, with flowing hair, towered over him as they walked across the beautiful inner courtyard of Nonsuch Palace. Water gushed from a marble fountain. The walls seemed to close in with their profusion of intricate plaster reliefs of figures both noble and godly. Across the court and dominating all was the

statue of the Queen's father, Great Henry, his menacing, magnificent figure seeming to hold the very gods of Olympus in thrall.

As if on cue, the Queen herself emerged into the sunlight from the state rooms on the far side of the courtyard. She wore a French gown of white pearl, flourished with gold and silver, embroidered with tiny harts and stags. In her hand she carried a fan of white feathers with a handle of ornate gold. She shone in the sun's glare, an aureole among the courtiers who thronged around her.

The Queen stopped a moment to breathe in the fresh spring air. Her courtiers stopped, too, responsive to her every movement. Chief among them was her favourite, the Earl of Essex, markedly taller than his companions. His eyes flitted from his sovereign to the bosom of a young lady-in-waiting two steps behind. On Elizabeth's other side stood the bluff, handsome figure of Sir Thomas Heneage, her greatest friend and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. He was whispering some tittle-tattle in her ear and she smiled.

Also there was Sir Edward Coke. As the Queen stepped forward again, Coke moved too, a spring in his step, puffed up from his appointment that very morning as Attorney-General. Cecil's father, Lord Burghley, hobbled behind, the pain of his gout evident in his expression. Southampton clasped Essex's arm with one hand and with the other ran his silky fingers through his own long hair. Behind them Shakespeare spotted the squat, white-haired figure of the torturer Richard Topcliffe, and shuddered. No courtier's elegant attire could disguise that feral, stale-sweat brutality.

Bile rose in Shakespeare's gullet at the sight of the white-haired Queen's servant. Their paths had crossed too many times and the loathing between them ran deep. Topcliffe had done his utmost to persecute Shakespeare and his family,

believing them tainted by Catholicism. Shakespeare, in turn, had seen the inside of the private torture chamber Topcliffe maintained in his Westminster home. It was there that he had brought the natural father of Shakespeare's adopted children to the point of death with his foul instruments of rope and iron. Shakespeare could smell the stench of pain and blood that hung there even now, and knew the torturer would not rest until he had destroyed him and all he held dear. As the royal party drew near, Topcliffe caught his eye and smirked. Shakespeare's expression did not change, did not reveal his revulsion, nor his contempt.

He and Cecil both bowed low and went down on one knee at the Queen's approach. She looked at them and for the briefest of moments her eye caught John Shakespeare's. At this proximity he could not but notice what he had not seen from a distance – how marked her face had become by time, how tarnished her glow. Her golden hair was dry, her skin coated white, like a badly rendered façade. She did not acknowledge him, simply looked away and walked on with her courtiers and the ladies in her train. Topcliffe turned as he swept past and threw Shakespeare a half-smile that denoted nothing more than loathing and disdain.

Cecil rose and touched his hand to Shakespeare's elbow to signify that he, too, should rise. The statesman's gaze followed the departing group.

'My lord of Essex has been swearing eternal love and devotion to his virgin queen,' Cecil said in a low voice in Shakespeare's ear. 'Yet before the hour is out, he will have *that* wanton's skirts about her waist with never a thought for Her Royal Majesty.' He nodded towards the woman whose breasts Essex had been contemplating. The corners of Cecil's mouth turned down in distaste. 'Come, John, let us walk in the gardens, away from ears.'

Shakespeare was surprised by the note of bitterness in Cecil's words. His enmity for Essex was well known, but it was unlike him to reveal so much of his inner feelings.

They ambled through the gatehouses. Chaffinches and sparrows sang with the promise of spring. Fruit trees burgeoned with blossom buds. From the outside, the fantastical turrets of Nonsuch Palace dazzled beneath blue slate and red-brick chimneys. Cecil patted the spaniel at his heels and then glanced up at a large lanner falcon that swooped and ranged above them and around them, hunting for food. He shook his neat head in admiration and acknowledged the falconer, who bowed to him. Cecil pointed out the bird to Shakespeare.

