

# **PART ONE**

## **The Chase**

## CHAPTER 1: NICK: PACKET AND CHANGE

*The mutinies of the Army of Flanders spelt military and financial disaster for Spain.*

*The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road 1567 - 1659*

*Geoffrey Parker*

Nick rode towards the smoke.

*And a pillar of smoke shall guide them during the day.* The blasphemous thought brought forth wry humor. *Not quite 40 years the Spanish have been wandering and warring through the Netherlands, but near enough. Though they are more akin to the plague of locusts than the Chosen People.*

There were peasants working in the fields, but not many. They all knew that the smoke meant Spanish nearby and that those Spanish *tercios* were well pissed off.

Corpses swinging from gibbets, object lessons to the rest of the mutineers, stood sentry outside the village. Captain Velasco had put down the mutiny with his usual enthusiasm and bloodthirstiness. *I hope he hasn't sent the Irish to the dancing master. Long ride for nothing.* Crows rose from the bodies as Nick rode past, then settled back to their meal.

The mutinying soldiers, a company of some units of Irish and some units of Germans from what Nick had heard, hadn't done too much damage to the village. Only a few of the houses were burnt shells. After all, the soldiers had been planning on making this their refuge until their pay came through. Over the decades that the Spanish

had been fighting in the Netherlands, this kind of mutiny wasn't a rare occurrence. But this time, the patience of Governor General Parma wasn't so much worn thin as non-existent. He'd ordered no negotiations, no offers to return to service. Instead, the hand was to be one of iron and the chastising rod laid on heavy. And, anyway, there was no money for renegotiated contracts or for paying at least some of the back wages now two years in the owing.

None of the villagers were visible as Nick entered the town. He sensed eyes on him as he rode past shuttered windows but the only figures moving were Spanish soldiers, a mix of pikemen, arquebusiers, and cavalry, lounging around. The mutinying troops were probably being held in some of the barns or animal pens until the lessons had been learned and the chastened soldiers re-entered the service of his most Catholic Majesty, Phillip II of Spain.

The village had grown up along a stream and, sometime in the past, the stream had been dug out for a mill pond. And because of its central location, the mill now served Captain Velasco as a headquarters. In front of the building, Velasco's men had set up a pair of heavy chairs. The men strapped into the chairs were no longer screaming, their voices garroted down to a desperate whine. Nick walked past the stranglers turning the cords and stopped in front the sentries guarding the mill's entrance.

"I need to see Captain Velasco." Nick's Spanish was rough but understandable. "I've been sent from Brussels to question some of the mutineers."

"Wait here." One of the sentries went into the mill and after a few minutes, came out. "It'll be a while. Come back later."

Nick sighed and reached inside his doublet for the document he'd been given in Brussels for just this complication. "You probably can't read, but I would think that you can recognize this." He unfolded the document, the paper crackling underneath his gloved fingers. The lump of wax at the bottom of the sheet shone red in the intermittent sunlight streaming through the mill door. "This is the seal of *Entretenido cerca la persona* Ximenez de la Vera Cruz. And it means that I get to see Captain Velasco right fucking now. Take me to him."

Both of the sentries glared at Nick but eventually, after a period of closely examining the seal, did as he instructed. They all made their way deeper into the mill. The sacks of grain and flour usually present on the mill floor had already been looted by either the mutineers or the soldiers. The waterwheel made an unceasing rattling and grinding sound from outside the other side of the mill; however, the millstone was not in use and its rasping voice was silent. The dust from decades of work and innumerable bushels of grain was worked into the planks of the floor and flavored the air.

Captain Velasco was seated behind a table, taking a report from one of his lieutenants. He was dressed and armored for the field, wearing a cuirass, helmet set on the table, along with his sword. Soldiers stood at attention along the wall, waiting for orders or messages to be taken to the rest of the troop. The lieutenant saluted and moved away from the captain as Nick and the two sentries came up.

"I thought I had made my orders very clear. I would see this man when all my other business was concluded. Why have my very clear orders been disobeyed?" Nick had become very tired of the same haughty bored tone used by every Spanish *hidalgo* officer during his years in the Netherlands.

Nick answered before the sentries could give voice. "Captain Velasco, I am Nick Crosby." Nick made a rough bow. "I am here from Brussels and I was able to impress on your sentries the importance of my mission."

The Spanish captain stared blankly at the fat man in travel-stained leathers who stood in front of him. His gaze took in the weapons, sword, dagger, pistol, that all showed signs of frequent use.

"You're not Spanish, are you?"

"I am an English Catholic, Captain, in exile while the heretic queen holds sway in my home. I am now attached to Hugh Owen and do his bidding for my part in the war against the heretic."

"This Hugh Owen, I am supposed to know his name? And his name is enough to allow you to run roughshod over my men and force your way in to see me?" The Captain's voice rose a bit. "And is his name strong enough to allow you to leave here with your back unwhipped? You're an English dog and I do not think that I will allow you to bark any longer." He gestured to the men crowding in behind Nick. "Take this dog out and lash him until he learns manners."

Nick unfolded the document that he'd shown the sentries. "You're right. No reason for you to know the name of Hugh Owen. After all, he's merely the Governor-General's chief intelligencer. However, there's a name and seal attached to this parchment that you might recognize. *Entretenido cerca la persona Ximenez de la Vera Cruz.*"

Velasco's eyes widened slightly at the name as Nick laid the document on his desk. He picked it up and looked closely at the seal. "If this is forged, you will be broken

on the wheel.”

“I’m not stupid enough to forge the seal and signature of a Staff Officer to the Captain-General. It’s real and it gives me the authority to ask the questions I want.”

Without raising his eyes, Velasco held up his hand to stop the soldiers preparing to seize Nick. “Return to your duties. This ... man ... and I have business to discuss.”

Disappointed in not being allowed to beat the shit out of Nick, the soldiers turned to leave, muttering amongst themselves. Nick turned to watch them go. “Oy! Next time you fucks think to beat a dog, you best keep in mind that some dogs have teeth.” From up his sleeve, the blade dropped into his palm and then it was quivering in the door frame next to the exiting soldiers. Except for some black looks, the soldiers did nothing in return.

The Captain took no notice. “What are you here to do?”

