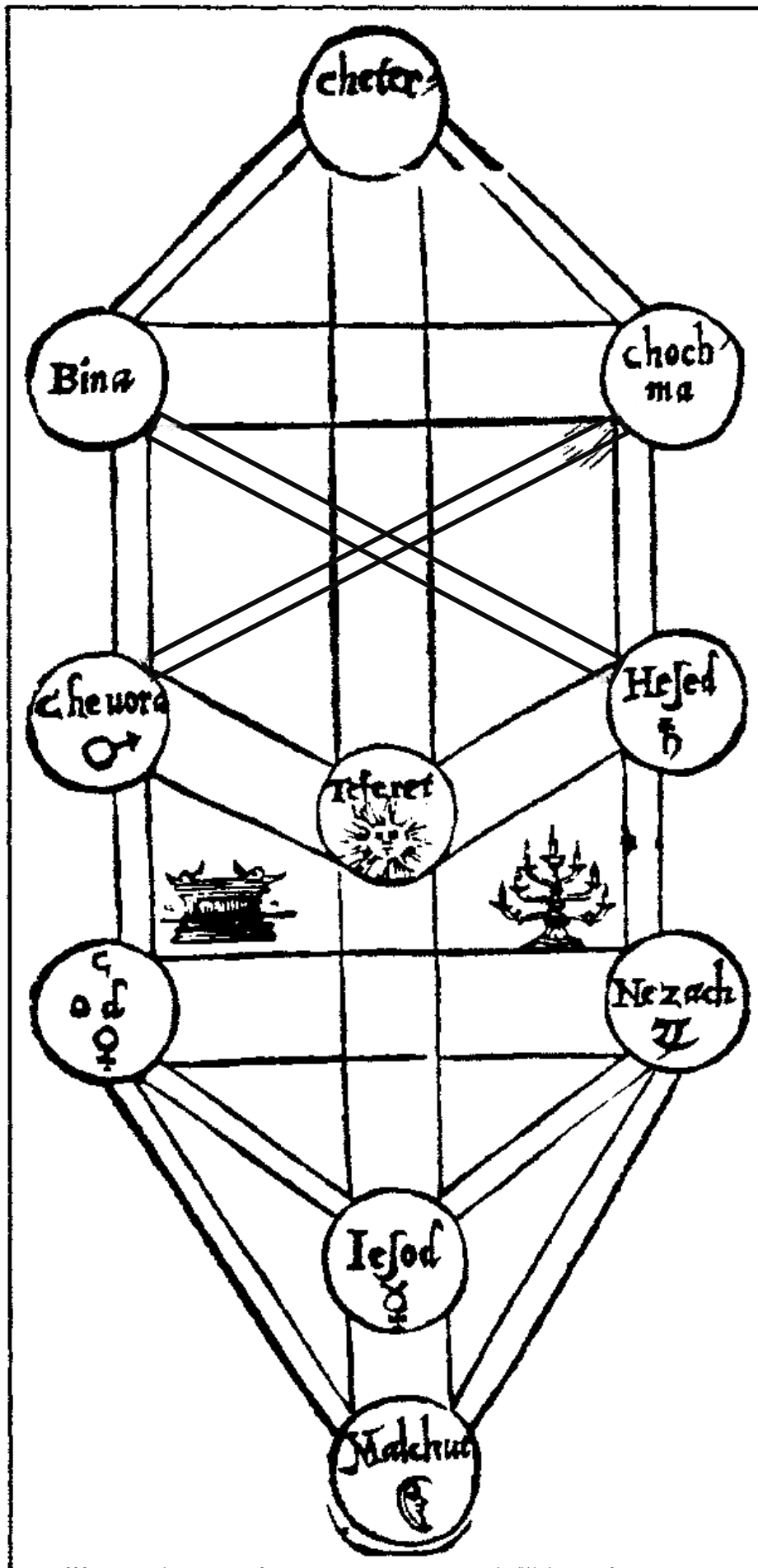


A THEFT OF MEMORY

Asun Álvarez



CAST OF CHARACTERS

Domhnall Mac Fhlannchaidh – now Donnell MacClancy to the English – a former Irish judge in exile in London.

