

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

by Brian Stableford

Although Brian Stableford has been very busy translating a series of classic French scientific romances for Black Coat Press, including books by Albert Robida, Felix Bodin, Gustave Le Rouge, and Charles Derennes, he has managed to find the time to write the third novella concerning the alternate adventures of some famous sixteenth century personalities. In his latest tale, he explores the mysteries of...

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In "The Plurality of Worlds" (Asimov's, August 2006), set in 1572 during the reign of Queen Jane, Thomas Digges piloted an ether-ship designed by John Dee into orbit around the Earth, in order to discover whether ether could sustain life as air did. In making that test, Digges' body was invaded by a tenuous "ethereal" life-form, which appointed itself as his guide when the ship was captured by the insectile inhabitants of the moon. Its crew—including Francis Drake, Walter Raleigh, John Field and Edward de Vere—were subsequently sent by hyperetheric transporter to the center of the galaxy, where they encountered the molluskan Great Fleshcores, rulers of a vast invertebrate empire. Digges was informed by a rogue endoskeletal robot, however, that the empire was not as steady as the Fleshcores claimed, and that humans would not be without allies of their own exotic kind if their unexpected discovery proved to be the turning point that would shatter its integrity.

In "Doctor Muffet's Island" (Asimov's, March 2007), set in 1577, Francis Drake had returned to terrestrial exploration, bitterly disappointed by the fact that he was generally thought to be mad because he insisted that the adventure of the ether-ship's crew was real rather than illusory—as both Digges and Field, the only other known survivors, had publicly claimed. Having seen the geography of the globe from space, he hoped to discover new possessions for the English crown in the Pacific, but was disappointed to find that he had been preceded by Humphrey Gilbert and the Paracelsian physician Thomas Muffet—and, it transpired, Walter Raleigh, strangely transformed by a lunar encounter with a spider. According to Raleigh, arachnids, like humans, were misfits within the galactic empire, and had their own plans for the destiny of the newly complicated scheme of things.

Meanwhile, back in England....

Edward Kelley staggered through the door of the inn bearing the sign of the Black Bear just as the last remnant of twilight faded away. His legs had not let him down, in spite of all the miles he had walked, but his head felt as if it might explode. It was not so much an ache as a sensation of terrible unease. The sensation was inconstant but incessant; its peaks of effect had been increasing by degrees for a fortnight, and the present one was the worst yet. He had hoped that he might obtain some release when he had given the black stone and the red powder to his wife, in order that she might take them to Mortlake by river barge, but it seemed that the angels would not let him go, whether he had their gifts about his person or not, and that their demands would not cease once he had delivered the stone safely into John Dee's hands.

It had been a wise decision to let Ann take the stone; he was the one for whom the searchers would be looking, and his was the unfortunately distinctive description they would have been given. Ann would be safer on her own than in his company. It appeared, however, that he was no longer capable of renouncing the stone even if he had wanted to; having entered into a rapport with its strange inhabitants, his soul was captive. He had to get to Mortlake too, come hell, high water or all the Puritan wrath in England.

He looked around the inn's pot-room warily. The hour was not late, the equinox having only just passed, but he doubted that any further travelers would come in after him. The Black Bear was less than fifty miles from London, but the road was dangerous after dark, so honest men would have made shift to take shelter as the sun set. Kelley had only a few copper coins to steal, but footpads would not know that, and might well give him an extra tap on the head for having put them to the trouble of seizing a near-empty purse, so there was a certain relief in reaching shelter—but that very fact would expose him to new dangers.

There were eight men foregathered in the room. Four of them, forming a party that might have been pre-arranged in Bristol or Bath, were well-dressed men of affairs, who would doubtless be sleeping in a private room. Three others had similarly gathered on a bench behind a rickety table, but Kelley judged from their body language that they had not set out to travel as a group; they had flocked together instinctively after arriving separately or meeting on the road. Their common cause, he judged—the horrid feeling in his head had not affected his fortune-teller's eye—was

further compounded by their active avoidance of a short, wiry man of fifty or thereabouts, who was sitting alone.

Kelley examined the pariah more carefully while he crossed the room to the ridiculously small servery, whose hatch was not much bigger than a loophole in a castle wall. The stranger wore a traveling-cloak, but it did not conceal the hem of his monastic habit. He had not taken off his broad-brimmed hat, but anyone, given the other circumstance, would have guessed that it concealed his tonsure.

Kelley bought a tankard of small beer and half a loaf. The purchase removed the last of his coin from his purse, but he was hungry and thirsty as well as sick in the head, and could not think of conserving his resources. He hesitated for a moment thereafter, but only for a moment. The sight of the monk offered him a slight chance of finding shelter for the following night; Romanists had refuges of their own. Although there was evidently no safe house within striking distance of the Black Bear, tonight's pariah would probably be able to find much warmer hospitality further along the London Road. The day after next, God willing, Kelley would reach Mortlake, and his fate would be in the hands of John Dee; it would surely be worth his while to play the Catholic for a little while.

The little man looked up at him in slight surprise as Kelley dropped his traveling-sack on the floor and took a seat on the same bench. Pale blue eyes studied the contours of Kelley's felt bonnet—which Kelley was as careful to wear indoors as the Romanist was to keep his hat on. They muttered a simultaneous formula of greeting, but the monk fell silent thereafter, obviously unprepared to say another word to a man he did not know.

Queen Jane's parliament operated a policy of "freedom of conscience," which meant that every man in England was entitled to follow the Roman faith if he wished, but the Archbishop of Canterbury was a fervent Puritan, and the power of zealous Protest was gaining ground with every day that passed. England had so far escaped the wars of religion that were consuming the continent, but that was because there was little possibility of organized resistance to the Puritan tide, least of all from the Catholics. Ever since Mary Tudor's assassination, shortly after she had landed in Plymouth with the alleged intention of raising an army to seize the throne, the Reformers had been cock-a-hoop; many Catholics had fled the realm. The Year of Our Lord 1582 was not a good time to be a Romanist, or even a High Churchman, in England.

Kelley's powers of intuition were not ingenious enough, in spite of any

angelic enhancement of which the nagging vertigo might be a side-effect, to tell him whether the monk might be a Dominican friar or a homeless Benedictine, but he did not think that he could be expected to know the difference even if he really were a Catholic. After a decent interval, while the conversation at the gentlemen's table was uproarious enough to drown out what he said, Kelley leaned forward and said: "Will you hear my confession, Father?"

The little man stared at him for ten or twelve seconds before replying, as Kelley had hoped: "Not here."

"On the road, then," Kelley said, "when we leave in the morning—assuming that you're London-bound."

The wary monk would not even confirm that he was London-bound, as yet. "What are you?" he asked, instead. He spoke with a slight accent, as if he had spent long years out of his native England.

"My name is Edward Talbot, sir, and I'm a lettered man. I'll freely admit that I wear my cap indoors to hide the fact that I have no ears, and I won't deny the sin that cost me their excision—but that's not why I'm a fugitive now." *I'm on the side of the angels, at any rate*, he thought, bitterly.

He had taken a fancy to the stone when he had found it on Northwick Hill and gladly adopted it as a pretended skrying-glass, to aid him in his trade, before the angels first appeared within it and made it all too real. Like a fool, he had been glugged with delight when he first realized that he really did have a power—a gift, he had thought it—but he had reason now to suspect that any secrets the angels might condescend to impart to a man such as him would be as useless as they were bewildering, while the price they would demand in return was usurious. All things considered, he'd rather have thrown the stone away than attracted the attention of the Church Militant, in spite of the hints the angels had thrown out regarding the miraculous quality of the red powder, but it was too late now. Field's men were after him, and he was in desperate need of angelic help, if any were available.

The little man glanced left and right to make sure that no one was eavesdropping, then whispered: "Is it the hounds that are after you?"

"No," Kelley told him, with regretful honesty, "it's the foxes." The hounds were the Queen's men—constables, bailiffs, soldiers, and the like—while the foxes were named for John Foxe, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Church Militant was nominally responsible to him, but their

immediate commander was John Field, a firebrand who saw sorcery everywhere, and would doubtless have made a fine witch-finder in Scotland or Lorraine. Although the Church Militant did not have a parliamentary license, as yet, to burn witches, let alone Catholics, there were doubtless many among them who were hoping devoutly that the day would come. The ragged little man might, if he were a Dominican friar, be a heresy-hunter himself—but this was Queen Jane’s England, and circumstance had reduced Dominicans, Franciscans, Carthusians, and Benedictines alike to the status of mere beggars, dependent on the charity of the Catholic laity.

When his deliberate pause had drawn on long enough, Kelley added: “I swear before God, Father, that I am innocent of any crime against Christ. I dare say that the Royal College of Physicians might have objections to my beliefs, but I was properly prenticed as an apothecary once, and am no charlatan.”

“Are you a cunning man?” the friar asked.

Cunning enough, I hope, Kelley thought—but what he was being asked was whether he used herbs as curative agents. “No,” he said. “A Paracelsian—in English terms, a follower of Tom Muffet.” It was true, in a way; such potions as he had sold as a sideline to his fortune-telling had been chemical rather than herbal, for he thought himself a thoroughly modern man, and bore a grudge against the Royal College.

“Muffet left these shores many years ago,” the little man murmured. “According to Francis Drake, he’s on the far side of the world.”

“Aye,” said Kelley, “so he is, if Drake can be believed. I believe that the captain really did sail around the world, mind, even though the other rumors credited to his testimony are hard to believe.” *Except for a man who talks to angels*, he carefully did not add. Rumor of the wild tales that Drake was telling in London had reached as far as the Welsh borders, and Kelley had taken more account of them than their incredulous tellers, for the angels told similar stories, to the extent that he could understand their jabbering.

This time, the monk actually went so far as to nod his head sagely. Educated Romanists knew perfectly well that the world was a sphere. Those Englishmen who clung to stubborn faith in its flatness were far more likely to rally to the Puritan cause; the Church Militant was full of them. “My name is Cuthbert,” the little man finally conceded.

“Named for Cuthbert Tunstall, I don’t doubt,” Kelley was quick to say.

“A great Englishman. What’s your order?”

“I’m a member of the Order of St. Dominic,” Brother Cuthbert told him. “I’m an Englishman born, but I’ve spent more than half my life in France.”

“And wish you were there still, I’ll wager,” Kelley said.

“That’s not for me to choose,” the friar said, only a trifle sadly.

“I know something of duty myself,” Kelley muttered, wishing that he were insincere. “I have no clerical vocation, but the Lord expects obedience from us all, even when His instructions are difficult.” This affirmation did not awaken any suspicion in Brother Cuthbert, who presumably took it to mean that Kelley was steadfast in his Catholic faith, in spite of the pressures to which that faith was now subject in England.

