

THE
SCAR-CROW
MEN

SWORDS OF ALBION

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THE
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MEN

SWORDS OF ALBION

MARK CHADBOURN



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For Elizabeth, Betsy, Joe, and Eve

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PROLOGUE

Fast the Candlewick Street plague pit they race, red crosses blooming on doors like spring poppies, and the words *God have mercy* daubed in scarlet paint on house after house. Breath burning in their chests, they stumble and fall in the night-dark alleys only to haul themselves up on shaking legs to run again.

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

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

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

Marlowe is a playwright, one of the most famous in England, but he has other work, secret, dirty, and dangerous. In intermittent shafts of moonlight, Marlowe’s face appears too pale, his sensitive features etched with a profound sadness that is surprising in a man still in his twenties. His eyes are dark against his almost translucent skin, the clipped black beard and moustache as wispy as the first face hair of a boy.

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

Lights dance in the dark, drawing closer.

“We could hide and take them by surprise,” the strongman says with a wavering voice that displays no enthusiasm. Under his working clothes, a loose coat over a shirt belted with cord, his sweat is cold.

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

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

The strongman urges his companion on with a rough shove. “We shall not outrun them.”

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

The route between the filthy hovels is as black as pitch, but Marlowe has run it many times to avoid the constables and beadles, the drunken cutpurses and the low men who have lent him money. Continuing west, they pass the open shutter of a cellar crammed to bursting with the poor, huddled in the dark in the reek of their own sweat. Pale faces glance up from the gloom, eyes wide with hopelessness.

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

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

Marlowe and Wainwright tumble into the candlelit cathedral and slam the creaking door behind them. The echoes rumble like thunder through the cavernous interior of the grand old building. Their breath ragged, they inhale the ghost of incense. With trembling fingers, the spies draw the bolts light-

ning-fast a moment before something crashes against the oak with the force of a carriage. The two men are hurled across the worn flagstones by the impact, knocking the wind out of them. Whatever is outside continues to heave with a steady, deafening rhythm.

Thoom. Thoom. Thoom. A funeral drum.

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

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

“It will buy us a moment or two. That is all I need.” Fighting back his queasy dread, Marlowe runs down the nave’s great length. The locals call it Paul’s Walk, and it is nearly six hundred feet from end to end, the third-longest cathedral in Europe, so the clergy boast. Past the scars of the destruction inflicted by Old Henry’s Dissolution and the Chantries Acts he races, under the grand vaulted roof and alongside the *triforium*—the galleries of shallow arches along opposing walls that give the cathedral a grandeur that makes the playwright wish he was a Christian with a God who would listen to his pleas. He fixes his attention on the stained glass of the great Rose Window at the east end and hopes to see a glimmer of dawn, although he knows in his heart there is still a good half hour to go.

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

“Put it out of your mind. We have little time left to us. Spend it summoning whatever pleasant thoughts you can.” Distracted, Marlowe searches along the nave.

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

Marlowe tries to ignore the sour taste of failure. He recalls the hope for success that he felt as he readied himself for the mission at sunset, but as in

all his dealings with the Enemy he had also prepared himself for the worst. Now it is a matter of make-do and hope once again. Against his hip, the sack weighs heavily. Would its contents be enough to turn the tide of events?

The crashes grow louder. He glances behind and sees the door will not hold much longer.

Grasping a candlestick, the playwright drives the shadows back until he finds the object of his search in the north aisle of the choir. A wooden plaque has been fastened to a pillar to mark the grave of Sir Francis Walsingham. A rush of memories surprises the playwright with their intensity. Though there had never been any love lost between him and England's former spymaster, he still thought the meagre funeral had been a sad end for a powerful man.

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

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

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

From the sack tied to his side, Marlowe draws a pot of ink, and with his quill defaces the grave.

In the beginning was the Word, he writes.

Wainwright squats beside him and babbles, "Why are we here? Why do you do this?"

The pounding on the door ceases abruptly. They both find the silence that follows somehow worse.