IN THE ENGLISH COURT

Sir Robert Cecil, spymaster, son of the Queen's chief minister, Lord Burghley.

Aemilia Lanier, a musician's wife, mistress to several powerful and not so powerful men.

Doctor Dee, the Queen's sorcerer, now fallen on hard times.

Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, a favourite of the Queen and her would-be successor.

Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, also known as the Wizard Earl, betrothed to Essex's sister.

Peter, the Earl of Northumberland's blackamoor servant.

Queen Elizabeth.

Doctor Lopes, the Queen's physician.

Sir Walter Raleigh, a former favourite of the Queen, now seeking to find his way back into her favour.

Florio, a linguist and translator.

Hariot, a mathematician.

Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton.

OUTSIDE THE COURT

Kit Marlowe, a poet, playwright, and spy in Cecil's service.

Willis, one of Cecil's secretaries.

Widow Bull, the owner of a rooming house in Deptford.

Simon Forman, an astrologer.

Frizer and Skeres, spies.

Thomas Symonds, a merchant.

Judith Roddick, a London woman.

Samuel, her husband.

Eli, their companion.

Nathan, a young man.

Will Shakespeare, a minor poet and aspiring playwright.

Thomas Dekker, a playwright.

Thomas Kyd, a playwright.

Thomas Nashe, a playwright.

William Anes, a merchant.

Sir Thomas Walsingham, a landed gentleman.

IN VENICE

Isaac da Silva, a rabbi and cabalist.

Diana Zen, a courtesan.

MALKHUT

Kingdom

CHAPTER 1

‘And you are *who*?’

That, thought Domhnall, *is an excellent question*. ‘Donell MacClancy,’ he answered nonetheless, the English version of his name – of his self – that was understood here. Understood but not acceptable, his Irishness as blatant as his red hair and his accent. And suspect.

The warehouse was small and untidy, ill-kept. Dust everywhere, and the usual charms to prevent hobgoblins from tapping the barrels sloppily done. Domhnall wondered whether the owner’s laziness was the reason why he had set up shop in this dreary area or that was merely the outcome of depressing reality. A half-hearted fire had been lit in a corner, yet it was almost as cold in there as outside, with draughts blowing in through the gaps in the rickety walls, the white plumes of their breath visible as they spoke.

The lanky young man who had been left in charge considered Domhnall with eyes narrowed in mistrust. ‘And who is it sends you again –?’

‘My lord O’Connor,’ he repeated for the benefit of the none-too-sharp lad. Questionable too, both that O’Connor was a lord under English law and that he was Domhnall’s lord specifically, but never mind. ‘He wishes to make a standing order of wine for his household, for the new year. He likes his malmsley and sack best, but whatever you deal in will do.’ Beggars can’t be choosers, as they said here.

The young man’s eyes lit up at the potential sale. ‘His household? Where is it?’ No doubt hoping it would be one of the grand houses overlooking the Thames.

‘Billiter Lane.’

‘Oh.’ Somewhat crestfallen at the lowly address, but a sale was still a sale. Particularly this winter, now that the plague was back. ‘You have come a long way.’

Domhnall was about to spout some rubbish about having heard of the excellence of their wines when the owner walked in. ‘That’s because no Leadenhall traders will do deals with *lord O’Connor*,’ the older man mocked. ‘A bankrupt Popish scoundrel, in arrears with half the vintners in the city.’ Which was not true: O’Connor owed all of them by now.

The vintner eyed Domhnall, his smile like lye. ‘No wine for the likes of you here. I will not have dogs, fairies, or the Irish in my shop. *Out*.’

Domhnall stepped into the icy air and sighed, stamping his feet against the frozen mud outside. He had gone far out, to the city outskirts, but it had been too much to hope that O’Connor’s reputation had not spread yet to every last corner of the traders’ grapevine: the man had been using his bills as kindling, not even glancing at them, for months. A Catholic Irish exile, skint and up to his neck in debt – nobody would touch him now. And the creditors kept knocking at the door.