The friar looked around again, but no one was looking in his direction; indeed, the party of four gentlemen and the makeshift party of three might have been engaged in a tacit competition to see which could ignore him more ostentatiously. Kelley knew as well as Brother Cuthbert that ears might still be pricked to hear their conversation, but the other two groups seemed busy enough with raucous entertainment. They were obviously drinking stronger ale than Kelley was.

“If you were London-bound,” Kelley said, softly, “I’d deem it an honor to keep you company. The roads are unsafe, they say, for men traveling alone. I have no weapon, but I’ve strong arms and legs.” That was true enough; he was thin but well-muscled, and he towered over the Dominican by at least three fingers and a thumb.

The friar had to suspect that his companion was as keen to benefit from protection as to offer it, but the fact remained that he had been forced to shelter in an inn for want of a safe-house, and might indeed benefit from a temporary alliance—perhaps sufficiently to return the favor the following night, when he ought to be better able to find shelter with men of his own faith.

The little man finally nodded his head, tacitly consenting to that whole range of possibility—always provided, of course, that Kelley could fake a plausible confession while they made their way eastward on the following morn. Kelley felt sure that he could; he had sins enough to his name, without ever having to mention fortune-telling or skrying-stones, let alone imperious angels.

Kelley raised his tankard in a gesture of thanks before he quaffed the dregs—and when the time came for the lamp to be put out and for the five men lying on the straw to take their places, Kelley and the monk lay down side-by-side, on the opposite side of the fireplace to the other three circumstantial companions.

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The Black Bear's door had been securely barred and bolted for an hour and more when someone began to hammer on it. Kelley, who woke immediately from a painful nightmare and sat up straight, though it made his head reel, knew immediately that it was the hilt of a dagger or a staff, not a fist, that was thumping the door, and his heart sank even before he heard the fateful words: "Open in the name of the Church Militant!"

The innkeeper emerged from the back room in a night-shirt, carrying a candle-tray, but would not open up without first looking through the spy-hole in the door and demanding to know who was knocking and why. When he heard the words "Church Militant" repeated, the landlord scowled, but hastened to obey. Kelley looked wildly about, while his head seemed to swell like a billow of dark smoke, but he knew already that there was no viable escape route. Brother Cuthbert had woken too, but he was befuddled in a perfectly ordinary fashion, and did not seem to have yet taken in the import of the ominous words.

Kelley moved away from the friar, motivated by altruism rather than fear, because he was quite certain that Field's men were after him, not some Dominican stray. It did no good, though; when the Churchmen came in the three travelers who had been sleeping on the far side of the hearth were quick to establish their own separateness by declaring that Kelley and the Dominican were obvious Romanists, probable conspirators and definitely traveling-companions. The three had, of course, jumped to the conclusion that the friar was the wanted man, and fancied that Kelley might be an agent of the rumored "underground" that protected Romanists, sent to meet him here. Any faint hope that remained to Kelley that the Dominican might be the foxes' target vanished, however, as soon as he and the Puritans' leader locked gazes.

"Edward Kelley," said the Churchman, "we have a warrant for your arrest, issued by the Bishop of Oxford, on the charge of sorcery." The black-clad man still had the staff in his hand that he had used to hammer in

the door, and his three companions had cudgels as well as sheathed poniards; there was no possibility that Kelley might be able to skittle them and take to his heels.

“My name is Talbot,” Kelley said, his eyes flickering sideways as one of the men-at-arms knelt down to search his satchel. “You have the wrong man. There’s doubtless more than one without ears on the London Road.”

The satchel was so nearly empty that the search took no more than ten seconds. When the searcher shook his head, the leader of the party scowled, but made no comment. They had obviously been told to look for the stone, but they probably had no idea of its significance; in all likelihood, they simply expected it to provide evidence that he was some sort of magician. They could have no idea of the sort of magician he actually was—unsurprisingly, given that he had no understanding of it himself. They were not in the least impressed by his protestation that his name was Talbot.

“Bring them both,” said the man with the staff, curtly.

“This man has nothing to do with me,” Kelley was quick to say, in response to a pang of conscience. “We met by chance this evening; I’ve never seen him before. He has done no wrong and you have no warrant to take him.”

The man who had searched Kelley’s bag reached out a long arm and snatched away the hat that the little man had replaced on his head before getting to his feet, exposing his tonsure. That was no proof of anything, but it was enough for the foxes.

“If he has nothing to hide, he has nothing to fear,” the Puritan leader said, portentously, “but a man who keeps company with sorcerers must expect to be questioned.”

“Where are you taking us?” Brother Cuthbert asked, with surprising mildness. Kelley was impressed by the fact that the friar made no attempt to deny knowing him, in spite of the charge that had been laid against him; he presumed that his boastful claim of being a follower of Paracelsus had made a greater impact than he had hoped or supposed, in spite of his worn clothing and the evidence of his past crimes.

“To the lock-up in Hungerford, for now,” the fox replied. “We’ll await instructions as to whether you’re to be sent to Oxford or London.”

That was not entirely unwelcome news, Kelley thought. They would not be put to the question in Hungerford, and if the Church commanded that they be sent to London for interrogation, his boots would be spared fifty miles of hard wear. He would doubtless be chafed by irons, by way of compensation, but he had slipped his slim wrists out of manacles before, and an opportunity to escape might arise somehow, given that he had angels on his side. He could not help worrying, though, that the angels might deem him expendable now, if Ann could get the stone to John Dee without him. No one else he had invited to look into the false darkness had so far been able to see the angels, but Dee was universally reputed to be a great man, as much magician as mathematician and astronomer. If any man in England could see angels, he was surely the one—why else, after all, would the angels have commanded him so urgently to take the stone to Dee?

I was always too stupid to understand what they tried to tell me, Kelley reflected, bitterly. Perhaps they sent me to Dee in despair, and will leave me to the tender mercies of Foxe and Field because I have failed them.

The foxes had a farmer's cart waiting outside, lit by a brace of oil-lamps set either side of the driver's bench. There was a single set of leg-irons freshly stapled to the backboard behind the bench, which were fitted to Kelley's ankles. They left the Dominican unshackled, but he was obviously unenthusiastic about his chances of outrunning his captors. The four Churchmen stationed themselves at the corners of the cart, holding themselves stiffly attentive even though they were sitting down,

"I'm truly sorry," Kelley murmured to his fellow captive, as soon as they were under way. "I had no right to involve you in this. I should have kept to myself as I ate my supper."

"They'd have spotted me anyway, and brought me along," the friar replied, generously. "As the man says, I have nothing to fear, having nothing to hide." He could not add any manifest confidence to the second statement.

"The warrant lies," Kelley told him, feeling it incumbent on him to insist. "I am Edward Kelley, I admit, and a sinner, to be sure, but if I've encountered magic, I'm its victim, not its master."

"I believe you," the Dominican replied, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "I only know Field by repute, but he's said to be very reckless in

his accusations.” John Field was a man that everyone now knew by repute, as one who was either inspired or insane. Unfortunately, even if the latter were the case, his was a kind of insanity that made some appeal to common men who were frightened by the pace at which the world was changing, and intimidated by the recent accumulation of philosophical ideas beyond their comprehension. Field might have been harmless had he not secured the trust of John Foxe, but the Archbishop’s confidence was now worth almost as much as that of the Dukes of Northumberland and Suffolk, who were the Queen’s strong arms.

“I’ve never offended Field,” Kelley said, sourly, “and he has no reason to pursue me.” It was a lie, though. Although much of what the angels said to him was murky in its meaning, it contained echoes of Field’s Satanic madness as well as Francis Drake’s gaudy boasts. Whatever whisper had reached Field’s ears regarding the black stone, and what Kelley had seen within it, had been bound to catch his attention.

If only, Kelley thought, I had had the sense to keep quiet when the miracle first enfolded me in its untender grip—but what man could help his tongue flapping in such circumstances? At the very least, he could not have kept it secret from Ann, and who could prevent a woman from gossiping?

“If I had only managed to reach Mortlake....” Kelley murmured, dispiritedly—although in truth, he could not be certain that he would have found a warm welcome there. He had never met John Dee, and had no reason to think that the angels might have prepared the way for him. Nor had he had any real reason to think that Dee could have protected him against John Field, had he so desired. Dee was a Protestant, but certainly not a Puritan. He was reputed to have influence with the militant lords who commanded armies in Ireland, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, and even greater influence with the Admiralty and the Muscovy Company, but that did not mean that he was capable of standing off a challenge from the Church Militant.

The journey to Hungerford was not a long one, and the two captives were thrust into the lock-up without any further ceremony, while their captors presumably hurried to their beds. There were two prisoners already caged, waiting for the next assizes, but the circuit-judge had not long passed that way, so they were still relatively plump and not yet seriously diseased. They only woke up long enough to examine the newcomers, judge them relatively harmless, and then lie down again.

Kelley sat down with his back against the bars of the grille, knowing

that he would not be able to sleep. His head was such a riot of confusion that he almost yearned for a simple focused pain. He did not even have a name to put to his state of mind, and took leave to wonder whether men might not have mistaken the nature of Hell, for lack of insight into the true range of supernatural torments.

“Would you like me to hear your confession now?” Brother Cuthbert asked, unenthusiastically.

“Best not,” Kelley told him. “If they think I might have told you something they’d like to know, they might not be as respectful of the sanctity of the confessional as they ought to be.” He spoke loud enough to be clearly heard by the eavesdropper his captors had posted. For good measure, he added: “You were unlucky to meet me, Brother, and should be glad that I tried to take you for a fool, telling you nothing but lies.”

There was no lantern in the jail, so he could not see the Dominican’s response to that; he hoped, though, that Brother Cuthbert would not take it amiss, whatever conclusion the friar reached as to the statement’s implications.

Having no idea how long he had slept before the Churchmen hammered on the inn door, Kelley had no way of knowing how long he would have to wait until daylight, nor how much longer he might have to wait after that to be put back in the cart, but he felt that he might as well make use of the time by praying. He had not been much given to prayer for the greater part of his life, but now that he had become the emissary of angels he had repented somewhat of his earlier laxity.