“I have been sent to talk to some of the mutineers that you have just captured. There was a *tercio* of Irish in this company. Are they still alive?”

“I believe so. I was instructed to kill the ringleaders but just leave the common fighting men with some lashes and the lesson learned. My lieutenant will take you to them.”

As Nick gathered up his letter of authorization, Velasco looked at him. “Why are these Irish dogs are so important that they should have so many visitors?”

“I’m afraid that I don’t quite catch your meaning there, Captain. Other people have been here to see them?”

Velasco was impatient to be on to other business. “Is that not what I said? Yes, earlier today another man rode up with the same request. His orders came from the

court of the Archduchess.”

*Fuck me. Did Owen have the right of it? English agents looking to get the Irish to work for them?* Annoyed by this latest complication, Nick took his leave of Velasco with the barest minimum of courtesy and made his way back out into the occupied village.

The Irish were part of the troops of Sir William Stanley, who had betrayed the city of Deventer and brought his troops with him into Spanish service. Crowded into a paddock and watched over by a brace of Spanish soldiers, they hunched together in the grey drizzle.

Nick clambered up onto the first rail of the fence and pitched his voice to carry to all of them. “That right bastard Velasco is all for letting you dance the hempen jig. And maybe it’s me who can convince him to do otherwise.”

A certain amount of disbelieving hilarity from those that understood English. “You’re that good at sucking cock, are you? Nay, nay, a fat ass like that, Velasco is probably hoping to give it a big hard ride.”

“Not too surprising you would think that, seeing how they’ve taken away your sheep and you all are most likely getting lonesome.” Nick caught the gaze of the officer and remembered the name that Hugh Owen had supplied. “Sergeant O’Sullivan, I want a quiet word.” He turned to the guards. “I’m taking him just over there. We’ll be in your sight the entire time. Now don’t give me any shit, because that’s the way it’s going to be. And you know that Captain Velasco has given me permission to do as I wish.”

The diminutive sergeant came over to the gate and the guards, with ill grace and visible anger, let him through. Though small, O’Sullivan was all muscle and the strength of his gaze showed an active intelligence.

Nick led O'Sullivan across the muddy ground, and they fetched up by a dungheap at the corner of the barn.

Nick launched right into his mission. "There's people in Brussels who are worried that certain people might be enticing you back into English service. They think that since you turned your coat once, you might turn it again."

"That's utter bullshit." O'Sullivan kept his voice level. "I'll tell you what I told that other man earlier today. We're all Irish Catholic who well remember what that bitch Elizabeth's father did to our land and religion. Being led into Spanish service by Sir Stanley at Deventer was the best thing that's ever happened to us."

*That other man earlier. Who the fuck is he and why is he in my patch?* Nick held up a placating hand. "It might not be done how you think. Let me spin you a tale. Man strikes up talking to you in a pub, you get to talking about this or that. He stands up for his round, a nice fella. And, you're not quite certain how, the talk gets around to how happy you are serving under the Spanish here in the Low Countries."

"I hope there are going to be sword fights or tits in this story soon enough. I like sword fights and tits in my stories."

Nick nodded understandingly. He leaned back against the wall of the barn, seemingly addressing his words out to the barnyard. "The tale's almost done. So he asks you how happy you are and of course you come back with the pay's shit, on the rare times you do get paid; the food's hog slop, and the Spanish are insufferable whoresons. No different than any other soldier would say. And this cove allows how that sounds like a proper tale of woe and buys you another round. And then he says to you, sounds like some extra money would make your life sweeter: better food, better class of

whores - and there's your tits for you, O'Sullivan – a better life all around. And you allow as how that would be God's honest truth, but that you'd not be interested in doing anything unclean. And he lays some florins on the table and says it's nothing like that. He's just looking for what you could tell him about the Spanish." Nick paused to straighten and stare directly at O'Sullivan. "This tale ring familiar in any way?"

O'Sullivan looked at Nick, his face betraying nothing. "I come from a race and a long line of storytellers, bards, and gleemen. And I have to tell you, you whose name I never got, don't think I didn't notice, you are one of the worst storytellers it's ever been my misfortune to listen to next to a dungheap while my boots come unstitched in the pismire."

"So the tale brings to mind no memories?"

"None whatsoever. A pity you wasted the long ride from Brussels. Now, can I go back to waiting to be hanged?"

"Sure and away with you. I'll put in a good word with Velasco and try to keep you from the dancing master."

*Now to find this prick who's been sticking his nose where it ain't supposed to be.*

Nick began to quarter the village, looking for anyone who might be out of place. He wandered past campfires surrounded by huddled soldiers, talking in Spanish and Italian. Several of the villagers' houses had been pulled down for fuel for these fires, but he spotted no sign of organized official looting, not that a village this small had much in the way of loot. Some of the houses had small gardens, the half grown plants crushed and despoiled by the soldiers moving through the village. He poked around the sutler's wagon and the other small groups of civilians who followed along behind Velasco's

troop. No sign of anyone out of place.

And then a tall man, weaponed like a bodyguard, came around the corner of a smokehouse and headed towards him. "Mynheer Crosby, my master, Mynheer Broussard would like a word with you, if the moment is convenient." His accent placed him as coming from around the French border somewhere, maybe Artois.

"Extremely convenient. Lead on, sunshine, lead on."

Nick followed the man to the edge of the village, where an oak tree spread its limbs over the stream. Broussard was waiting there, under the tree, next to two horses. He was a small man, lace collar falling over a fawn doublet, neat hose, clothes clean under a traveling cloak. Nick felt like a shambling bear next to him and decided to play on the contrast. He walked right up to the man, leaned in close, and jabbed a thick finger in the man's chest.

"Now let's you and I talk. And perhaps I can find out why you're sticking your fucking gob in my business!"

Broussard took no obvious affront at Nick's provocation. "Please walk with me. And perhaps we can satisfy our mutual curiosity." He glanced solicitously at Nick. "You can walk and talk at the same time, can you not?"

Nick glowered at Broussard but made no reply. He accompanied the smaller man in the direction of his gesturing hand and soon found himself strolling along the bank of the stream and bending an ear to the conversation. The bodyguard trailed behind, out of earshot.