“Is there nothing that can save us?” the strongman pleads. “I could turn myself to God and pray for forgiveness.”

“If you feel there is some good in it, then do it.” The younger man’s tone is warm and he hopes it will comfort, but he sees a shadow cross his companion’s face and knows he has accepted the suggestion too readily. Wainwright begins to shake until Marlowe puts a steadying hand on his shoulder. “We should go our separate ways. That at least will give the other a fighting chance,” the playwright urges in a quiet, calm voice.

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

“I have no regrets, either. What will be, will be.”

The harsh grating of slowly drawn bolts echoes along the vast nave. There is no one near the door. Marlowe and Wainwright jump up and shake hands before racing back along the nave, Wainwright to the north door, Marlowe to the south. Crouching behind a stone pillar, the playwright can just make out his counterpart’s shadowy form in the gloom on the far side of the cathedral.

The east doors crash open. The pews fall aside like autumn leaves in a gale. Footsteps echo off the flags. Whispery voices chill the blood.

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

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

Ice water sluices through Marlowe, and recognition.

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

Run, the voice in the young man’s head insists, but he is gripped by the curious sight. *Why a box? What does it contain?*

For a moment the only sound is the wind whistling through the open doors. Then a low rustling begins. Marlowe spies movement on the edge of

the box's dark interior, one small shape wriggling, another, a third. And then from the depths streams a swarm of black spiders, each one as big as the playwright's hand. Too many for the small box to contain.

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

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

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

The screams grow less. The older spy staggers like a man in his cups, then stumbles to his knees, still slapping at his skin weakly. And when he pitches forwards onto the cold stone, the creatures continue to feed.

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

This is only the start, he thinks.

Dashing to the south door, the younger man wrenches on the cold iron ring and bolts into the warm night. His laboured breathing echoes off the walls of the houses, punctuated by the beat of his Spanish leather shoes on the dried mud. The thunder of blood in his head destroys all thoughts, and it is only when he is scampering south through the winding streets towards Blackfriars that he realises fortune is with him. But not with poor Wainwright.

Marlowe forces aside a tide of regret and grief and guilt. Will always told him he would never thrive as a spy because he felt too keenly. The past no longer matters, with all his failings and his dashed hopes. Only the future is important, and the slim chance that he can do something to avert the coming tragedy.

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

Marlowe reaches the muddy banks of the slow-moving Thames, black under the dark sky, and he thinks of the River Styx. He smells wet wood and

vegetation, and hears the symphonic creaks of straining ropes on the boats moored along the river's edge. Across the water is his own personal heaven, Bankside, and the gardens surrounding the Swan Theatre, and the Rose Theatre, and the stews and dives where he can be the man he wants to be, away from the scrutiny and demands of powerful people.

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

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

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

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

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

From his sack, Marlowe pulls a thick sheaf of papers, tied with string and sealed with red wax. "You must deliver this to my good friend Will Swyfte."

"England's greatest spy?"

Marlowe smiles wryly. "Yes, that is how he is known. But first, and quick, I must write a note to accompany the work." He retrieves the quill and pot of ink from the sack.

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

"What is wrong?" Tom asks. "You are not yourself."

Marlowe laughs at that.

Hearing the pursuit close upon their position, the playwright's hand trembles as he grips the quill. Too much is at stake, and he dare not write plainly. But too obscure and Swyfte will not understand his warning. In the end, he can only trust in his friend's intellect.

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

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

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

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

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

The whispers roll along the riverbank. Shadows emerge from an alley.

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

Ahead, the first gleam of dawn lights the horizon. The spy looks to the bank and sees the grey forms melt away into the still-dark streets.

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

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

The end, the end.

The end.

CHAPTER 1

The man, dangerous and controlled, was moving through what felt like a dream, with devils and wolves, cats and dragons, dolls and jesters on every side. Fantastical faces peered at him from the growing shadows, gloved hands rising to mouths in surprise or intrigue or desire.

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

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

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