A flurry of fine snow blew into his face as started walking back to the city, the way he had got here. A barge up the river would be quicker, but he had little else to do and not much coin to spare. Nor did he feel like informing O’Connor that no wine was forthcoming, and that his current options were marriage to a rich woman or Newgate prison. Unless O’Connor could persuade Elizabeth to allow him to return to Ireland, or wheedle more cash out of his fellow Irish lords. Both of which were unlikely, now that war in Ireland was all but declared.

Traffic on the Oxford road was lighter than usual, and most of it outbound – this outbreak of the plague was the worst in the more than three years Domhnall had been in London, and those who could were getting out to escape the city’s noxious fumes. He kept to the side of the road, trying to avoid the oxen, dray horses and coaches and the trail of turds they left in their wake, the jostling drivers and spitting coachmen, the sudden unwieldy flock of geese. He covered the bottom half of his face with his cowl as a cart laden with coffins, marked as plague victims, creaked by.

Out. He stared at the flat fields on either side of the road, where cows grazed on the frosted grass and smoke rose from the occasional cottage, and thought of Ireland. As he had never ceased to do since he came here, differently every time: to the extent that it was no longer really a thought but rather a backdrop, the weather of his mind, changing with his moods.

He had kept yearning, at first, for the time when he would be able to go back home. Even though he knew full well that there was no *back* and no *home* for him. He had been exiled by his overlords, and both an Irish poet and a mighty Sidhe, one of the oldest powers on the island, had confirmed that he would not return. There was no denying it if he faced up to it: Ireland – or at least, the Ireland he knew, the Ireland where he had grown and held a place of respect – was doomed. And he could not even be there as she fell.

When he could no longer deny this knowledge, he had fallen into a black despair for months, not least because he was so alone here, without his family. Yet he still held a position in O'Connor's household, and the sheer ingrained pull of duty – however empty, however much of a mockery the whole thing now was – had kept him going.

The blackness had gradually given way to grey, so that the memory of Ireland no longer felt like a stab in the heart, but a mere dull soreness at the back of his mind. Yet the stirrings of grief and shame and guilt never abated. Sometimes waves of burning wrath engulfed him, mixed with the terrible fear that he was forgetting Ireland, and, with her, forgetting himself, the man he had been and no longer was. The rage and terror drove him out of his pitiful room in the middle of the night, to stride furiously along the river into the small hours, heedless of the curfew, until sheer exhaustion blunted his mind.

Ireland was a blinder spot within this blind limbo that he now inhabited. But he fiercely missed Gráinne, his sister, and Martín, his brother-in-law. They had wanted to stay with him, but had come to understand that London was no safe place to raise a small child – much less when her father was a Spanish werewolf – as it grew more inhospitable and dangerous by the day. He smiled despite himself, imagining Martín's sputtering protest at being described as a

werewolf. He had still been so easy to tease, when he and Gráinne had left for Bristol with the baby. He wondered what Sadhbh – Sabina, Martín called her – his almost four-year-old niece, would look like now. And had to think of something else, it hurt so much.

He heard the strains of a ballad coming up from further down the road, a popular tune, often repurposed for the latest broadside. As he came closer, he could make out the sung words:

*I am a poor prisoner condemned to die,
Ah woe is me woe is me for my great folly,
Fast fettered in irons in place where I lie.
Be warned, young wantons, hemp passes green holly.*

Poetry here did not have the magical power it had in Ireland, or at least the English had forgotten about it. Yet his chest tightened and a lump rose in his throat. He had tried very hard not to think about the place further up the road, yet now it was all he could think about, even though it was not a hanging day. But Tyburn Tree was close enough to for broadside sellers to ply their trade here anyway, the shadow of the gallows adding that edge of thrill to their bloody doggerels.

And suddenly, he was there again, that November day that had been almost as cold as this, when he had gone to that terrible field to see his lord die.