"You and I work for the same man."

*So, not an agent for the English, rather one working for the Catholics like myself.*

“Do we?”

“We do.”

“And who might that be?”

A small sigh. “An Englishman trying to be coy. A novel sight, much like a leper trying to dance. Very well. I shall speak slowly and clearly.”

Nick kept everything off his face and merely proceeded alongside Broussard. The smaller man glanced sidelong at Nick, judging his reaction. “I work for Hugh Owen and through him, for the Spanish Crown, as do you. I have been in pursuit of some specific intelligence for some time. And now I am close. I have uncovered two spies working for the English in Antwerp and brought about their capture. And I am close to uncovering the third.”

*Shit. Fuck. If he's talking about who I think he's talking about...* It was all the years of double dealing and lying and fear that kept Nick's voice steady. “That is some fine work. Hugh Owen doubtless will be rewarding you greatly for such an accomplishment.”

Broussard nodded at the praise and preened a bit. “However, during my pursuit I met up with some others in our business and was given a packet to be given to Master Owen as soon as I am able. My current mission is in such a state that I cannot deviate and take this packet to Brussels. But you are heading in that direction.” His voice became slightly pained and it warmed Nick inside. “I would take it as a great favor to me if you would take this packet and deliver it into Master Owen's hands.”

He pulled a packet of papers sealed in oiled leather from a pouch at his waist and held them out to Nick. “And directly to his hands, do you understand? To no one

else. I have been told that this contains intelligence straight from Elizabeth's council. It is vital that you deliver these straight to Master Owen as quickly as you can. That means no stopping at taverns or bawdy houses, do you understand?"

Nick reached out to take the packet. "Oh, I understand full well."

And all of a sudden, it was clear. The thought rang in his head like a bell. *I am done. Finished. Time to go home.*

His hand moved past the packet and grasped Broussard's wrist in a crushing grip. "You cuntin' shithead." Broussard was just opening his mouth in outrage and incomprehension when the narrow blade in Nick's other hand went into his ear. His eyes rolled up, he shat himself, and he dropped as a lump of dead meat at Nick's feet.

Nick left the blade in Broussard's head and turned to face the bodyguard. The ox had begun to realize that something was wrong and pulled his sword.

Nick unsheathed his own sword and filled his off hand with another blade. "It doesn't have to go like this. Your employer is dead, you can just walk away."

"Not my employer." The bodyguard bulled forward, sword held for a ripping thrust. Nick stepped inside; his sword deflected the other. But the bodyguard checked Nick with his shoulder and drove him back, towards the canal. Nick staggered, his footing uncertain in the wet long grass along the canal bank.

The bodyguard saw his opportunity and went with a strong side swing, like a housewife beating a blanket, right at Nick's legs. Nick thrust his sword down, in a strong cross-block, hoping to Hell that his sword wouldn't just snap in half. The impact rang all up his wrist and arm, but his sword remained intact.

Nick made a quick move and jammed his dagger into the bodyguard's arm,

dragged the bodyguard towards him, yelling. In a spasm of pain, the bodyguard dropped his sword into the grass and mud. Nick let go the dagger, and with a two handed thrust, tore out the man's throat.

Hands clasped in a vain attempt to stop the bloody flood, the big man stumbled past Nick and fell into the canal. His legs thrashed briefly and then stilled. The water around him slowly turned red.

It was a wet and bloody piece of work, hiding the bodies, and by time Nick had finished, he was blowing like a foundered horse. He had dragged the bodyguard from the canal and into an abandoned fishing hut at the side of the canal. And then he had thrown Broussard's corpse in there as well. Broussard had a nice purse on him, which raised Nick's spirits a bit. He wiped himself down with handfuls of grass and then went to find his horse.

Riding back to Brussels, Nick considered the next steps he had to take, Hugh Owen's possible response, his own response to that. Things grew dim and uncertain after three moves in his mind. *I fucking hate chess, God Damned foppish la-de-da.* Some of his old attitude came back, from before the days of double dealing and intelligencing. *Wait for the wind, then react. No sense in setting a course without knowing the wind. Wait and react.* He let his horse have its head as it picked its way along the muddy rutted road as he stared sightlessly between the horse's ears and planned.

But like a tongue worrying a loose tooth, he kept coming back to the moment of his betrayal. And as deeply as he searched his mind for some sort of reasoned strategy, some cunning ploy, he kept coming back to a simple truth. *I want to go home. Fuck Bob*

*Poley and his threats. Fuck all this double dealing and lies and fear. I'm going home.*

As Nick got closer to the city, traffic on the road got thicker. Carts loaded with vegetables and herds going into the city to feed its insatiable maw, merchants and their cargoes, peasants bringing in goods to the markets, soldiers, and messengers all churned the road into a muddy soup and slowed his progress to a slow walk with long periods where he made no progress at all. He pulled himself from his contemplation of the possible courses the future might take and tightened his grip on the horse's reins.

Brussels was a walled city, as were all cities in the Low Countries. Nick looked at the walls with a critical eye. They were old and not in very good repair. Brussels had been fortunate in its location so far behind the line of battle in the last few decades. It had never suffered siege or sack and had only changed hands through political maneuvering, not the maneuvering of armies. He remembered getting pissed with a bunch of siege engineers up in Breda last month and what they had to say about properly protecting a city from siege cannons. Drawing in spilled beer is never a precise art but what they seemed to be showing was much thicker walls made of dirt, sloping, parts of the wall sticking out for better fields of fire. And then they broke out the brandy and things became increasingly unclear. But what he took away from that boozing session was the clear knowledge that if it ever came to a siege, Brussels was well fucked.

Along this road leading into Brussels, a village had established itself. Farmhouses lined the road with their fields and gardens stretching out behind them. There was even a church.

This section of the moat was dry, had been dry for some time. Along other

sections of the moat, the authorities had diverted canals and rivers filled the moat but this section was now just a midden heap for all manner of things. Piles of filth and refuse lay at the bottom of the moat and festered in the sun.