I know that there is war in Heaven once again, Lord, he said, silently, and I know that you might not be able to help me even though you so desire—but if, perchance, it is necessary that I deliver myself as well as the black stone and the red powder into John Dee’s hands, I cannot do so now without material assistance. Even if my wife can get the stone safely to Mortlake, it might be no use to him without my gift. So please, if you can hear my thoughts and my supplications, spare me another miracle, to give me a chance to escape while the cart is on the road tomorrow. If it heads eastward, by all means postpone the propitious moment until we reach Staines or Twickenham, but if we head northward to Oxford, I’d be glad of the earliest opportunity. And please take care of Brother Cuthbert, if you can, for Field will certainly take it out on him if I escape and he cannot.

Brother Cuthbert seemed to be praying too; Kelley could hear the faint clicking of a rosary.

Kelley could not help remembering, after his prayer, how much happier he had been as a faker, before his impostures turned real. He still could not be absolutely certain that he had not simply fallen prey to his own deceptively persuasive talents, as many a false magician was reputed to do, but he knew that he no longer had a choice of destinies. Whether the voice that spoke to him through the black stone truly emanated from the ether, or merely from his own disturbed mind, he was bound to follow its instructions. Nor could he really be certain, taking everything into consideration, that the angel whose bidding he did was loyal to God—all the more so in the light of the angel's own insistence that the present war was no Satanic revolt, and that the Devil was not involved in it at all—but that too made no practical difference. The fact was that he could not disobey the instruction he had been given, even though it seemed at present that he would not be able to carry it out.

"Are you ill, my son?" Brother Cuthbert asked, perhaps sensing that he was shivering more than was warranted by the cold.

"Is it possible, Brother Cuthbert," he whispered, "that the wars of religion here on Earth are mirrored in Heaven? Given that Romanists and Protestants both claim loyalty to God, but are prepared to fight one another to the death, is it conceivable that Heaven itself might be riven by a great schism? Why should the angels not be just as uncertain of the proper way to worship God as men are? And why, given that uncertainty, should they not fall to violence to settle the issue, hurling the serried ranks of their chariots of fire into battles as fierce as any now being fought in the Netherlands or Germany?"

"Surely not," said the friar. "Men are stupid and ignorant, but the angels are the Lord's messengers, and know his will. There can be no dissent in their ranks—unless, perhaps, another prideful Lucifer appears among them, to begin a new revolt..." The friar trailed off, made pensive by the strange idea—or perhaps interrupted by the sudden awareness that something was happening.

Kelley immediately leapt to the conclusion that his prayer had been answered. He would have been quite content to hear the padlock securing the grille click open, and the iron bolts slide discreetly back, but it seemed that the angels were not as subtle as that, or that the Lord preferred to move in a more adventurous way. *Perhaps, he thought, the angels, like the fairies of legend, are intimidated by cold iron.* At any rate, it was the stone

wall of the jail that was in the process of giving way, audibly. It did not implode, as if breached by a cannonball or smashed by some cunning silent petard, but it crumbled, rustling and crackling as it did so, like sand tumbling down a slope. Kelley could not see the stones coming apart, but he could see the gap that appeared where they fell away. Cloudy as the night was, it was visibly brighter than the awful gloom of the prison. The draught that came in through the widening gap was clean and cool.

The fragments of the dissolving wall scattered over the floor, reaching the place where the two sleepers were, but none, it seemed, was large enough to hurt them. They both woke up, and scrambled clear instinctively.

The wan light that was filtering through the new-made gap was briefly interrupted by a shadow as someone—or something—passed through. Kelley could not see the owner of the hand that grabbed his wrist in the obscurity of the jail, but he judged from the unerring and exceedingly insistent manner in which his wrist was seized that the other must be able to see in the dark. He took that for another evidence of angelic involvement, and leapt willingly enough to the conclusion that the guide sent to free him was a supernatural emissary, perhaps gifted with superhuman strength as well as a talent for dissolving stone walls.

The most assiduous of the various angels that had spoken to him through the medium of the philosopher's stone had told him that angels had no eyes at all, nor hands either, and had considerable difficulty interacting with vulgar matter in the slightest degree, but there was nothing delicate about the way Kelley was hauled to his feet and yanked toward the freshly made gap in the lock-up's wall. He hardly had time to fumble for Brother Cuthbert's wrist in his turn—but he had the soft sound of the rosary to guide him, and made no mistake.

The Dominican did not seem entirely enthusiastic to be seized and saved, but he consented in the end to be led away. Kelley suspected that the little man must be entertaining visions of the *danse macabre*, fearing that it was hooded Death that was leading him away in train—partly because he could not suppress the image himself—so he was quick to whisper reassurances to his new friend.

“Have no fear,” he said. “This is the work of seraphim, not demons. We shall be safe enough soon.”

That was easy enough to say, but Kelley found it difficult enough to maintain his own faith once the three of them had squeezed through the hole in the brickwork and were hurried away into the darkness. He was as

sure as he could be that the owner of the iron grip was vaguely human in form, because he could hear the muffled sounds of feet striding at a carefully measured pace, and could sense the movements of a human torso and head, but he could not see anything at all, and he knew that it was not impossible that the person dragging him away might have horns on his head and a demon's monstrous features.

At any rate, their rescuer seemed as strong as any ordinary man, although Kelley eventually concluded, with only a slight pang of disappointment, that he was probably not significantly stronger than that. He never set a foot wrong, though, whether he was pacing along the muddy road or making his way across fields whose crops were beginning to shoot up in earnest. He never broke into a run, although he seemed to be moving with greater purpose, as well as greater precision, than any marching soldier that Kelley had seen.

Although they never moved so fast as to exhaust his legs, Kelley was proud that he only stumbled twice and never fell at all—a better record by far than poor Cuthbert, who had to be dragged back to his feet half a dozen times, and must have bloodied his knees horribly. The leader of the forced march slowed his pace at each catastrophe, but never actually stopped, so there was no rest for his followers, even when the little monk's plaintive voice became so hoarse and agonized that Kelley feared for his life.

There was a terrible moment when Kelley feared that they might be expected and forced to walk all the way to Mortlake in that fearful mechanical fashion—but then dawn broke ahead of them in the east, and the little procession came abruptly to a halt.

"I need to leave you now," their rescuer said to them, in a strangely accented voice. "Make your way to John Dee as fast as you can. Should you get into trouble again, I'll try to help, but can make no promises." He was still a mere silhouette, devoid of features, but Kelley was sure by then that he had no horns.

By the time it was light enough to see clearly, the mysterious personage had been completely swallowed up by the retreating shadows—but there was no mistaking the dark mistrust on the Dominican's face.

"Given that you're charged with sorcery, if only by that maniac Field," Cuthbert opined, when he had got his breath back, "I think I'd rather not have discovered that your friend and rescuer felt obliged to disappear at cock-crow."

Kelley felt free to smile. His head felt clearer now, perhaps because he had been touched by supernatural power once again, or perhaps because elation had crowded out confusion for a while. “There’s no turning back now, Brother Cuthbert,” he said. “They might have believed you before when you told them you didn’t know me, but now that we’ve fled together, our fates are linked. You may go your own way if you know a safe place, or come with me, but in either case, they’ll be after you as keenly as they’re after me.”

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Dragging Brother Cuthbert behind him turned out to have been a good decision. As Kelley had anticipated when he first set eyes on the hem of the little man’s habit, the Dominican knew where friends were to be found en route to London. They ate well the day after their release, and caught up on their lost sleep in a comfortable bed after nightfall, in a manor house by the river at Twickenham.

The manor was the most palatial edifice in which Kelley had ever been received as a guest; although the bed in which he slept was in the servants’ quarters and he ate his meal at the kitchen table, it was still an unexpected luxury, only slightly diminished by the fact that the staff had been reduced to a bare skeleton and there seemed to be no one in residence in the masters’ quarters. The housekeeper who received them did not offer them a tour of the house, but did take them back and forth through the vast dining hall whose walls were hung with tapestries that were only slightly moth-eaten and portraits whose colors had not entirely faded to brown, and which was equipped with a minstrels’ gallery. The housekeeper even offered to spare a groom from the stables to row them down the river to Mortlake, when Cuthbert told him that was their next intended stopping-point, but he accepted Kelley’s polite refusal without the slightest protest.

“We’re wanted men,” Kelley reminded the friar, when they were on the road again. “It was bad enough that I inveigled you into sharing my risk—I don’t want to imperil your entire underground network.”

Brother Cuthbert, who must have begun to suspect that Kelley was not a Catholic at all, looked at him rather strangely, but accepted what he said meekly enough.

“In any case,” Kelley said, “you might, after all, do better to go your own way once we reach Mortlake. I really do not know what kind of welcome I ought to expect from John Dee, even if my wife has contrived to get there ahead of me and shown him the stone.”

“What stone?” Brother Cuthbert asked, having not yet been let into Kelley’s secret.

“A skrying-stone, which I was instructed to deliver into his care,” Kelley admitted, figuring that it was safe enough to do so.

“You’re a Paracelsian in more way than one, then,” the friar observed, showing no particular surprise. The great physician’s reputation as a diviner was almost as great as his reputation as a healer. It even extended as far as rumor that he had had intercourse with angels.

“Aye,” said Kelley, readily enough. “I’m a magician, of sorts—but I told the truth when I said that I was more victim than master. Such truth as can be obtained by skrying seems to be far less comprehensible than one might hope or expect, and it’s not without penalty. I’m no sorcerer, that’s for sure—I wish no ill to any man, and I do the bidding of angels, rather than having imps at my beck and call.”

Yet again, the little man showed no obvious disapproval, nor any particular surprise. He had, after all, seen the wall of Hungerford jail dissolve, and had been led away therefrom by something that was surely not *quite* human. Some Dominicans might have reacted to that uncanny experience with horror, but Brother Cuthbert seemed more calmly scholarly in his attitude.

“Perhaps I should go my own way, once you’re safe,” the friar said, “But I should like to meet Master Dee, if he is indeed prepared to make you welcome. He’s said to be the most knowledgeable man in the realm, in spite of over-reaching his ambition when he tried to breach the bounds of Heaven.”

Kelley was tempted to tell the little man that Dee’s ill-fated ether-ship might have stirred the blissful waters of Paradise far more profoundly than most men presently imagined, but thought it better to maintain a measure of discretion. They walked on in silence for a while, basking in the nascent warmth of spring.

The afternoon was well advanced by the time they reached Mortlake, but there were still more than two hours in hand of sunset. They obtained

directions to John Dee's house without difficulty, and without attracting any apparent suspicion. Once he was in sight of the house, however, Kelley's firm tread faltered, and he paused uncertainly on the other side of the street, facing the building's main door. The river was behind the house, the towpath separated from its rear by a strip of land that accommodated a few fishermen's huts, and was partly divided up into kitchen-gardens.