'That is my lanner, John. Is she not comely?' He paused and looked around. There was no one within earshot. 'So tell me, now that we are in a quiet place, what do we know about the attacker?'

'Nothing, except that he wore a large cloak, which concealed a German wheel-lock pistol, which we have. He ran like a hare. Boltfoot, with his club-foot, had no hope of giving chase. Anyway, he was more concerned to stay with Ivory.'

'Did they follow the blood trail?

'As far as it went, into the next street. After that, nothing.'

'Would they recognise the man again?'

'Unlikely – he closed his cloak about his face. This was no common felon, but a mercenary, a hired man.'

'From Spain?'

'We have no way of knowing.'

'But not a common footpad after Mr Eye's gold?'

Shakespeare grimaced. 'No. Mr Ivory confirmed that he demanded the perspective glass. However, there is still a chance of identifying the assassin. Here . . .' He withdrew the would-be killer's pistol and handed it to Cecil. 'It is a fine-wrought piece.'

Cecil handed it back. 'Give it to my man, Clarkson. He will pass it on to Frank Mills to deal with. I have other requirements of you. This incident in Portsmouth has worried me greatly. Where are Mr Eye and the perspective glass now?'

'I have them both safe, Sir Robert.'

'And you do not think they should be parted? The glass kept safe in the Tower, perhaps?'

Shakespeare shrugged his shoulders. 'That is for you to decide.'

'But I would appreciate your opinion, John.'

'Well, the glass is our priority, but Mr Ivory is also of great value to us. It seems rational to keep them together.'

Cecil smiled briefly. 'My thoughts exactly. Keep the Eye and the implement secure. Tell no one where they are except Clarkson. And beware of men in cloaks with scarred wrists. I fear we will need Mr Eye again very soon.'

Shakespeare bowed solemnly. There were times when Cecil required obedience, not debate, and this was one of them. Many men loathed him, calling him Robin Crookback or Robertus Diabolus – mocking names, spoken with a tinge of fear – but there were few who did not respect him. Shakespeare went further. He liked to think he understood Cecil. He worked for him because he believed they shared some human creed and aims – peace and justice, the security of the realm, a prosperous commonwealth, the hoped-for triumph of good over evil. And if that sometimes meant being harder and more devious than the enemy, well, so be it.

'I must tell you, John,' Cecil continued, 'that this perspective glass has assumed great significance. I do believe the very fate of the realm might rest on our strange instrument. We have culverins, we have ships-of-war, we have courage, yet this glass is our greatest weapon of all – for we alone have it. As the sparrowhawk's eye provides its killing vantage, so it is for us.'

Shakespeare considered what he knew of the perspective glass. It was made of stiffened pig-hide and it concealed curved pieces of glass, like those used in spectacles to remedy feeble sight. These glass discs were precisely ground, highly polished and so conformed that, when a man looked in one end of the tube, the impossible happened – distant objects drew near.

As chief officer in Cecil's intelligence network, he was one of a mere half-dozen men privileged to have used it. It had been at Greenwich for a demonstration in front of the Queen. When Shakespeare looked through it, he had clearly seen the markings of a deer a mile away and the freckles of a maiden hanging out her mother's washing. Astonished, he had gazed through it for a full minute and then handed it back to Cecil suddenly, as though the glass contained some magic that might burn his hand or eye.

That had been a year ago. The next Shakespeare had heard of it was last month. Cecil had ordered him to assign Boltfoot Cooper to protect the glass's keeper, William Ivory. Word had reached England from a spy in the court of King Philip that Spain had become aware of the glass's existence – and wanted it.

'We will keep Ivory and the glass safe.'