O'Connor had refused to come, out of fear of displeasing the Queen who held his pursestrings and his fate, or unable to stomach watching the death of his fellow countryman and peer, or both. So Domhnall had been alone in the midst of the jeering crowd as O'Rourke was dragged through the mud, tied to a sled like the carcass he was about to become. Then shoved and elbowed and spat on as he tottered his way through the rabble and up the small ladder to the gallows.

O'Rourke, betrayed by the King of Scotland, abandoned by the King of Spain, scorned by the King of the Sidhe, had been magnificent even in his ruin, standing proud in his filthy tatters and his bruises. They had sent the archbishop of Cashel to try and make him repent:

O'Rourke had laughed, in Irish, that no Franciscan turned Protestant and, worse, a betrayer and a lickarse was going to absolve him.

O'Rourke was hanged from a willow withe instead of rope, as was the custom in Ireland, at his request, then drawn and quartered. A traitor to the Queen he had never recognised, whose image he had literally dragged through the mud and mocked.

And Domhnall had stood there and watched as O'Rourke's guts were torn out of his body and flung onto a burning brazier while he was still alive.

Had he wanted to catch O'Rourke's eye, so he could take comfort in a familiar face near him in his last crossing? Domhnall didn't know if O'Rourke had seen him – if he had, he had shown no sign of it. Or had he wanted to bear witness, somehow – to what? His own horror and pity at the fate of his chieftain, the man known as Brian of the Ramparts because he was so adept at destruction and little else? Or his grief at the passing of the world that had made men like O'Rourke?

And made me, too.

Domhnall had been a judge in Ireland – a master brehon, O'Rourke's own judge –, respected and feared, a link in a chain of knowledge and power that stretched back, unbroken, to an unthinkable distant past. *Until now*. He had been trained from childhood and stood for a law that had endured for centuries and was now being destroyed by English force and Irish blindness. As he had found out for himself, being sent into exile by O'Rourke and the other Irish lords because his insistence on justice had been too disruptive, too disturbing, too much.

And now he ran errands for O'Connor, another exiled Irish lord in denial. All he had to judge in his current position was O'Connor's incompetence in dealing with his massive debts while trying to keep him from prison and starvation.

Most harshly, though, he judged himself.

If I hadn't been so stubborn about investigating those murders. If I had been more politically astute. If I hadn't meddled with the Sidhe. If I hadn't allowed Gráinne and Martín to follow me to England. If I'd been there when Gráinne needed me and not abandoned her to Father. If I had handled my affairs better and made more money.

He was an aging, pointless nobody nearing fifty, an accursed exile, alone in a city where he was a suspicious foreigner, trapped in the duties and rituals of a dying world. With nowhere else to go and no means to get there anyway.

Out. I need a way out.

Despair seized him again, a soul-spasm, at the hopelessness of things. He had been told, by someone who knew what she was talking about, that he had the Sight. It was no gift: he had seen things about the future that he wished he hadn't. All he could see now ahead of him was darkness. For Ireland, for the world, for himself.

It was not yet evening by the time he got back, and already the city was shuttering itself against the night and the cold. O'Connor's household was on Billiter Lane, but Domhnall had insisted on renting a room several streets away, closer to Bishopsgate, in a narrow lane full of other immigrants. O'Connor did not like it, not least because most of Domhnall's neighbours were Protestant refugees from the Continent, Dutch and Flemish and French Huguenots. *You are going to live among strangers?* the appalled chieftain had shouted at Domhnall, using the English word for foreigners in the middle of his Irish tirade. But Domhnall had his own meagre, on-and-off income from what was left of his trade deals with Ireland, thankfully managed by his friend Matthew Williams, and God knew O'Connor's house was crowded enough already. He wanted, most of all, to be left as alone as possible.

Shopwindows in his neighbourhood had to be kept shut – foreigners were allowed to sell, but only if they didn't display their wares – and many of them were permanently boarded anyway after the shops were burnt in the English apprentices' riots and because of the plague.