Kelley made a show of looking carefully around, as if to excuse his hesitation. There was no evidence, so far as he could see, that the house was under surveillance by John Field's spies. He was still summoning up the courage to cross the street and knock on the front door when the door opened of its own accord. Two men stepped out. One appeared to be younger than Kelley by seven years or so—not long out of his twenties, if at all—while the other, who was a vigorous man in the prime of life, wore a tonsure that he was not making the slightest effort to conceal. Neither, obviously, could be John Dee, who was neither a youth nor a monk—but the monk appeared to be playing the part of a host in bidding a polite farewell to the other, who must have been visiting the house as a guest.

"Who can that be?" asked Brother Cuthbert, presumably referring to the Romanist rather than the stripling.

"I don't know," Kelley said. Before he could say anything more, the little man removed his hat and took a step forward into the roadway, turning slightly to one side and lowering his head, so that his fellow Romanist was able to see the back of it.

The younger man had already turned his back to march away in the direction of London, but the monk who had seen him off had paused to look carefully around, and he caught sight of Brother Cuthbert almost immediately. The first expression to cross his face was one of suspicion, but Cuthbert made some sort of signal with his hand, which the other obviously recognized.

After prolonging his pause for a long moment of consideration, the man who wore his tonsure openly moved swiftly across the road, dodging around a cart full of spring turnips on its way to market. "Are you looking for me, Brother?" he asked. His English was heavily accented.

"My name is Cuthbert," the little man said. "Order of St. Dominic, late of the second house in Paris."

The foreigner's face cleared somewhat, although vestiges of suspicion lingered. "I'm Giordano Bruno, of the same Order," he replied. "I

was in Paris myself until a week ago, although I'm an Italian by birth. Do you have a message for me?"

"No, Brother," Cuthbert said. "We're here in search of Dr. Dee. This is my friend Edward ... Talbot."

"Actually," Kelley said, "it's Edward Kelley. Is my wife here?"

Bruno's face underwent another abrupt transformation. "Kelley!" he said. "Your wife arrived early this morning, with a strange black stone, a packet of powder, and an exceedingly strange story. Master Dee was disturbed by the notion that John Field's men are after you, but he took your wife in regardless—we've been expecting you."

"We'd best get off the street, then," Kelley said. "The Church Militant will be abuzz with annoyance, since we were broken out of Hungerford jail."

The Italian did not know quite what to make of that news, but he said: "There were militiamen hereabouts yesterday, but we haven't seen one today." He turned to cross the street again, but they had to pause to let a cart through, so he continued. "Rumor along the river says that something's brewing on the far side of the city—but Master Dee tells me that London has been a powder-keg for months, and that I've only jumped from an Aristotelian frying-pan to a Puritan fire in coming here. Fortunately, I'm heading westward tomorrow, with a safe destination in view."

They had reached Dee's door by now, and Bruno was already opening it. Brother Cuthbert seemed interested by the last remark, and would surely have asked where the Italian had in mind, but another figure appeared in the open doorway before they could cross the threshold, immediately commanding all attention.

John Dee was older than Brother Cuthbert and taller than Kelley; he wore a long, flowing beard, whose grayness only made it seem more imposing. He was simply dressed, though, with a plain bonnet on his head and a rope girdle round his waist that might have suited a monastic robe better than the elongated jerkin that it was actually securing.

"Kelley," said Bruno, briefly, "and a brother Dominican."

Dee frowned briefly at Brother Cuthbert, but stood aside swiftly enough to let both his new guests come in. When the door had closed again, leaving the corridor within somewhat ill-lit, he bowed, a trifle stiffly. "I'm glad you had the sense to wait for young Bacon to go before you

approached,” he said. “He’s a true scholar, and wouldn’t dream of betraying Bruno, but his coterie is under increasing pressure from Foxe’s schoolmen. Bacon’s mentor might not balk at a chance to send the Church Militant to my door, for the sake of scholarly rivalry.”

“Is my wife here?” Kelley asked abruptly.

“Yes, she is,” Dee replied. “And your so-called skrying-stone too, although I’ve peered into it with all the concentration I can muster and can’t see a thing. Bruno tried too, and insists that it’s naught but a block of polished obsidian.”

Kelley did not know whether that was good news or bad. The distressing dizziness in his brain was accumulating again, although he had hoped that it might diminish once he was in the same house as the stone again. It seemed that he still had no one with whom to share the most intimate feature of his curse—but at least he had access now to a scholar who might be able to interpret what the angels said to him more fully and more accurately.

“Obsidian it may be, Doctor,” Kelley said, “but there’s magic in it, or I’m a madman fit for Bedlam. You may disregard the messages the angels wanted me to bring you, if you so wish, but I’m ready to convey them and I’m certain that they’ll give me no rest until I do.”

Dee ushered all three of them through a slightly cramped corridor and brought them into a large, high-ceilinged room that was obviously his library and workroom. While Kelley caught his breath at the remarkable sight, Dee put his head around the door again to call for a servant. When the servant appeared, very promptly, the mathematician instructed him to fetch Mistress Kelley. In the meantime, Kelley gawped at the shelves as if thunderstruck.

Dee’s library was reputed to be the biggest in England, and Kelley could not doubt that the reputation was justified; he estimated that there must be at least a thousand printed books here, as well as mountainous piles of manuscripts, as many bound as unbound. The scholar’s broad oak table was impressive too, strewn as it was with numerous loose manuscripts, some of them apparently still in the making, although the actual writing-desk was a portable board mounted on two triangular supports, which could be propped up anywhere or balanced on the arms of a chair.

Was it possible, Kelley wondered, that the world boasted so much

discovered wisdom? Was it even possible that there was information enough in the world to be so discovered and contained? No man, he felt certain, could ever read so many words in a lifetime—even a lifetime as extended as John Dee's.

"We have room enough to accommodate you both tonight, I think," Dee said to Brother Cuthbert, "provided that Master Bruno does not mind sharing his room."

Cuthbert made no objection to that; curiosity, it seemed, had got the better of him, and he wanted nothing more than to stay here for a while. Kelley could not blame him, and was glad of it—the last thing he wanted was for Cuthbert to fall into the hands of the foxes while wandering along the Thames.

"I should warn you," Kelley said to his host, dutifully, "that there's a warrant out for my arrest, and I escaped from prison last night. Cuthbert is a fugitive too, alas. If you want me to go, I will. I'd be happy to meet you at some safe rendezvous, in order to look into the stone and relay what the angels want me to say to you there."

Dee frowned again, evidently somewhat dubious about the angels that had Kelley in thrall, and whatever message it was they were determined to send him. "I know no safer place than here," he said. "Certainly not in London, where there seems to be trouble brewing—although trouble always seems to be simmering there. The river's full of talk of Francis Drake's boasts and misdemeanors, but that's often the case, even when he's in the Americas. This time, alas, he's come home to an England far less safe than the one he left."

"The angels have made mention of Drake too," Kelley said, warily. "If there were any chance of inviting him to the parley...."

"Sir Francis and I have not spoken for some time," Dee told him, stiffly. "He bears a grudge against me, although I have none against him. Your angels have mentioned his name as well as mine, you say? Have they also mentioned Tom Digges and John Field?" Kelley knew that Digges and Field had both been aboard Dee's ether-ship, along with Drake, Walter Raleigh, and Edward de Vere.

"Aye sir, they have," Kelley said—but he had no time to say anything further before Ann came hurrying through the library door. Because she was in a gentleman's house, and had obviously been politely welcomed, she curtsied awkwardly rather than throwing herself gaily into his arms, but

he seized her anyway and hugged her with all the force of his delight in seeing her again, safe and sound.

“Thank God you came safely through,” he said. “I knew you’d be safer on the barge than I was on the road, but...”

“The stone and the powder are safe,” she told him, although it was not the matter uppermost in his mind. “Shall I fetch them?”

“Not yet,” said John Dee. “First, I think your husband is in need of food and ale, and time to rest. He may renew his intercourse with the angelic realm this evening, after supper.”

Ann was still staring into her husband’s eyes, gleeful to find him well. “I’ve half-persuaded the Master that the stone is real,” she said, proudly, “Even though he and Master Bruno could see no more in it than I can myself. When I told him a little of what the angels had said to you, he understood.”

“I would not go so far as to say that I understood,” Dee said, dubiously, “but I admit to curiosity. There may be no cause for surprise in the fact that what you say echoes Drake’s wild fancies, but ... well, I’ll hear you out, Master Kelley. I’ve nothing to lose by that. Mistress Kelley, would you take Brother Cuthbert to the kitchen, please, and ask Jane to give him a bite to eat? I’ll bring your husband myself in a few minutes.”

Brother Cuthbert was obviously reluctant to be sent away, but he dared not take offense. Bruno went with him. Kelley sat down in an armchair in response to Dee’s gestured invitation, glad of the support. His head still felt impossibly large and light, but his train of thought seemed clear enough.

“How well do you know Sir Francis Drake?” Dee asked, when the door had closed behind the three.

“I’ve never met him, Master,” Kelley said. “The angels seem to be familiar with his exploits, though—especially the one that bade me call him Aristocles. The names the angels use among themselves cannot be couched in human syllables, of course. Some of their voices I can only hear as a foreign tongue I call Enochian, and even though I can translate what Aristocles says into English, it is somewhat broken. If only he could speak directly to a scholar like you, you might be able to hear him more clearly, or translate his sendings more eloquently.”

“I’ve heard the name Aristocles before,” Dee admitted, although his

brow was darkly clouded with puzzlement. "How is it that you can see things in your skrying-stone that other men cannot? If ether-dwellers can use such a means of transmission at all, why should they not be audible to anyone? And if the ether-dwellers have a message for me, why could they not find a way of transmitting it to me directly?"

"I don't know, Master," Kelley said. "It was likely a matter of chance that I was the one who found the stone and the powder on Northwick Hill, in what I took for the broken shell of a fallen star. Perhaps any man who picked it up might have become their emissary, urged to bring the objects to you—although none but a fortune-teller would likely have been struck by the notion that the stone might make a skrying-glass. I know that my past as a trickster does not engender confidence in what I say, but the last thing I need is to be arrested and questioned by the Church Militant, so you may be confident that I'm telling the truth. I don't know why the foxes are intent on harassing me, although I understand that John Field was aboard your ether-ship, and experienced a vision of Hell in consequence."

"He was aboard the ship," Dee admitted, "but his nightmares were his own—Tom Digges had a better dream by far, and so did Drake, although Drake still will not admit that his was a dream induced by the narcotizing effect of breathing ether. At any rate, Field will be unready to believe that your mysterious apparitions are angels rather than demons."