'Good. Your man Boltfoot did well. But I must now tell you why I am so concerned that we will need the glass again very soon.' He signalled to a liveried servant, who had been dogging their steps at a discreet distance. The man approached and bowed. 'Give Mr Shakespeare the paper.'

The servant proffered a document. Shakespeare took it and instantly recognised his associate Frank Mills's hand. It was a decoded intercept. He read it quickly and began to go cold. His eyes met Cecil's.

Boltfoot lost Ivory in the busy street of Shoreditch. One moment, they were riding at a slow walk, a little way apart, the

next he was gone into the throng of people, livestock and wagons.

'A plague of God,' Boltfoot rasped beneath his breath. He was furious with himself. Progress had been slow. It had taken them over three days to get home to Dowgate from Portsmouth. And now, just an hour out on the way to join Jane and the family in the safety of Suffolk, he had let his guard drop. Standing up in his stirrups, he tried to look above the heads of the mob.

Boltfoot's hand went to the hilt of his cutlass. He wished very much to do some injury to Ivory. Well, he would just have to find him; even among this teeming mass of humanity and animals, there was only a limited number of places he could be. He kicked on into the crowd.

Shakespeare read the message again. It was from a French intelligencer in Brittany to his masters at the royal court of Henri IV, and it revealed that the Spanish army of Don Juan del Águila was building a fort on the southern headlands that dominated the entrance to Brest Harbour.

'The fort is almost complete, John, and will be powerfully equipped with long-range cannon and at least four companies of men. The Spanish will control the entrance to Brest Harbour – and will hold the port in thrall. If Brest is taken, with its deep-water harbour, they will be able to assemble a far more deadly armada against us than was attempted in '88. And they will have liberty to pick their time, when the wind and weather are in their favour. Hawkins tells me the great danger is that the harbour is to windward of Plymouth, so their ships could use the prevailing winds to make a sudden attack. I do not know how we could withstand such a force. Our coffers are empty, our fleet is in disarray, our land is overrun with verminous bands of rogues and vagabonds. These are straitened times. *Dangerous* times.'

'What can be done?'

'What indeed? Sir Roger Williams has been sent secretly to survey the fort to see whether it can be taken. But the omens are not good. The forces we have in Brittany are woefully lacking after four years of skirmishing. General Sir John Norreys is down to his last thousand men, of which half are non-effective through sickness or wounds. They are holed up in the fishing port of Paimpol. Only now does Her Majesty see the importance of this forgotten war. She is summoning Norreys home to confer.'

'What will you recommend, Sir Robert?'

'That he must be reinforced. With seasoned men, new recruits, a siege train and a fleet. I have already sent out an order to the lords lieutenant to recruit men throughout southern England. And we will move a number of battle-hardened troops from the Low Countries. But it may all be too little, for we will be up against a well-equipped Spanish army and a constant patrol of galleons. Brittany is in turmoil, with French troops on both sides. Marshal Aumont's army supports the English, but Mercoeur's Catholic League militias are with the Spanish. In such circumstances of disarray, we need every advantage we can muster.'

'The perspective glass.'

'As Erasmus told us, in the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king. So in the world of dull-eyed pigeons, the hawk's-eye kills.'

Shakespeare bowed. Ivory would be protected until he was needed. It would not be easy. He was prickly and churlish and would not take kindly to being nursemaided by Cooper. Reports suggested he lived a solitary life, communing with his fellow man only when he wanted a game of cards or a whore to satisfy his carnal desires. No one would ever have noted him except for his one great talent: his eyesight. Vision so precise

that his crewmates called him simply Eye, or Mr Eye. Even before the perspective glass, Drake had used his skills to good effect on the great circumnavigation of the globe. The glass had given him almost godlike powers to observe the land and sea.

One thing puzzled Shakespeare.

'Sir Robert, could we not make more perspective glasses now that we have the secret? Surely the mechanism can be copied? There could be one on every ship-of-war and in every coastal fortress.'