There was a long line of people outside the gate, waiting to get in. As he waited, one man could not ignore the demands of his bowels any longer. He squatted over the edge of the drawbridge and let spill a watery gush of shit. The line moved slowly as the customs officials collected tax from each person, based on what they were bringing into the city to sell. Nick stood in his stirrups to get a better view over the heads of all those in line. The officials had no extra guards with them and their behaviors were no different than all the other times he'd come through the gates in the past. *I'm still in front of the news. I have to maintain that edge if I'm to get back out safely.* Satisfied, Nick dropped back into his saddle and put his heels to the horse's ribs. He wove his way to the head of the line, dodging grumbles and curses from all those waiting to enter the city.

A pikeman of the city militia barred his way. "Get back in the fucking line or show me your pass."

Nick rummaged in his saddlebag. Leaning stiffly in his saddle, he handed over the same folded piece of parchment that had gained the Spanish captain's cooperation. "Here it is. And since you probably can't read, take a long hard look at the seal on the bottom. I'm sure you can recognize that. So, after taking a long hard look at it, why don't you let me through the fucking gate?"

After taking as long as he could to look the document over, the pikeman handed it back to Nick, spit between the front hooves of his horse, and sullenly waved him on.

Nick kneed his horse through the gatehouse. The noise of the merchants and herdsman arguing with the tax men and the guards made a deafening cacophony in the short tunnel that was the gatehouse. The clatter of the hooves of Nick's horse was barely audible over the din. At least animals destined for the shambles and slaughterhouses came through a different gate, so the smell wasn't overpowering.

*Well, that's one foot in the trap. If he's looking for me, Owen will know that I'm in the city. All the more important that I give him no reason to do so. Head to 'gritte's house, foist her off with some excuse, gather all my letters of credit that she holds for me, as well as all my ready coin, and get back out of here as soon as fucking possible.*

Just past the gate, the houses still had gardens and fields behind them. Just ahead, at an intersection of streets before the inner walls, a market slowed the traffic. This was the destination of most of those who had been waiting outside the gate. They came in with their goods and either set up a stall or table themselves or sold them direct to those who had already claimed a patch and were extolling the amazing nature of their merchandise at the top of their lungs. Nick threaded his horse through the crowd and went in through a gate in the inner wall.

Here, the houses and shops were closer together and only the finest houses had small gardens behind their walls. Nick passed the tall church of St. Goele on his right.

*No more being two faced working for the English while seeming to work for the Spanish here in Flanders. Broussard was close on my trail and he attached no small importance to this packet of papers he gave me. I wonder if what's in this packet will get that bastard Poley off my back.*



## CHAPTER 2: POLEY: MAM UPSHAW

*He will build a career out of cheating, though all in the name of 'loyalty and behoveful service' to the State.*

*The Reckoning*

*Charles Nicholl*

"All I can say is what he told me."

Robert Poley, short man, hard expression on his face, look in his eyes that forecast an explosion to come soon, dressed in brown and grey, made his way at a quick walk up the street. At his side was Ralph. "So tell me."

He'd used Ralph before, as muscle, at first. The bastard was big and broad, with hands like a smith's hammer, and he had no hesitation in dealing out the necessary violence. But men like that were three a penny in London. What made him so very useful to Poley was the bright intelligence that lurked in the eyes hidden behind the stringy black hair.

The big man's voice rumbled. "He only got out of Antwerp with his life. Both Duclos and Horyncx were taken. And if it was that bad in Antwerp, he didn't want to risk Brussels. So he got himself across the Channel as quick as possible."

Southwark was never quiet, not even at night. Taverns spilling sound as well as light from their windows and open doors, groups of drunken men staggering from the landings on the Thames bank to the inviting bawdy houses well stocked with Winchester's geese, all these and more kept the night lively. Poley and Ralph kept to the side of the street, out of the foetid puddles that lurked unseen amid the rutted

surface. Ralph ducked his head to near Poley's ear so that he could talk without shouting.

"I didn't bother to get any more from him. I planted him in a room, made sure he had sufficient booze to keep him there, and then came and found you."

"Where's the room?"

Ralph pointed. "At Mam Upshaw's, there ahead."

"Right. Let's get this sorted. You handled this exceedingly well, Ralph."

They hurried through the crowded and smoky common room and took the stairs without breaking stride. Ralph set a shoulder to a door and it flew open, revealing Liam rising up out his bed, mouth all agape, eyes all filled with fear. Ralph was across the room in two swift strides and had gathered up Liam by his shirtfront in one big hand. The room smelled of an unemptied chamber pot and was lit by the weak light of the moon coming through the small parchment covered window.

Poley moved into the room behind Ralph and stood at the foot of the bed. "Now then, Liam. What happened in Antwerp?"

Liam's eyes swiveled madly between the big man effortlessly holding him and the smaller man at the foot of the bed. He was clearly unsure of whom to fear more. "It was bad, Master Poley, real bad. I was right there, at Horyncx's, getting the packet of intelligence he had for me, when they came in through the front door. No warning. Just BANG! And the door goes into flinders."

Poley gestured at Ralph and Liam was lowered back onto the bed. Ralph stepped back and Poley moved forward, made his voice calmer and more reasonable. "Awful news indeed, Liam. And I'll wager that's not all the intelligence you have to

impart. What happened next?”

Liam sat on the edge of the bed, stared at his boots, his voice low. “I escaped out the back, running as fast as I could. I remembered what you had told me, what to do if things went cack-handed.” He essayed a glance at Poley. “I followed your instructions, Master Poley. Truly I did!”

Poley laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I have no doubt that you did. From first I met you, I knew that you were someone who would keep his blood cool when everything went to hell. So where did you go to from Horyncx’s?”

“I wove through the back alleys and then through the crowds. I wasn’t followed; that I’m sure of. But it was no matter. I arrived at Duclos’ just in time to see him taken away in chains. When I asked a fellow in the crowd, all curious-like, what was this man’s crime, some heretic printer or the like, he answered that he was an English spy.”

“So now I was terrified, Master Poley, I truly was.” Liam swallowed hard and his gaze flitted between Poley and Ralph. “I know I was supposed to go on to Brussels and meet up there with him that you call Adonis, I know I was. But it was like the last time when the Inquisition came through. And you know I lost some of my mates over there when they was taken into their prisons. So I couldn’t do it, Master Poley, I just couldn’t. I got myself back across the Channel just as quick as I could.”