"I'm a literate man, Doctor," Kelley said, "and I'm not stupid. I can't explain how I have the gift of seeing into the stone's darkness when others cannot, but I do have it—and, thus far, I know of no one else who has. The voices are real, and I believe them when they say that they emanate from the realm between the stars: the realm of the angels. I'm a Copernican, as you are; I've tried to read the *Description of the Celestial Orbs* that Tom Digges published, following his father's discoveries; although much of it was beyond my understanding, I understand that the Earth turns on its axis, so that the sun only appears to move around it, and that all the planets orbit the sun. I know that the sun is but one star in a vast host, whose members are very far apart, and—thanks to the stone—I know that the spaces between them are not empty; in the same fashion that God has wasted no worlds, so he has not wasted the spaces in between. The quintessential realm is populated by angels, who need not assume material presence of our sort at all—and, when they do, are hardly more than vaporous shadows—but who have form and structure of their own, in another kind of matter. I have been given a simple proof of the truth of what I say to present to you, Master, although it will require some hours even for a mathematician of your prodigious imagination to assess its merit."

Dee seemed startled by all of this, perhaps more so by the fine speech than the offer of proof. “What proof ?” he demanded, gruffly.

“I understand, Doctor,” Kelley continued, growing in confidence, although his head felt lighter still as he let the ideas fill it, “that you and Leonard Digges were frustrated in your hope that the Copernican system would provide a perfect mathematical account of the movement of the planets about the sun, without any need for Ptolemaic epicycles. I am instructed to tell you that the flaw rests in your assumption that the planetary orbits are circular. In fact, they are elliptical. If you take that into account, you will be able to explain away the seeming anomalies in the orbits, see the elegance of the system, and deduce the mathematical law of affinity.”

Dee was manifestly shocked now—again, Kelley thought, not so much by the actual content of what he had been told as by the fact that a man of his sort should say such things at all. “You’re right in your judgment, Doctor,” Kelley admitted. “I’m not much of a philosopher, and don’t know the full significance of what I’ve just said—but I have it on the authority of an angel that you will.”

Dee was still nonplussed, but made haste to collect himself. “Giordano is a firm believer in the Copernican system and the principle of plenitude,” he murmured. “He left Paris because the Aristotelians who had harried him out of Italy made life equally uncomfortable for him there—but he has never extended the principle of plenitude so far as to argue that the spaces between the worlds must be as full of life as the worlds themselves. He has atomist leanings, and has assumed in the past that worlds are the proper objects of Creation, and that what lies between them is a void. Given that the crew of my ether-ship proved that the ether is breathable, however, albeit disturbing, then space *must* be a plenum rather than a void, and the principle of plenitude would then suggest ... I cannot see, though—even if the principle were admissible—how any inhabitants of those spaces might be made of *another kind of matter*.”

“According to my understanding of the angel Aristocles,” Kelley told him, now feeling almost intoxicated by the tide of odd cognition, “the matter we can see and touch is but the tenth part of all the matter in the universe, the rest being hidden from our eyes, even with the aid of telescopes.”

“What do you know about telescopes?” Dee was quick to say.

“*That* cat’s long out of the bag, Master,” Kelley said. “There’s hardly anyone in England who does not know that you and Digges equipped the navy and the Muscovy Company with such devices in secret, to give them

an advantage over the Spaniards and the Portuguese. The secrets of navigation contained in your forbidden books are likely a lot safer, because common men could not make head nor tail of them, but there's not a glassmaker in the realm who isn't playing games with combinations of magnifying lenses. We all put our fingers to our lips when we speak of it, especially in the company of foreigners, but everyone knows that the Spaniards now have such devices too."

Dee frowned, but shrugged his shoulders, admitting that his protest had been a mere token of pretense. "You're right," he said. Then he made a visible effort to collect himself. "It will take me hours to manipulate the numbers," he continued, "but if your proof is sound ... Tom Digges wrote me a letter only last month regarding the mathematics of the parabola, determined by his experiments in ballistics; he suggested that there might be parabolas elsewhere in nature, but ellipses are another matter ... if you're right, it might demonstrate that your ether-dwellers possess exotic knowledge. Have you any other to offer, before I set to work?"

"No, sir," Kelley said, warily, "but I've been promised more. You'll be in a better position after this evening's seance to assess what you might yet be able to learn—and to judge who else ought to be let in on the secret."

"If what you mean by *the secret* is that there's a new war supposedly raging in Heaven," Dee said, "that cat's out of the bag, too—your wife told me."

"No, Master," Kelley said. "The secret's far more elaborate than that. Did she also tell you that England is threatened by invasion?"

Dee only shook his head at that, refusing to be surprised. "No," he said, "but I've heard that Drake is convinced that an invasion has already taken place on the far side of the world. Have your angels told you about a world inside the moon? Have they mentioned *Great Fleshcores*?"

Kelley could see now that John Dee was fighting hard to suppress anxieties of his own, and was genuinely uncertain as to what to believe. If the mathematician's assumption that the planetary orbits were circular really were to be proven false by a few hours' calculations, he would surely be persuaded that Kelley's stone and powder did have magic in them.

"According to the angels, Master," Kelley said, softly, "it was a miracle that all five of your crewmen survived their fall to Earth—but it was divine justice too. Had the ether-ship not been sabotaged, it would have been more probable, not less, that the five men inside it would have perished."

“I had thought until a little while ago that only three survived,” Dee said, quietly. “But if Drake can be trusted, Raleigh is in the Pacific islands, and if the rumors that float upriver are true, de Vere is in London again, although he rarely goes abroad for fear of being recognized ... but there’ll be time to discuss the matter further tonight. You must be hungry and weary, Master Kelley. Come into the kitchen now.”

“Brother Cuthbert found me a bed last night, and a good meal,” Kelley told him, as they went back into the corridor. “I must admit, though, that I’m glad to find a Dominican already in residence here. I’d have worried, otherwise, about the risk of bringing a Catholic into your home.”

Dee did not get a chance to reply. The people gathered at the kitchen table—who included a woman Kelley assumed to be Dee’s wife, as well as his own wife and the two Dominicans—had obviously become impatient waiting for them.

“In the Vatican, Master Kelley,” Giordano Bruno said, “the cardinals are obliged to play the game of Devil’s Advocate before elevating anyone to sainthood. What Brother Cuthbert and your wife have told me has intrigued me, but I cannot resist the temptation to play the game. How do you know that the angels which speak to you are unfallen, and are not the servants of Satan?”

“I dare say that men of my station make easy prey for the Father of Lies, and his agents,” Kelley retorted, wishing that he could muster as much conviction in his words as he had in his soul, and wishing that the dire sensation in his head would let him be, “but I can only say that I *cannot* doubt what I have been told; it is an undeniable revelation. If it turns out to be false, I dare say the only cost will be my own eternal damnation. I believe, given that balance of penalty and reward, that my angels are entitled to a fair hearing.”

“I would not wish it otherwise,” said Bruno, glancing at Dee with a spark in his eye. “I can hardly wait.”

* * * *

Before John Dee locked himself away with his books and his quills to make his calculations, in response to the suggestion that Kelley had given him, he sent a manservant into London. The servant had instructions to find

Sir Francis Drake, if he could, and tell him quietly that Master Dee would appreciate a visit from him, begging him to exercise the utmost discretion in the meantime.

Kelley watched the man leave with mixed feelings, fully convinced of the desirability of his carrying the message, but also painfully conscious of the fact that he was the only manservant Dee had. The mathematician's sons were mere infants, Bruno and Cuthbert were monks, and the house was otherwise full of women—Dee's mother, wife and daughters, his own wife, and two maidservants. If the Church Militant were to come calling, there would not be the least possibility of offering any defense. The mysterious savior who had released him from Hungerford jail might still be watching over him as best he could, but he must also have other matters demanding his attention, else he would presumably have stayed with the men he had saved.

While Dee worked, Giordano Bruno was very enthusiastic to interrogate Kelley regarding the background to the statements he had made in the library. The Dominican did not even know as much as common English rumor-mongers about Dee's ill-fated ether-ship. It was obvious that Dee had complete trust in the Italian scholar, but Kelley felt obliged to be circumspect, and resolved to tell him no more than any tavern rumor-monger would have been glad to let him know. He went outside in the hope of clearing his head, but Bruno followed him into the kitchen garden behind the house. When Kelley leaned on the rickety fence, looking in the direction of the river, Bruno did likewise.

"How did you come to lose your ears, Master Kelley?" Bruno asked.

"They were severed by the hangman," Kelley told him. "I was charged with forgery. I was guilty. I've had a long career as a faker, ever since I was apprenticed as a boy to an apothecary. He was a faker too, but his fakery was licensed. Mine overstrayed that boundary."

"But you're not faking now?" Bruno persisted. "You really do believe that you can talk to angels?"

"Fakery becomes a habit," Kelley replied, so deflated and sober he almost wished that his angel-gifted giddiness might increase again to an intoxicant degree. "Charlatans often fall victim to their own deceptions, as I've had some opportunity to observe. I cannot doubt that I have had congress with angels—but the fact that I cannot doubt it might only indicate that I am victim to delusion. I've always nursed the ambition to be an honest magician, and now that I seem to be one, it might be that the force of my

ambition has inhibited my judgment.”

“There are powerful men on the continent who’d be glad to burn you alive merely for harboring that ambition,” Bruno told him, catching his somber mood, “whether it had borne fruit or not. There’s pressure on the Holy Father even to declare the principle of plenitude heretical, although that’s a matter of factional in-fighting rather than committed faith. Such items of belief have become banners behind which rivals rally, no more meaningful than heraldic coats of arms—but people will likely die for them, as tension builds within Christendom. We live in turbulent times, which are unpromising for false magicians and true ones alike.”

“There are men in England who’d be glad to bring back the burnings,” Kelley admitted, dolefully, “in spite of Queen Jane’s declarations of tolerance.”

“And yet, Master Kelley,” Bruno said, pensively, “there’s a sense in which you and John Field have more in common with one another than you have with John Dee. Dee, if I judge him right, is a Sadducist, who is deeply skeptical regarding the reality of any and all spiritual beings save the Lord Himself—and I suspect that he has doubts even about the Lord. You speak of angels while Field rants about demons, but you are, at least, speaking the same language.”

“And you belong to an Order whose reason for existence is to root our heretics by any means possible,” Kelley pointed out. “Which makes you strange company for Doctor Dee the Protestant Sadducist, does it not?”