Cecil shook his head impatiently. 'No. It is out of the question. The Queen won't have it, nor will the Privy Council and neither will I. Protecting *one* glass is hard enough. How would we keep safe a dozen or more? How long would it be before one of them fell into Spanish hands – and then where would our advantage be?' He stopped in the shade of a new-leafed horse-chestnut tree. 'You realise, of course, John, that the incident in Portsmouth was but the beginning. There will be other attempts.'

'Indeed.'

'But protecting Mr Eye is not sufficient. There are two other men who must also be safeguarded – the men who constructed the perspective glass. If the Spanish cannot get to the glass itself, they may seek to abduct one or both of the men who made it and learn their secrets.'

'Dee and Digges . . .' Shakespeare muttered.

The two most learned sciencers in England were Dr John Dee, alchemist, spiritual seeker, stargazer and ingenious deviser of machines, and Thomas Digges, mathematician, military theorist, architect of forts and professor of navigation. Digges had been Dee's student. Some men said he had now surpassed his master in the sciences.

Dee and Digges, both remarkable but very different. In 1580,

fourteen years ago, Lord Burghley – Cecil's father and Lord Treasurer of England – had commissioned the two men to devise a perspective glass. They had assured Burghley that, with the best glass crafters and with time, the device was possible. There were difficulties, however, mainly in calculating the exact conformation of the glasses and in grinding and polishing them with the required precision. Dee had given up the struggle, leaving the country for Prague. Only after his return, and with the onset of open warfare with Spain, did he and Digges begin to overcome their difficulties. The invasion attempt by the Armada accelerated their efforts, which at last came good.

'Do we know where they are, Sir Robert?'

'Thomas Digges is at his country home, in Kent. He is writing a new volume on warfare science, but he ails. Frank Mills is organising his protection. Two men watch him day and night and Frank will follow them there.'

'And Dee?'

Cecil looked pained. 'Ah, yes, Dee. He is more difficult, and that is your task. Since his return from Bohemia, he has been impoverished. He continually solicits my father and Her Majesty for grants or church livings. It is utterly tedious. He wants the chancellorship of St Paul's or the mastership of St Cross, but he will have neither. His dabbling in the dark arts makes him most unsuitable for such positions and, anyway, he is an irritant. In truth we wish him away. My father has hinted to him that he might have the wardenship of the collegiate church in Manchester. Dee has now gone there to spy out the land, so to speak.'

'That is almost as remote as Prague,' Shakespeare said wryly.

Cecil laughed. 'I believe he views the prospect with some reluctance, but it is a good living with extensive lands, and he has few options. It would remove his infernal begging and complaining.'

The lanner at last landed on the arm of the young statesman's falconer with a fluttering of wings and took the shred of meat.

'Come, John, for we must talk on this further and Sir Thomas Heneage must be included. As he is Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the palatinate of Lancashire is his domain – and there are local sensitivities in the county. I have asked him to detach himself from Her Majesty's presence and wait on us in my apartments.'

Ivory's grey gelding stood patiently in one of the smaller, quieter streets, to the north of Hog Lane. The animal was tethered to a post. Boltfoot slid from the saddle and looked around. There was only one house it could be, the one with the youth sitting outside, idly drinking a gage of ale.

'How much for a woman?'

The youth eyed him up and down with scornful boredom. 'For a maggot like you? Sixpence. Tuppence for me, the rest for the wench. Take your pick?'

Boltfoot handed him two coins and went into the dingy hovel. Three girls sat on the floor in the sawdust. The room stank of sweat and scent. Without thinking, the whores bared their breasts to him. He ignored them and examined his surroundings. There were two interior doors, one closed.

Boltfoot pushed open the closed door. In front of him, less than a yard from his face, was Ivory's white arse. His hose and stocks were down about his calves and ankles and he was at his business with a plump young woman who was moaning by rote. Boltfoot laughed. 'You've got five minutes, Ivory, then I'm dragging you out.' He closed the door again. He had his man.