But the light of candles within seeped out through the cracks, casting long warm bars across the sludgy snow.

He was haunted by words these days, English and French and Dutch and German and Italian, as well as the distant echo of Martín's Spanish curses. He had realised he could not stay under O'Connor's roof when one day the Irish sounded foreign on his own tongue, as when words repeated over and over turn alien and uncanny. He found it oddly comforting, the sound of other languages around him, the plain black clothes and stiff white collars of his neighbours, who treated him with puzzled politeness. A stranger among strangers.

He heard the muted voices of the Widow Beauvais and her two nieces murmuring French prayers as he climbed up the stairs. Someone was cooking, the sharp tang of un-English garlic drifting down the corridor to mingle with something warm and milky and Dutch further down. There was a wooden toy on the floor before his door when he got there: a tiny horse and horseman lying on their side, left behind from one of little Peetje's endless campaigns. Fellow survivors. He picked it up and walked into his room.

The two men had made themselves at home in his absence. The thin one sat on his bed, leafing through one of the very few books Domhnall had brought with him from Ireland. The other one, the muscle, was standing next to the shut window, munching his way through the last of the week's bread.

'I was saving that for tonight,' Domhnall said.

The thin man stood up, dropping the book to the floor. 'Don't worry. You are dining on the Queen's bounty.'

Domhnall knew better than to ask for specifics. 'Can I send word to my master?' he started to ask. But already the taller man was pushing him through the door, and he dropped Peetje's horseman on his way out.

CHAPTER 2

They marched him down to the river, cutting a straight line through Lombard Street and Candlewick Street, then across Thames Street, now almost empty, until they reached the Steelyard. It was quiet there, too – only one lonesome ship was moored by the German merchants' warehouses, its cargo already unloaded. The buildings were spookily silent: trade in the Hanseatic League's London outpost grew more and more sluggish with every day that passed, damaged by the rising anti-foreign feeling and the government sanctions, as England seemed bent on making itself even more of an island.

Down the stairs and onto the wherry that was waiting for them, the watermen ready at the oars. Domhnall clambered onto the flat, shallow barge and settled down for the trip, wondering which way they would go. One of the watermen untied the moorings and pushed them into the current with a pole, steering the wherry on an upriver course. To Westminster, then?

The weak winter sun was setting now, setting the Thames ablaze in its dying burst of light. Around them, barges and wherries and ferries and skiffs were rushing up and down to get their passengers to their destination, the last stragglers before dusk fell. Already he could hear the church bells ringing the curfew: the stately chimes of St Mary Le Bow drifting from afar, and her smaller sisters following suit as the city gates were shut and taverns closed and the watch went out on its rounds.

London had been founded by Trojans, it was said, and then was taken over by their Roman heirs. Who had never crossed the Irish Sea, not finding anything worth their while in Ireland, and Domhnall couldn't really blame them. He imagined, now, as he was rowed up the darkening bridgeless river, watching the scattered point of lights along its banks, what it must have been like, being a Roman soldier posted on this strange strand at the edge of the world.

Standing on the city walls, staring at the unknown wilderness beyond the river that ran like a dark artery through England's heart.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

Poetry did not have magic here as it did in Ireland; yet Domhnall had written poems once, and the city was swimming in words. They flowed and overflowed from mouth to ear to mouth, carried along the tide of the broadsheets and pamphlets and volumes that were published every day, rushed out, wave after wave, from the busy printing houses and the bookstalls that mushroomed in the shadow of St Paul's cathedral, from the stages of the theatres now shut against the plague. They hammered on Domhnall's mind, ghostly melodies he was unable to block out.

My tale was heard, and yet it was not told,

My fruit is fallen, and yet my leaves are green

The elegy of a traitor who had gone up against the Queen too and ended like O'Rourke. He looked up at the clusters of lights of Arundel House to his right as they rowed past, towards whatever it was that awaited him.