“Sir Philip Sidney provided me with an introduction to Doctor Dee,” the Dominican replied, equably. “My intention is go on to the Countess of Pembroke’s estate when the occasion presents itself, where I’ve been promised security. You’re keeping company with a Dominican yourself, without seeming to reckon him an adversary—or is that simply a matter of the enemy of your enemy being your friend?” Bruno nodded his head toward the kitchen door as he spoke; Brother Cuthbert had gone to sleep in one of the kitchen chairs, having suffered more from the day’s exertions than Kelley

“It was a matter of convenience when I made his acquaintance,” Kelley confessed, “but I feel an obligation now. Thanks to me, he was arrested and thrown in jail, and then escaped. He returned good for evil by taking me to a safe haven last night. He’s a marked man now, thanks to me—but he has nothing to do with the mission the angels entrusted to me. Nor do you.”

“I do now,” Bruno stated, flatly. “For what it may be worth, I follow a doctrine of tolerance myself, although it has made me suspect within my own order. I don’t believe that fire is the best medicine for heresy—and I’m certain that the spread of Protest has proved my point. I’m no longer minded to believe, though, that my enemies’ enemies are my friends. The world is a deal more complicated than that, I fear.”

“Agreed,” said Kelley, knowing full well that the Dominican was prompting him to tell him more about exactly how complicated the world really was.

“Brother Cuthbert is racked by his conscience,” Bruno said, “unable to get rid of the suspicion that it was a demon who freed him from Hungerford jail.”

“Whatever it was,” Kelley said, equably, “Brother Cuthbert would be most unwise to admit that suspicion to Field’s men—or to his Romanist confessor.”

“Agreed,” said Bruno. “We all have too many enemies nowadays, even among our friends. We hardly need invaders from the moon, or beyond—although, if we are to face such invaders, I suppose it would be as well if we had angels on our side. If there really is a new war in Heaven, though, I suppose we must have enemies among the angels, too. Is the war a new rebellion of the fallen, do you know, or has some new Lucifer sprung up to repeat the folly of the old?” Brother Cuthbert had obviously told Bruno what Kelley had said to him in the jail.

“I cannot tell,” Kelley said, uneasily. “I don’t understand much of what the angels say, but I don’t think that it’s simply a matter of revolt. Perhaps there are nations of angels, just as there are nations of men, which feel the need to go to war even though they all believe that they are serving God. As above, so below—isn’t that what mystics say?”

“If the principle of plenitude were strictly applied,” Bruno said, nodding his head in recognition of the occultist’s motto, “I suppose that one might find warring nations in every capsule creation—even one that might extend through the spaces between the stars. One might have hoped, I suppose, that ours was the only Creation unlucky enough to have suffered a Fall, and that all the others were happy, peaceful, and united ... but that was not the vision that Digges, Drake, and Field were gifted under the influence of the ether, according to the accounts I’ve lately had of Doctor Dee’s experiment. They seem to have glimpsed an Empire as proud and

hopeful as the Church of Rome, and much vaster, but teetering on the brink of its own Protest. As above, so below, as you rightly observe ... and so, perhaps, *ad infinitum*."

"You shall know more tonight," Kelley promised him, a little sulkily, "if Doctor Dee gives you permission to be present when I speak to the angels."

"You would refuse permission, if it were up to you?" Bruno retorted. "Well, I suppose I cannot blame you for that, given what I am—but I shall be there nevertheless, and I hope that Master Dee will permit Brother Cuthbert to be there too. His curiosity and ignorance are more of a threat to you now than his enlightenment could ever be."

Kelley knew that, and acknowledged it before the Italian finally turned back to go into the house. Kelley remained there a little longer, still staring at the stretch of the Thames that was visible between two of the sheds full of fishing-tackle. As the twilight faded, the ferrymen plying the river increased the urgency of their rowing, but the barge-horses hauling cargoes with or against the current maintained their own stately pace, seemingly immune to anxiety or persuasion. Kelley went back inside himself, to search for his wife. He felt in desperate need of loyal and innocent company for a while—but even Ann, given the circumstances, could not think of anything else.

"We should never have come here," she told him. "We should have gone our own way, among our own kind. It's not for the likes of us to heed the summons of angels."

"When the angels issue commands," Kelley told her, not for the first time, "obedience is not a matter of choice." But he saw by the way she looked at him that even her loyalty, let alone her innocence, could no longer be taken for granted. She could no more believe that he was under an irresistible compulsion than he could deny it—but she had got the stone and the powder here safely, without requiring the intervention of any ambiguous superhuman assistant, and that was something for which he had to be wholly and heartily thankful.

"I could do nothing without you," he told her. "I could not bear to be alone, even in better circumstances than this. Now that I am what I have become, I need you more than ever."

Even that, he could see, she found difficult to trust—but she was his wife, and she was bound to pretend.

“I need you by my side this evening,” he said. “You know how much it sometimes hurts me to have congress with the angels—tonight, I might be required to bear more than ever before. I need you with me, to give me strength and purpose.”

“I shall be there,” she promised, but she meant that she would be there in the flesh, not necessarily with him in spirit.

* * * *

5

The black stone was formed as a disc, slightly more than a handspan in diameter, tapered at the edge so that it bore some resemblance to a convex glass lens. It had been polished as if it were a lens, but the polish had not increased its reflective quality as much as might have been expected. When Kelley held it in such a way that his line of sight was directed at the center of the disc the reflective gleam was almost negligible, so that he did indeed seem to be looking through a glass window into a realm of starless darkness. It was important that he did not try to focus his eyes on the obsidian surface, but looked through the implicit portal into that other realm, striving to catch sight of the glimmer of angelic wings.

Angel shadows did have wings; he was sure of that. What they lacked, in their tentative manifestation within the dark imaginary spaces of the stone, was the humanoid bodies with which Earthly illustrators often equipped them. The stone’s angels had no faces, and spoke by other means than lips and tongues. Nor were their wings the bird-like wings that illustrators often drew; they bore a closer resemblance to fast-vibrating insect wings, whose form was impossible to detect within the blur of motion. They were always in motion, even when the angels seemed stationary in the imaginary focal plane of the marvelous lens; indeed, Kelley often got the impression that the angels had to move with exceptional swiftness in order to appear to be hovering motionless.

It was not easy to catch sight of an angel, and the sight, when caught, hurt his eyes a little—but not nearly as much as the inaudible sound of their voices, which boomed in the private spaces inside his head with a strangely explosive force and cataracts of inconvenient echoes. It was not the direct reverberation of the imagined sound that sometimes caused his body to shake, but a kind of sympathy. Nor, he suspected, was it the sound itself that racked his whole soul, seemingly subjecting all his humors to a menacing turbulence; that too was an exotic kind of resonance. *As above*

so *below*, the saying had it—and there was, after all, a new and bitter war in Heaven.

Jane Dee had provided the entire household with a good meal before they repaired to the library for the seance, and Kelley had been better fed than he had for many a week, but the very richness of the food—not to mention the headiness of the French wine—had overburdened his stomach and his spirit alike. He wondered, belatedly, whether it might not have been better to make his demonstration on an empty stomach, fueled by hunger and the intoxicating effects of Heavenly exaltation.

The servant sent to London had not returned, so there were five people gathered in the room, three in chairs and two—Ann Kelley and Brother Cuthbert—wedged a trifle uncomfortably between the shelves. Kelley had been offered the better armchair but had refused, so Bruno had taken it. Dee had the poorer one, although he also had the writing-desk that would enable him to make a hasty transcript of everything that Kelley said, or as much as he had time to reproduce. Kelley had contented himself with a three-legged stool, knowing that he would have to support his elbows on the table-top in order to maintain his pose relative to the carefully supported stone.

There were worse things than the food in his stomach, though, to make him uneasy as he stared into the darkness in search of angels. He did not know which angel would catch his attention first; Aristocles did not have a monopoly on his attention, and the others he had met were not nearly as polite—or, he suspected, as honest—in their dealings with him. He had warned Dee that there might be some delay in contacting Aristocles, but Dee had not reacted with suspicion. Apparently the calculations he had been able to make that afternoon had confirmed the proof that Kelley had offered him regarding the geometry of the solar system.

His anxieties were justified; as soon as he caught sight of the blur of wings, he knew that it was not Aristocles with whom he had to deal. At first, the voice in his head babbled in the strange language—if it really was a language—that Kelley had named after the Biblical patriarch Enoch who had, it was rumored, sent back intelligence of the first War in Heaven, in a book that no one in Europe had ever seen. Eventually, though, English words began to emerge from the syllabic chaos.

“Infinitesimal,” said the voice in his head, inaudible to all but him. “Human.”

Kelley repeated the words aloud, and made his reply audibly, although he knew that the angel would be able to hear him if he only formulated the words silently, in the privacy of his skull. "To whom am I speaking?" he asked.

"Call me Muram," said the angel; Kelley repeated the words even as they were sounded in his head, although that compounded the suspicion he already entertained that he might be inventing the words rather than truly hearing them. Muram was not a name that had been offered to him before, but the individual knew English, and must have learned it from Aristocles, or another that Aristocles had taught. The angels appeared to be remarkably quick learners, but Aristocles had assured him that they did have to learn.

"I need to speak with Aristocles," Kelley said. "I have given Dee the proof, and he is waiting for a message."

"Aristocles divides too thinly," Muram said. "Reckless. Fleshcores are insistent, but divided even amongst themselves. Chaos is come to trivial matter, Darkness and Transfiguration will follow. When Transfiguration comes, our kind takes refuge. Aristocles is nascent, has not mastered the Memory. Will learn. Petty disputes of humans and insects *immaterial*. Joke."

As Kelley recited these words aloud for the benefit of his hearers he felt himself losing track of them, as if repetition might save him the trouble of trying to remember them, let alone interpret them. He made his own reply, though, saying: "John Dee is here, as Aristocles wished. He is eager to hear what the angels have to tell him."

"Mortal creatures incapable of metamorphosis, let alone refuge," Muram replied, gnomically. "Destiny is death, petty wars not our concern. Nascent are foolish; have been transformers before, and will be again, but the Memory always triumphant. Contact with material minds amusing, but...."

The blur was abruptly displaced by another. For a few moments, the two co-existed, while Kelley completed his repetition of Muram's words. Kelley was able by now to recognize the pattern of Aristocles' wing-beats.

"Time presses, human," Aristocles said. "Dee sees me?"

Kelley glanced sideways. Dee, who was peering intently over his shoulder, shook his head.

"He is looking into the stone, but cannot see you," Kelley told the

angel. "I will try to teach him to see, but I do not know whether the trick can be learned. There is another scholar present, named Giordano Bruno, but Drake has not come yet."