Poley looked considering down at Liam and stretched out the moment. Just as it looked as if Liam was going to babble something more in his own defense, he ran his hand through his hair. And at that signal, Ralph moved the interrogation along. His rumbling grind of a voice sounded almost consoling. “Can’t ask for more than that, can you, Master Poley? All in all, sounds like Liam here, did the right thing, got out with his

news and bollocks intact. Had he not scarpered, we might have been kept ignorant of all the those goings-on even longer.”

Liam nodded his head so fast, snot flew from his nose. “That’s it! That’s why I came back and didn’t go on to Brussels!” He gazed at Ralph with a look so pathetically grateful, disgust almost overwhelmed Poley’s anger. None of his feelings touched his face or voice.

“That’s a good point, Ralph. Liam has indeed brought us worthwhile intelligence. The Spanish have taken two of my agents and I need to start finding out how that happened. So, to work.” He gestured to Ralph and turned to go. “Sorry about bursting in like that, Liam.”

“Think nothing of it, Master Poley! It is no matter! I’ve given you every right to be angry at me, fleeing Antwerp as I did, without completing my mission.” Relief clogged Liam’s voice, thick and glutinous.

It was with no little flare of sadistic humor that Poley stopped halfway to the door. He spoke without turning to look at Liam. “One last thing troubles me, though, Liam. Perhaps you can set my mind at ease. And that’s why you didn’t come and tell me right away? Why did I have to come to this Southwark hole and winkle the tale out of you myself?”

“I was so very afraid!”

Poley’s teeth flashed unseen in a grin of mirthless satisfaction. “Yes, I can believe that. But afraid of what, Liam? Or afraid of whom? You’re safe here. No chance of the Inquisition capturing you in London.” He turned to look at Liam. “So why did you not follow instructions and come to me right away?”

There wasn't much light, but enough for Poley to see Liam swallow convulsively and sweat to break out on his brow. "I swear, Master Poley, I swear. I was just afraid. I was going to come to see you but I just needed to get my courage back."

"You're lying. About what, I don't know. But there's something that you're not telling me." Poley turned his gaze to Ralph. "Hurt him."

Liam wailed and tried to cast himself out the window. Ralph effortlessly grabbed him and bent one arm up behind his back. Liam screamed and pissed himself.

"Take this the fuck outside." The voice came from behind Poley and made him turn with a snarl. When he saw who stood in the doorway, he quickly made the expression on his face more agreeable. It was the big man holding the lit taper who drew the eye first but he was just one more big bastard that Ralph could easily sort out. No, Poley immediately drew his mind away from violence because of the woman standing in front of the ox. Mam Upshaw tapped a gnarled oak club into her palm, small piggy eyes steady and cold above a delicate mouth, graying blond hair escaping from underneath her bonnet. A ferocious pair of tits strained the front of her dress behind a stained apron.

It wasn't the club or the ox in the hall, who looked to be Danny, one of her many sons, that stopped Poley from launching into a high handed shit fit. Here in Southwark, Mam Upshaw was a person of consequence, gnarled fingers into many pies. Piss in her soup, he could count on any number of obstacles in his way, the next time he had to work south of the river.

A short bow and he strode forward. "Mistress Upshaw, I beg your pardon for this disturbance. I would not have conducted my business here, but I am charged by the

Privy Council to get to the bottom of this matter.” He rubbed his fingers together. “This will not take long and I am certain that those in Westminster to whom I report would be greatly appreciative of your understanding.”

Tap, tap, tap, went the club. No hint of give in her voice. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I am a humble servant of her Majesty.” Poley tried to assume an appropriately humble mien, hard to do with his humors roiling with anger and impatience.

“Easy to say. Hard to prove. What stops me from calling the Watch and having you all taken from here?”

Poley thought from a moment. He didn’t want to use this name, but he saw no other choice. “Meg will vouch for me. She and I have done business and she knows whom I work for. You know Meg, I’m sure.”

“Aye, that I do. And I know that she’s not a name to be mentioned lightly. If I ask her about you and she finds out you’ve been bandying her name about, you’ll be fed to the pigs.”

Poley made one last effort to gather up his quickly fraying patience and kept his voice level. “I know that. You know that. So why don’t you accept me as who I say I am and let me get on with my business?”

Danny made to move forward. “Let me thump him, Mam. I’ll knock some truth out of this lying buggermaster.”

Ralph was suddenly at Poley’s side. “You can back off now, my son. You and me, we’ll let the wiser heads talk this through. Nothing is solved by us getting all violent-like.”

Mam Upshaw’s hand on Danny’s arm forestalled his rush to come to grips with

Ralph. "What makes you think I give a fuck?"

"Surely you do not wish to be an enemy of her Majesty? You may think that her writ does not run into these corners of Southwark, but I assure you, it does."

A calculating look. "Aye, true enough. But I'm going to need something for my trouble, beyond just the words of some pursuivant."

Poley had an immediate vision of the few coins in his purse and Mam Upshaw's likely reaction if he were to offer them to her. And besides, he wasn't going to pay some raddled Southwark hag for the privilege of doing his business. "Do you think that I carry coin on me when coming this side of the river to do my business? Do I look like I was dropped on my head as a babe? Get me some paper and ink. I'll write you out a note that you can take up to Westminster to get redeemed for coin."

"Pen? Ink? A note?" Mam Upshaw's voice became more venom filled with each word and her knuckles went white where she held the club. "You've got some fucking cheek, you piece of shit. You come to my house, cause trouble, then try to buy me off with some promise of jam tomorrow? Now who looks like they was dropped on their head? Aye, you work for Westminster, sure enough, no one else would be so stupid as to suggest such a thing." She spit on the floor in front of Poley's feet. Danny dragged up an inarticulate growl from deep inside his chest, the urge to damage whoever caused his Mam this kind of upset clear on his face. This caused Mam Upshaw to go from anger back to calculation. Nothing to be gained in causing trouble for someone working for the powers up in Westminster. Her face screwed up sour. "Fine. Do what you needs must. But try to keep the noise down and if you kill him, do it out back. Don't leave me with a corpse on my hands." She turned to go, chivying Danny in front of her.