Something floated on the water, startling him, some inchoate, confused tangle. *Flotsam, jetsam, spindrift*, the English words kept raining down, relentless. *Wreckage, castoff, scum.*

My youth is spent, and yet I am not old,

I saw the world, and yet I was not seen

A bump. The watermen had raised their oars and were manoeuvring, deftly sliding the wherry alongside a wooden platform. His destination.

My thread is cut, and yet it is not spun

The larger man grabbed him by the elbow, as if Domhnall didn't know how to get off a boat, leading him along like a small child. They had landed at the steps of one of the great houses on the bank, but Domhnall wasn't sure which one – Somerset House? Durham House?

He was pushed up a narrow, dark lane before he could find his bearings, then dragged across the sudden bright span of the Strand with the lights of its inns and houses, up another alley.

The day is past, and yet I saw no sun

A door in a wall, a brick turret looming above it. A garden, and a flight of steps into a building. Then a corridor lit only by the moon beyond the glass lattice of a casement window. Domhnall thought he heard busy domestic noises, and smelt cooking wafting in the air. Not a palace, then, but a large household getting ready for the night.

The thin man knocked on a door, peeked in at the answer. Then nodded for Domhnall to enter. He went in, and the heavy door shut behind him like the rhyme swinging to its close.

And now I live, and now my life is done.

A long, begloomed room, lined with bookshelves. A man sat at a desk at the end, working his way through a sheaf of papers in the light of a lamp. It reminded Domhnall of his own lost study in Ireland, the piles of legal records that kept growing alarmingly high. Yet this man was no judge.

He was hunched over the paper as he scribbled furiously, dwarfed by the massive desk. When he looked up it became clear that it was no trick of the eye: the man was small, and the ugly curve in his back was permanent. He was about thirty, Domhnall knew, but his broad brow, large, slightly bulging eyes, and smooth features made him look uncannily younger. The jibes about him ran rife – that his pregnant mother had been hit by elf-shot, that he had never really ripened into adulthood but was merely an overgrown misshapen embryo that should never had been spawned. Domhnall had heard the names for this man on the street: ape, toad, dwarf, Robin Crookback, or, as the Queen herself called him, pygmy.

This was Robert Cecil, son to the Secretary of State and the Queen's chief minister, the mighty Lord Burghley. Who was being groomed by his aging father to become his successor as he took on more and more of his duties.

Cecil glanced at a note on his desk. 'Donnell MacClancy, an Irishman in O'Connor Sligo's household,' he read out. 'Educated, travelled, fluent in several languages, including Latin. Formerly a judge in his country, dealing in trade on the side, now much come down in the world after incurring the displeasure of his Irish masters for unclear reasons connected to the death of one of O'Connor's younger brothers. Has a sister in Bristol, married to a fellow Irishman, with a small child.' He looked up at Domhnall again with huge, water-green eyes. 'Formerly served the traitor O'Rourke. Said to have had dealings with the Irish fairies. Said to have harboured and protected the Queen's enemies.'

Domhnall's mouth went dry with dread.

'You were in contact with one Edward Kelley, in Ireland,' Cecil said. Referring to the English necromancer who had tortured and almost vivisected Martín. It was not quite a question, but Domhnall answered nonetheless. 'I never came across him. I saw what he did, though.'

Cecil considered Domhnall for a moment. 'You will have heard of Doctor Dee, the Queen's sorcerer. Kelley used to be his associate and betrayed him. Doctor Dee has been in need of assistance for some time now. You will enter his household under the guise of his assistant, on the strength of your knowledge of Kelley and your experience with the fairies –' He gestured curtly, in distaste. 'It is taken as a given that the Irish have a special affinity for such matters.'

Domhnall somehow managed not to gape. 'I was a man of the law in Ireland. I know nothing about sorcery, and, I assure you, have no special affinity for it.' Not quite true, but this man did not need to know the full extent of Domhnall's connection to magic or the Sidhe.

‘You’ll have to do your best to persuade Doctor Dee that you have it, then,’ Cecil said, leaning back. ‘He will ask you about Kelley – tell him all you know, so you will gain his trust. We believe Doctor Dee has, unbeknownst to him, something that would be of much use to us. We need to retrieve it without him becoming any the wiser. You are to find this thing for us. Do you understand?’