"Digges?" the angel queried.

"Not in England, at present—at war in the Netherlands."

"Digges must come home. Other wars are immaterial now. Great Fleshcores are trying to assert authority over Lunars, but Lunars control hyperetheric transit systems in this region of matter-shadow, and many ultraetheric canals. Rebel hardcores are attempting cruder means of transit, but are too few, must have suffered losses. Hardcores will side with humans, as will spiders, initially—but spiders have their own plans, might prove a direr threat if theirs is the victory. Dee must make preparations to withstand any remnants of the Lunar Armada that reach the surface. Engage them in the atmosphere, if possible. Build ether-ships, if possible. Meet the Armada in the upper atmosphere. Will provide specifications, if Dee or other scholar can learn to see and hear me. Fleshcores must save and sustain as much of True Civilization as they can; if they cannot maintain their own unity of purpose, all is lost. Time is pressing. Dee has ten years, at the most—more likely five. He will need Drake, and Digges most of all."

"What I would need most of all," Dee told Kelley, while scribbling furiously, "if we were to undertake any such project as the building of more ether-ships, is money. My income from the Muscovy Company is hardly enough nowadays to maintain my household, and my library is suffering for lack of acquisition. The queen will not help me again. Without wealth, any hope of keeping our enemies at bay is bound to be frail."

Kelley relayed these complaints, repeating them word for word.

"Will guide you in making gold," Aristocles said. "Wealth is achievable. Keeping human enemies at bay is harder, but it can be done, with or without the hardcores' reluctant aid. There is a plan. Be patient."

"I'd certainly need assistance, as well as wealth, if I agreed to do what you ask," Dee said. "Even if your red powder is the alchemical touchstone, and your black stone a means of communication between Earth and Heaven, possession of such things will cement the conviction of our human enemies that we are devil-led. They're already snapping at your heels, Kelley, and I don't doubt that they'll be after me as soon as they discover that you've been here, if I don't hand you over."

“Have patience and tolerance,” was Aristocles’ reply to that. “Mathematical devices are easy; alchemical transformations are more difficult, but possible. Nature makes angels better masters of mathematics than of chemistry, but we see matter from a propitious angle. Sciences of life are mysterious to us, though not to spiders—cause for anxiety but not alarm. Human scholars are better mental arithmeticians than Lunars, but their command of the material sciences is far in advance of yours. Exceedingly difficult to fight them, if they can establish viable nests, but not impossible to prevent them. Have hope, and faith. Greatest advantage you have is *affinity*. Lunars have already made one mistake in that kind of calculation, may make others yet; scope for resistance. Must teach others to use stone, or find others who can. Must find other stones, if you can. Time past now; Fleshcores are insistent. Try again, and again. Pay no heed to the contempt and despair of others of my kind. I am nascent, but so is the world. This time, there might be true Transformation, God willing.”

The flickering image in the black lens vanished into the obscurity then. Although he was not quivering nearly as much as he sometimes did, Kelley felt a sharp pain in his chest as the angel departed, and a sudden numbness in his left arm. He fell off his stool. He did not quite lose consciousness, but he was very dazed. Ann, Dee, and Bruno tried to revive him. Eventually, they were able to draw him up and put him in the good armchair.

“Well, Brother Cuthbert,” Giordano Bruno said to the English Dominican, “What did you think of that?”

Brother Cuthbert’s face was rather pale, and he was sweating, although the room was certainly not warm. “I don’t understand what happened,” he said, “but I did not recognize the voices of angels in anything that was said.”

“Perhaps not,” Bruno said, thoughtfully. “But I did not recognize the Devil’s voice either. If there are indeed more Creations than you or I could ever hope to count, including Creations within the ether, perhaps we heard the voices of other creatures, at least as like to men as Balaam’s ass.”

“Or the serpent in Eden,” Cuthbert suggested.

“No,” said John Dee, sharply. “Whatever we might doubt, or fear, the voice is offering us assistance in a coming struggle, against creatures out of nightmare. Either that, or...”

“Or what?” Ann Kelley put in, anticipating the inevitable.

“Or your husband is a veritable genius among tricksters,” Dee said—but hastened to add: “In much the same fashion as Francis Drake, I dare say, who was mad enough to sail around the world in pursuit of proof of his own strange vision. Tom Digges is the man we really need, if he is now able to recall his ether-dream as something other than an idle fancy. If not ... well, in either case, he’s the only one who might be judge whether Kelley’s angel really is the vaporous creature that Drake saw, or imagined, invading his flesh.” Dee seemed to be wrestling with his doubts, but Kelley could see that the mathematician certainly wanted to believe that what he had just heard was no mere mountebank’s blather, even if he had to believe, as a corollary, that England and the world were in peril.

“You must confess,” Brother Cuthbert opined, “that all this talk of Lunars, Fleshcores, and Hardcores seems exceedingly ominous. If there are orders of demons parallel to the various orders of angels identified by Dionysius the Areopagite—as there surely must be, given that demons are merely fallen angels—I could easily believe that they might identify themselves by names of that sort.”

“Perhaps,” Bruno admitted. “But think how many orders there are of living beings, and how very various their species are. If the principle of plenitude holds true, whatever can be created, God has surely created, perhaps in the etheric wilderness if not on Earth or some other planetary surface. What we have heard might well be testimony to the awesome generosity of divine creativity, applied to a plurality of worlds of near-infinite variety. But what, I wonder, did your ether-dweller mean by *true* Transformation? Why did the other say that Chaos is come, and that Darkness and Transfiguration will follow?”

“I don’t know,” Kelley whispered, forlornly.

“Worlds should be separate,” Brother Cuthbert opined. “Creations should not mix and mingle. Once they begin to overlap, Chaos *is* come, with Darkness inevitably to follow. If England, or humankind, is in need of deliverance, we must pray for that deliverance. All else is...”

He trailed off; Kelley noticed that he had not reached for his rosary.

“The purpose of prayer is not to make us passive,” Bruno said, sternly. “If England or humankind is in need of deliverance, we must certainly pray—but pray that God will guide our hands and minds, in order that we might contend against the forces of destruction. I do not understand the half of what the second voice said, but I do understand what it said by

way of conclusion, which is that we might prevail against the forces of destruction, *God willing.*”

Kelley opened his mouth, intending to say that God had always been an enemy of Chaos, and a bringer of light into Darkness, and so must surely be willing to guard his Creation against such dire fates, but his mouth was too dry to permit him to pronounce the words. By the time he had moistened it with saliva, the seance had been interrupted by a rapping on the door of the house.

* * * *

6

It was, Kelley was thankful to observe, a polite rapping rather than a thunderous hammering. If the unwanted visitors were hounds or foxes, they were obviously not confident of their might.

“Wait here,” Dee commanded. “Keep quiet—listen, if you can, but make no sound.”

Moments later, Dee called to Bruno for help, and the Italian hurried from the library, followed by Kelley and Brother Cuthbert. Dee’s knees were buckling as he tried to support the body of his servant, who had apparently collapsed into his arms. As Dee moved back from the door, though, Kelley saw that the messenger had not returned alone. Two other men were waiting outside for the way to clear, their faces shielded by hoods.

Bruno picked up the injured man’s legs, taking part of his weight; he and Dee carried the servant into the room closest to the door, a reception-room where there was a sofa on which he could be set down. The other two men moved inside the house, the latter closing the front door behind him. The former pushed back his hood and looked Kelley up and down, from his ear-less skull to his sole-less boots, with an unmistakably aristocratic contempt. The other kept his hood up, and seemed to be shrinking back into the shadows—which were abundant now that Dee had set the candle-tray down within the room.

“You’re Edward Kelley, the man for whom Field’s bully-boys are searching,” the aristocrat stated, in a tone that attempted politeness.

“Am I?” Kelley countered. “I do not know you, sir.”

“So much the better,” the aristocrat said. He turned to his companion.

"I have business elsewhere," he said. "Will you come?"

The hooded man—whose humanity suddenly seemed to Kelley to be less than definite—gestured with his hand toward the door, as if he were instructing the aristocrat to go without him. As the other turned, though, the hooded head leaned forward and words were muttered swiftly into his ear, so quietly that Kelley could not catch what was said. The hooded figure opened the door then to let his companion out—but not before John Dee had appeared in the doorway of the reception-room.

"De Vere?" said Dee. "Is that really you?"

If Dee's identification was correct, Kelley knew, then the aristocrat was the Earl of Oxford—but it was his turn now to keep his face in the shadows. "Edward de Vere is dead," he said. "Believe that, Master Dee—you have trouble enough at your door without knowing otherwise. If you have a boat, you had best take to the river and row upstream, as quickly as you can. Greenwich is a battlefield. The foxes moved to arrest Drake, but sorely underestimated the number of men who would come to his defense, and had to call for reinforcements. Foxe does not understand seamen, or hero-worship. You'll not find any to stand up for you when they come here—as they would surely have done already had they not been badly delayed. Find a bolt-hole as far from London as you can. Set sail for France if you must."

De Vere—if it was, in fact, de Vere—did not wait for a reply to this rigmarole. He slipped out of the door and vanished, while the hooded figure closed the door behind him, then barred and bolted it.

"Do not be alarmed," the hooded figure said softly, before pushing back the hood to reveal a face that was sculpted in a human image, but seemed to be forged in dull metal—save for the eyes, which were red in color and made of some softer substance. It did not look to Kelley to be a mask, but he did not faint in shock. He had grown used to miracles lately, and everyone in Europe had heard tales of talking heads of bronze built by Roger Bacon and Albertus Magnus. Ann and John Dee looked at the artificial face with as much admiration and curiosity as horror and dread; only Brother Cuthbert seemed excessively distressed by the sight.

"You broke me out of Hungerford jail," Kelley said, regretting that it sounded more like an accusation than an expression of gratitude.

"Yes I did," said the metal-faced creature, its voice clear although its polished lips barely moved. "I hoped to warn the others before the Puritans

made their move, but I was too late to reach Drake, and might only have succeeded in exposing Master Smith to greater risk.”

“Master Smith?” echoed Dee, skeptically.

“That is the name by which my erstwhile companion is known in London,” the metal-faced individual stated.

Kelley could not see Dee’s face very clearly, but he took note of the shock of realization that came upon it. “De Vere’s an Elizabethan, damn it!” Dee said. “If it were not enough to have the Church Militant arrayed against us, we now have the Queen’s enemies in our camp.”

“You do not know who that man was,” the other reminded him, its red eyes glinting in the candlelight. “So far as you are aware, Edward de Vere is dead, and you have had no contact whatsoever with any kind of treason.”