Liam let out a wail and stretched forth his undamaged arm. "Please, Mistress! Have mercy! Succor me, I beg of you! In Christ's name do not leave me here!"

She ignored Liam; glanced back over her shoulder to Poley with a face like flint. "I said, keep the noise down."

Ralph grabbed Liam by the throat and muscled him against the wall. "You heard the lady, whoreson. No talking less asked a question."

Liam gabbled so fast spittle sprayed on Ralph's face, who took it unblinking. "I swear, I swear, I swear it's like I said, it's true, true..."

Ralph laid a hand almost tenderly on Liam's face, palm closing the working jaw, the horny thumbnail coming to rest right at the edge of his eye. "Liam, Liam, Liam. Do you think that I'd even stop to think about taking your eye? Gouging it clean out of your head and wiping it on the coverlet? Do I look like the kind of cove who'd lose even a wink of sleep over that? And would I stop at one eye?"

Liam rolled his eyes towards the threatening thumb but was so terrified that only mute whines dug their way out of his throat.

"Your days are about to become as dark as your nights, Liam, unless you answers Master Poley's questions."

"Liam." No response from Liam, his gaze still trapped by Ralph's threat. Poley made his voice louder, sharper. "Liam!"

Liam pulled his eyes away from Ralph's thumb and fixed his gaze on Poley. His voice was barely a whisper, clotted with tears and pain. "I swear, Master Poley, I swear, I swear..."

"And I don't fucking care what you swear, Liam. I want to know the truth." Poley

leaned back against the wall opposite and folded his arms. He gestured with his eyes and Ralph released Liam's face and moved a little way from Liam. "Let's start at the beginning. Did you get the packet of intelligence that Horyncx was to give you?"

Liam said nothing for a few heartbeats, just stood there, rubbing his face where Ralph had placed his hand, smearing snot and tears across his blotched face. Ralph made a low noise in his chest and began to move forward. Liam jerked his hands down. "No, no. No, Master Poley, he didn't have time to give it to me. He was saying that it contained the most important intelligence and then he went to fetch it and then the door came down and then I ran."

"That's what he said, precisely? The most important intelligence? Think hard, Liam, remember it clearly. Is that what he said? Was there anything more, anything at all?"

"And then he said something else, as he was leaving the room, to go into the back, something like intelligence this pure could only come from one place."

"This is good, Liam. You're doing brilliantly. Now we come to the matter of you arriving in London. Why did you not come directly to me?"

Liam clutched his arms around himself and huddled inward, looked at the floor, his voice a low mutter. Poley leaned close, straining to hear over the sound of a drunk outside the window professing in song that his love was pure and like unto a summer day. The fa-la-la chorus was interrupted by the sound of spewing. "I came into Southwark late. I had landed at Gravesend and rented a nag. I thought not to disturb you until the morning. I admit it, I was reluctant to come to you with such bad news."

Poley kept his voice low and nonthreatening. "I understand. By my count, that

was two days past. What stopped you from coming to me the next morning?

“This man. I was coming to see you, I was, just past the Bridge, when two bravos came up beside me and pushed me into an alley. They was much like him.” A flicking glance towards Ralph underneath lowered brows. “They leaned in close, on either side, and said someone wanted a word.”

*Ah. The shape starts to become clear. I thought there was something missing in all this. Someone stirring the pot. I'll have you, you fucker.* “And who was that someone, Liam?”

“Some gentleman. Not too fancy, but had money, you could tell. Didn't like putting his feet among the filth in the alley.”

Poley kept his voice even, so as to not have Liam lose his new found composure. “Now that's a nice bit of recollection. Well done. What did he look like?”

“A bit taller than me. Blonde. One of those little beards. Nice clothes. Two rings.”

“Would you know him again, if you saw him?”

“Aye.”

“And what did he say? Why did he have those two pieces of muscle nab you?”

“He said it would be best if I were to clear out of London, go somewhere else, maybe Bristol, and leave my current employment far behind me and forgotten.” Liam straightened and life entered his voice, though he still did sniff back blood. “Well, I told him that my employment was none of his concern and who the fuck was he to tell me what to do.”

“Good man!”

“Well, he didn't take to kindly to that. He had those two oxen give me a right

thumping. Not used to the business, though. Was not used to seeing violence done right in front of him. Saw that in his eyes. Then he bent down to where I was kneeling, cradling my cods, said that I was employed by a mindless git - his words, Master Poley, his words -"

Poley nodded in understanding and gestured for him to continue.

"Employed by him who played at spies but was no match for someone superior in all ways. And since I was employed by one such, that made me less than low. But even one as low as myself was worthy of mercy and so he was being merciful and sparing me and giving me the chance to leave with my life." Liam raised his gaze to look directly at Poley. "To tell the truth, Master Poley, I think he was fair cracked. Almost like one of them preachers who get all invaded by the Spirit, like. Or maybe a crazed dog. His eyes were flat stones, nothing behind them, and his voice was all trembling. By that time I was more scared of him than of the bravos."

"And then he said that all my employer had built up was to be torn down and that he was the Samson who did it. What just happened in the Low Countries was just the start of his successes."

"He did say that? He knew about my agents being taken and he took responsibility for it?"

"Aye. Just as I related. Well, I slobbered out something fearful and agreeing, didn't take too much acting on my part, I'll tell you that."

*No, I'll wager it didn't.*

"So he had his men give me another kicking, then minced out of the alley. By that time I didn't know what to think, so I hid out in the Alsatia liberty. All this is much above

my head. I just wanted to hide until it all passed. I was there when your man found me. He can tell you that.”

“And so he did.” Poley moved away from the wall and towards Liam. He clapped the man on the shoulder, getting a small piece of satisfaction from the way he cringed from the hand. “You did well, Liam, in observing that man and telling me what he told you. This is valuable intelligence that you’ve brought me.” Poley moved away from Liam and towards the door. “Now get the fuck out of London.”

Liam’s face became a study in incomprehension and fear. “But why, Master Poley? I told you everything I know! I did, I swear it, everything, every last word!”

“I know and I don’t care. You’re a worthless little shit and I can’t use you anymore. Now take that fucker’s advice and go to Bristol or someplace. I see you in London again and I’ll kill you.”