Domhnall did stare at Cecil then, dumbfounded. ‘I cannot do this for you,’ he stuttered. ‘I serve my lord O’Connor.’

‘O’Connor has already been notified, and compensated for the loss of his man. He accepted readily.’

‘You covered his debts?’ *And he sold me out?*

‘Some of them.’ A hard glint in those watery eyes. Of course O’Connor wouldn’t be let so easily off the hook when he could be kept trapped in London debt and out of Ireland. And of course Domhnall wasn’t worth that much to anyone. ‘Your sister in Bristol,’ Cecil went on, and Domhnall’s whole body stiffened. ‘And her husband. Grace and Martin MacTeer. who appear to be recusants who avoid church services. And that merchant friend of yours, Matthew Williams, who has been running deals for you, not quite above board. Would you have us look into those matters more closely?’

Domhnall was paralysed with sheer terror for a second, then shook his head.

‘Good.’ In the tone of one who did not expect any other answer. ‘You serve new masters now, but we will deny all knowledge of you if asked. Be mindful of it.’ Cecil gestured at the door. ‘You will be given the specifics later.’

His new master set his notes on Domhnall aside, placing them on top of the pile of documents already dealt with, and moved on to the next matter. He did not even glance up as Domhnall shut the door behind him.

He was rowed downriver again, not to his Bishopsgate room, but all the way down to Deptford, to stay at the house of one Widow Bull. His belongings, he was told, had already been moved there. He accepted this mutely – there was no point in protesting – hunkered down on the wherry, wrapping himself against the biting Thames wind, and allowed himself to be taken wherever as the thoughts whirled in his head.

Recusants. Not quite above board. He gulped in the cold air, trying to steady himself. Those were relatively minor offences, he reasoned: they thought Gráinne and Martín were secret Catholics because they had not been going to the Anglican services to avoid exposure. And someone must have snitched on Williams and the deals he kept out of his records. Neither of those offences was that serious, but Cecil's threats had been vague enough to let Domhnall know that could they be shaped into whatever suited them. They thought they had dirt on his family, but luckily it seemed they had not looked closely enough to see what was right under their noses.

Which didn't mean they wouldn't, if Domhnall took just one wrong step.

If the English government found out that Martin MacTeer, his sister's husband, was not a very quiet dark-haired Irishman, but Martín de Salas, a Spaniard, who moreover had wolf-like senses and could fight like a devil, they were all lost. He thought wildly of sending word for Gráinne and Martín to sail back to Ireland, but no doubt they would be under surveillance now, and seized. And even if they made it, there was no one left to protect them in Ireland now – very likely, they would be recognised and handed over, at some point, by someone wanting to curry favour with the English. He thought of O'Rourke's fate, saw Gráinne dragged on that sled to the Tyburn Tree. The rush of horror made him want to throw up.

They would not find out. He would not allow it. Which meant that he was to become Cecil's bondsman. Unless Domhnall could find the means and the way to get them all out of England, this would hang permanently over his head – over the heads of Gráinne and Martín

and little Sadhbh and Williams and Williams' family – a sword ready to be dropped the moment Domhnall slipped up.

He closed his eyes, breathing in the cold night air as the city lights floated by, willing himself to calm down. There were still ways out for them. There was Spain, for one. The Continent. Perhaps even the Americas. And, even though he himself was trapped, he could get money, probably, through Williams' contacts or his own, even if he had to lie through his teeth, even if he had to *steal*...

First things first. He would get into Dee's house and find whatever it was that Cecil wanted. Then he would think how to get them all out of this whole bloody mess. Whatever it took, even if what it took was his own head. Which, considering the situation, was more than likely.

He found the thought oddly comforting. He had been sinking into oblivion anyway in this pointless life he now led. Saving those he loved, who had a life ahead of them, would give him back his own forgotten self, a way to redemption, even if the price were his own death. All he needed now was enough time.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.