As Poley left the room with Ralph following, he heard Liam break into a torrent of abuse aimed at Poley. Liam’s imprecations and insults faded away as Poley and Ralph clattered down the stairs and into the clamor of the main room. Poley ducked a nod to Mam Upshaw on the other side of the room as he and Ralph passed through and out onto the street. She spit on the floor in response.

“With Duclos and Horyncx gone, I have only one intelligencer left in the field. And I need to know if he’s been taken and, if not, why not?”

“This is the one you call Adonis?”

“Aye. I need to send someone across the Channel and I need to do it right quick.”

“I can think of someone. But you’re not going to like it.”

“Oh, and are you under the impression that there’s any part of this that I do like?”

Go on, say your name.”

“You need someone you’ve worked with before. Someone slippery yet knowledgeable enough to ferret out what’s going on in the Low Countries. And he’s close at hand.” Ralph tilted his head in the direction of across the river. “Very close at hand, in fact. And undoubtedly willing to listen to any offer you might make.”

The name that Ralph suggested rose through Poley’s mind like a bubble through a puddle of spew. “You’ve been hit on the head one too many times, that can be the only reason why you would suggest I go to that fucking cunt. You are correct in saying that I have worked with him. And that is why I will never go to him with something like this.”

Ralph shrugged. “You know who I’m talking about, then.”

Poley swore impotently under his breath. “Of course, I fucking know who you’re talking about!”

### CHAPTER 3: NICK: A GUTTING MAN

*On the whole, the States-General met every three years, mainly to discuss tax demands and there might be several meetings before the necessary unanimity was achieved. In the course of the haggling and debate a certain degree of unity and cooperation grew up among the delegates from the main provinces who habitually attended...*

*The Dutch Revolt  
Geoffrey Parker*

“Hoy, Nicholas! Where are you off to on this fine day?”

*Fuck.* Nick wearily closed his eyes. *I have even less time than I thought.* He pasted a faint smile on his face and turned to face his questioner.

It was Braathuis and Edgewine, two of them that were always hanging around Owen looking to cadge coin or some small deed to raise them in his favor. Nick had always thought of them as the fleas that infest a particularly fast and dangerous hunting dog. Edgewine was dressed in his usual failed attempt to look better than he was; stained doublet and sagging hose and a codpiece that owed more to padding and Edgewine’s dreams than reality. Braathuis had found a large Italian hat somewhere; it sat on his head like some particularly despondent and diseased mushroom. The two of them stood in the doorway of the stable where Nick had just returned the nag.

Nick hitched his sword belt more comfortably under his belly. “Just returned this very day from a mission for Master Owen. I thought I’d avail myself of an ale at The Duchess, wash this dreadful taste of dust and horse out of my mouth before reporting to our mutual employer.” He hawked and spat.

Edgewine, all conviviality and good humor, drew close. "That sounds like a capital idea. Might we join you and toast your successful return?"

Braathuis also pulled in close and managed to plant one large booted foot in the middle of a pile of horse shit. "Aye, you have the right of it, Edgewine. You can tell by that shit eating grin of his that he's returned well accomplished. You were sent south, were you not, to pass messages to some noble of the Catholic League?"

Nick raised one hand to forestall any other clumsy attempts at intelligencing and turned to the stable owner. "Thank you for the horse. It served me well." He handed the man a few groschen. "This is the remainder of what I owe you."

The man squinted at the coins in his dirty palm, prodded them with a calloused finger, thought a bit, then nodded. "Aye. Right enough. And you brought the beast back in good condition. Thank you for your custom, mynheer."

"Well, that's done!" Nick picked up his saddlebags and moved out through the doorway and into the street. "Let's go, you two, grab a quick pint."

"You are the most excellent of men! Why, I was remarking the same to Hugh Owen this very morning, wasn't I, Braathuis?"

The large Brabanter was behind Nick and Edgewine. "Indeed you did, and Hugh was much in agreement with you."

*It could be worse, I could have been caught by someone skilled at the game, not these two lackwits. The course is set, let's see if I founder.*

It was a grey Flanders day. Low clouds made everything wet and damp. The three of them proceeded down the street in the direction of the Duchess. They stepped aside and doffed their hats as a member of the States General went past, all rich

velvets and surrounded by clerks, secretaries, and bodyguards. Governor-General Parma had returned to Brussels after the defeat of his forces at Ivry down in France on the side of the Catholic League. As a consequence, the mood of the city was tense as people scrambled to find out which way the wind was blowing. Would there be more taxes to pay for more troops? Is the price of grain rising or falling? Is the Spanish escudo falling in value against the Dutch florin?

And so, a meeting of the Estates General was convened and all the representatives from the loyal provinces were in town. This made the crowds thicker than usual. As the capital of the Spanish Netherlands, Brussels ebbed and flowed with the press of government business. If you wished to transact commerce, you went to Bruges, Ghent, or Antwerp; for matters of government or law, you came to Brussels. As a result, Nick felt that Brussels lacked a certain vitality, even on its best days.

A religious procession went past. Monks chanted and reliquaries were displayed to beg God to not look away from His most loyal servant, the Governor-General. Incense and droned Latin clotted the air. Even with his years in the Netherlands, Nick was struck by the alien sight and sound of the Old Religion; not having seen any such thing in his years in England. Elizabeth had been queen all his life; Catholics worshipped very quietly or not at all.

A group of swaggering bravos from one of the militia guilds, the Grote Kruisbooggilde from the crossbows they were carrying, shoved their way through the crowd.

“Damn my eyes, is it time for the *ommegang* already?”

“Nearly, the festival’s next month. They’re off to practice for the shooting

competition. They go to the fields outside the walls and shoot up targets and then come back and brag to the whores.”

“Fuck, look at those capering apes. Carrying on like they’re going to defeat the heretics all by themselves. With crossbows. Who the fuck uses crossbows anymore?”

Nick and Edgewine kept up a stream of talk as they went along, touching on the latest rumors and news: religious war in France between Guise and Navarre, the fall of Breda, where this season’s campaigning would take place, whether the whores in Amsterdam or Utrecht were the best at sucking prick.

“You said you wanted to slake your thirst at The Duchess, did you not, Nicholas? Why, this alleyway will shorten our travels by quite a bit and get us away from this infernal crush of bodies.”

Nick compared Edgewine’s words to the map of Brussels he kept in his mind, acquired by years of shadowy service for Hugh Owen, and knew that Edgewine was so full of shit he should reek like a midden.

“S’t ruth? I had no idea. Lead on, Edgewine, lead on.”

“Oh, here’s a tasty bit of news.” Edgewine’s voice was a touch too excited. Its falseness scratched at his ear with warnings that he’d learned not to ignore.

*Here it comes.*

Stepping around a pile of dog shit overlooked by the tanners’ apprentices, Edgewine was careful not to look at Nick. “It seems that the English whore queen has lost her spymaster. The Puritan Walsingham has been gathered to the Devil’s bosom for his infernal reward.” He suddenly spun and glared at Nick. Braathuis’ sword rasped free behind him. “So who’ll pay your wages now, you heretic spy?” Steel glinted in his

fist.

Cloak on left arm. Nick horse-kicked, spurs forcing Braathuis back. Got space to draw his own sword and drove at Braathuis.

*Boxed. A very bad place to be. Rain barrel off to the side. Maybe. Braathuis first.*

Nick pulled up and threw his back against the alley wall by the barrel. Edgewine and Braathuis moved in, crowding each other. Braathuis essayed a thrust over the top of the barrel. Nick parried down, driving Braathuis's sword into the barrel. In the time provided by Braathuis the Shit-Wit trying to free his sword, Nick lunged at Edgewine. Squeaking in fear, he tried to fend off Nick with his dagger, wildly thrusting it in the air between them. Nick heard the barrel splinter behind him.

*Ending this now!*

He fouled Edgewine's dagger with his cloak. Drove his sword into the squeaker's thigh. Moaning and gasping like an ass-fucked cabin boy, Edgewine collapsed into the shit and mire.

"That's done for you."

"You fucking heretic!"

*Fuck!*

Nick spun. That great stinking blade coming right at him. A twisted downward parry. The shock of his sword breaking four inches above the hilt. The cold burn as the sword sliced into his fat belly. Expecting Nick to fall, Braathuis pulled his sword back to finish him off.

"Nay, boy, not so easy to kill a gutting man!" Nick bulled forward and head butted Braathuis to the ground. Knelt on his chest and shoved his broken blade into Braathuis'

face until the screaming stopped.

Nick grunted to his feet and stumped towards Edgewine. "And now, you. How much did that dribble dick Papist Owen tell you?"

Squealing thinly, both hands clamped around his wounded leg, Edgewine looked up from the alleyway. Tried to push himself backwards through the muck, away from Nick. A futile effort.

Dripping blood that was both his and Braathuis' Nick reached him in a few steps. Kicked him in the wound and then in the balls. Hunkered down to one side, avoiding the spew Edgewine coughed up.

"No time for Topcliffe artistry, so I'm just going to cut on you until you tell me. Then you can voyage on those juicy tits of the Virgin Mary all peaceful."

"I don't know anything!"

Nick sheared off one of his fingers.

"Who told Owen I was intelligencing for the Moor?"

"Don't know!"

"Tell me and I cut your throat quick and the pain stops. The longer you fuck me around, the longer the pain lasts."

"Don't know!" Edgewine drew trembling breaths, tears streaming down pasty cheeks. "Wait, wait, wait! Owen, he called me and Braathuis in, told us that you were a spy, promised to reward us if we did you."

"Was there anyone in the room with him?"

"Helmsley! Dick Helmsley, that high born English that's Owen's right hand. He's the one that told us to look for you at the stables as you were expected back. He did

most of the talking, Owen was mainly looking at a letter as Helmsley addressed us.”

“Owen wouldn’t tell you any more than was needful, I warrant. Well, Edgewine, you’re a treacherous back-stabbing little shit and I’m glad it’s me that gets to kill you.” Nick thrust the stub of his sword into Edgewine’s chest. He died with barely a whimper. From Edgewine’s cloak, Nick tore a length that wasn’t too smeared with blood and filth, pressed it to his wound.

*Fuck, I hurt. Have to get to ‘gritte and out of the city. Brussels is nothing but a killing floor for me now.*

How he made it across Brussels, Nick never knew. His left boot filling with blood, his sight going grey around the edges, he banged on the back gate of the Cornieliuszoon residence. Eventually, each rapid breath caused pain to stab from his wound, eventually the gate was opened a crack. The familiar face of Matthias, the stable boy, gaped at him.

“Myhneer Crosby! You’re all bloody!”

Nick was so far gone, he barely recognized the name by which all had known him these past years. “Aye, boy, I’m all bloody. Go fetch your mistress.” Nick stumbled past him and leaned against the inner wall. “Go now! But be quiet-like. No shouting. Just bring her.”

The boy moved off quickly and Nick just leaned there, trying not to pass out.

*Fuck, what a shambles this is. Walsingham dead? Can’t go back to my lodgings. Owen will have men watching them, likewise the gates. Glad I kept my bolt hole money and letters of credit here with ‘gritte. Who the fuck gave me over to Owen? He’s a dead man walking, whoever he is.* He checked the packet from Broussard, made sure it was

still safe. *Maybe some answers in this. And that rancid cove Poley has answers, always does, even if he doesn't like giving them up. So it's to London, then, and Poley. And get quit of this service, go back to honest smuggling. Have to stop bleeding first.* Light headed chuckles shook his frame. *Damn, that hurts! Where's 'gritte? That slack wit Matthias probably stopped in the stable to fuck a dog. Damn me, that's a lot of blood. I'll get passage across to England in Antwerp. I pray to God Great-Thirst is still running cargoes.*

"By the Virgin, Nick! You're a shambles!"

Nick looked bleary-eyed up at Margritte. *Why am I sitting down?* "Why it's an angel of mercy, sent from the Lord, to minister to the unworthy."

"So being gutted makes you an even bigger fool, Nick Crosby. I'll keep that in mind." She turned to Matthias and her gardener. "Quickly. Go fetch planks and bear Myhneer Crosby into the back room. Go!"

"Nonsense! I can walk. No need to carry me." Nick struggled to his feet and promptly fainted.