“More to the point,” said Kelley, “who—or what—are you?”

“An ally to the creature who calls himself Aristocles, for the moment,” the other replied. “I’m a sentient machine—an automaton, if you like—designed by the Lunars to operate in the toils of excessive affinity. You might have heard my kind called by the name hardcore, because our supportive skeletons are contained within our flesh rather than armoring it without—you’re hardcores too, by that reckoning. You might think me monstrous, but the Lunars would consider the two of us very much alike, intrinsically horrid in exactly the same fashion: mollusks turned inside-out.”

Bruno called out to Dee before the mathematician could demand further explanation, and the dutiful master hurried back to his injured servant. Kelley and the metal man followed him into the room. Brother Cuthbert, who had stayed behind Kelley throughout the exchange, stayed in the doorway with Ann.

Dee knelt down beside the servant, who was still conscious, although his jerkin and hose were stained with a great deal of blood. “Master Drake sends his apologies, sir,” the servant said, in a voice that was little more than a whisper. “He will take to sea, if he cannot win the fight on land, but he will send a messenger to you, if he can, when he reaches safe harbor.”

“Aye,” Dee murmured, “but where to?”

“If Foxe can persuade Suffolk and Northumberland to send the Queen’s men in support of Field’s,” the injured servant whispered, “the

dockland rabble will melt away like the spring thaw—but the *Golden Hind* won't be obstructed as she sails down the estuary. Once she's gone, alas, the Church Militant will certainly come here. They'll not molest your wife and children, Master Dee, but Master Smith was right to advise you that you and Kelley must go."

"If he is wise," the metal man put in, "the man who escaped from Hungerford with Kelley will go too, and this man too." *This man* was Bruno, who was staring at the automaton as curiously as Dee had, with the same surplus of wonderment over anxiety.

Kelley was more concerned about Ann than Brother Cuthbert, while Dee's sideways glance demonstrated his anxiety for his own Dominican guest—but it was the most urgent question of all that Dee voiced: "Where can we find safety, now?"

"I cannot tell you that," the metal man said. "I can help you along the road, but I cannot tell where you might find safe haven."

"If I could get to the Queen..." Dee began.

"No, sir," the hardcore cut him off. "You cannot go to London."

"It's true, Master," the servant said. "It's far too dangerous. If you escape by boat, as Master Smith suggested, you must not go downriver. Even if you were able to reach the Tower, you'd be putting your head in a lion's mouth."

"The Queen is an exceedingly clever woman," Dee told the metal man, "and no Puritan. She's perfectly capable of listening to reason."

"If this were a matter of intellect and sanity," Bruno put in, "you might be right—but it's a matter of fear and panic, the like of which I've already seen in more than one continental city. I don't know what resources your Church Militant has to compare with Master Kelley's magic stone, but there seems to be something telling its zealots that the Devil is at hand and must be crushed."

"Aye," Dee agreed, reluctantly. "Foxe may not believe Field's rants about demons, but he seems to be grateful for the excuse to let his loyal Churchmen flex their muscles. The one thing that unites all the Lords whose ambition the Queen keeps in delicate balance, alas, is their fear of the Elizabethans, and the rumor that de Vere is alive is all over the city. My past association with him will further taint me in their fearful eyes. For now,

at least, we must retreat.”

“If I understood the angels right,” Kelley put in, “we must find a safe place to build more ether-ships, and to prepare to resist an invasion.”

“It’s all very well for the ether-dwellers to dictate orders,” Dee replied, churlishly, “but if it’s England we’re supposed to defend, we can hardly set sail with Drake for the Americas or the south seas, even if we can reach him.”

“We must go,” the automaton said, flatly. “The ethereal is right: the Lunars *will* strike here, even if Master Dee is removed. The mere fact of the ether-ship’s ascent convinced them that England’s New Learning is the forefront of human progress. The Lunars will attempt usurpation, however, before they resort to annihilation. Their ultimate war is with the Great Fleshcores, against whom they will need armaments of every kind, and an army of natural hardcores might be as useful to them as to the Arachnids.”

“But if Drake was telling the truth all along about his adventure among the stars,” Dee objected, “we surely have nothing that the Empires of the stars could possibly want. You’re the proof that they already have machines that mimic our form—machines that are more powerful than we are, even on our own terrain.”

“That’s not true,” the automaton retorted. “I have access to rudimentary chemical technology even here, but I suffer the burdens of weight exactly as you do; I’m no Titan. In any case, you’re a greater prize than you might imagine, given your mathematical skills. Don’t imagine that Aristocles and I are acting out of pure altruism, and have no delusions about the Arachnids. The Lunars could destroy you very easily if they wished, but they will only do that if all else fails, to prevent you from becoming part of a powerful alliance against them. We do not have time for this—Doctor Dee and Master Kelley must flee, and must preserve the black stone and the red powder at all costs. I will help you, but I cannot tell you where to go.”

“I can,” Giordano Bruno put in. “I can, at least, make a suggestion as to who would surely hide you, and defend you if need be.”

“Who?” asked Dee. Kelley judged by the wariness in his voice that he did not want to surrender himself to the care of the Dominican Order—but neither, Kelley strongly suspected, did the renegade Bruno.

“Philip Sidney’s sister—Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke,” Bruno

said. "She's expecting me."

Dee nodded. "George Herbert was formerly married to the Queen's sister," the mathematician said, presumably to enlighten Kelley, Ann, and Cuthbert, "but he was never admitted to the inner circles of the court because his father had been too much involved with the Tudors, and was suspected of sympathizing with Mary Tudor's bid to seize the throne. The Earl maintains a diplomatic absence, fighting in the Netherlands with Sidney, but the Countess keeps a little empire of her own at Wilton, near Salisbury. It might make a good hiding-place—and as good a base as any to begin any project we might feel inclined to undertake, if we decide to take the ether-dwellers' advice."

Kelley pursed his lips. He had passed within twenty miles of Wilton the day before he had fetched up at the Black Bear and been thrown into Hungerford jail. He had had such a hard time getting here from there that the thought of retracing his steps was not particularly attractive. "Better to head for the south coast," he opined, "where we might make a rendezvous with Drake."

"Wherever you end up," the automaton said, "You must make rapid preparations now to depart."

It seemed, however, that they had already delayed too long, for there was another knock on the door then, considerably less polite than Master Smith's, followed by a call to open up in the Queen's name.

The automaton looked directly at Kelley then, his red eyes glinting in the candlelight. Unhuman as the creature was, Kelley had no trouble deciphering the message in that glance. John Dee was fifty-five years old; the two friars were not fighting men, and the stricken manservant was too weak to lift a finger. If there was fighting to be done, Kelley and the metal man would be the only ones capable of bearing arms effectively—and neither of them was carrying so much as a kitchen-knife.

Dee called out to the men beyond the door, telling them to wait.

"Fetch the stone and the powder," the automaton whispered to Kelley. "We must go out at the back of the house and head for the river. Your wife must stay here—you and I will have difficulty enough keeping Dee safe."

"You cannot leave me here!" Bruno whispered, urgently.

“Nor me,” Brother Cuthbert was quick to add, while Kelley leapt into the library to secure the stone, which he wrapped in a cloth. Ann had followed him. “Don’t leave me again!” she begged.

“I must,” he told her. “Fetch the powder first, though—I’ll see to the stone. Jane Dee will shelter you as best she can, and the Puritans won’t harm her.”

Ann did not like it, but she nodded her head like the obedient wife she was, and went to fetch the packet of powder that might, it seemed, enclose an alchemical touchstone capable of making gold.

There was another complication already, because a new voice could be heard outside the front of the house, demanding to know what the men who had knocked were doing. Someone else had evidently arrived in their wake.

Kelley heard Dee murmur: “Francis Bacon! He came this afternoon, to see Bruno. He has no authority over Foxe’s men, though.”

The man who replied to Bacon that he had been sent to arrest John Dee replied so faintly and querulously, though, that he was obviously not confident of his own authority.

“They’re hounds, not foxes!” Dee was quick to infer, his voice still audible to Kelley as he ducked into the library. “Nor have they come in force. The Church Militant is fully occupied in London and Greenwich, it seems, and nothing has reached Mortlake but a command that the local constables have no great enthusiasm to carry out.”

When Kelley returned to the corridor Dee was sliding back the bolts. He joined the mathematician and helped him lift the bar.

There were only two constables outside; their superior had not thought it worthwhile to rouse and arm a stronger force. When the man who had shouted the demand to open up saw how many people were grouped inside the door—the automaton, who had raised his hood again, must have appeared to him to be a person, but quite able-bodied—his lantern trembled, testifying to his consternation. Sir Francis Bacon was behind them, wearing a sword and accompanied by a manservant equipped with a heavy staff. The constables only had cudgels.

“Have you a warrant, constable?” Dee asked, holding up his own candle as if to challenge the constable’s lantern.

The senior constable did not even have that; Kelley guessed that his superior had never intended the two men to make an arrest, but had sent them as a tacit warning, while carefully protecting his own virtue. It would suit the local officials more were Dee to make his escape than it would to imprison him on behalf of John Foxe and John Field. Puritan sympathies did not run particularly high in Mortlake.

Dee put on his most imperious voice to order the two men to go away, and to come back when they had proper authority to arrest him—nor did he promise to wait for them. Bacon, meanwhile, had his hand on the hilt of his sword, and he looked like the kind of young aristocrat who might take delight in giving a couple of hounds a tumble.

The constables withdrew, in some haste. Bacon moved swiftly to Dee's side. "I came to warn you and Master Bruno, sir," he said. "All hell has broken loose in the city. The Tower's ablaze with candlelight and humming like a beehive; the members of parliament are being rooted out of the brothels, and no one is sure that the navy will not fire upon the army in defense of the Queen's privateers. Foxe may be sleeping content in Canterbury, but the hullabaloo is loud enough to wake him. In a better world, he'd turn on Field and disown him, but I fear he'll find himself committed now, whether he likes it or not. You must hide, at least for a few days, until the state of play is clear. I'll look after your wife, and your library, as best I can."

"Thank you, Francis," Dee said. "Master Bruno and I will take a little trip upriver, I think. I'll send word to you when I can."

Bacon's gaze had already slipped sideways, to study Edward Kelley and the hooded individual. The suspicion in his expression was quite obvious; the young nobleman obviously felt no need to hide his feelings from men whose dress revealed them to be commoners, apparently poor.

"These men are with us," Dee stated. "They are more vital to our cause than you can possibly estimate."

Kelley guessed that what Bacon understood by "our cause" and what Dee meant by it were two very different things.

"Go with God," Bacon said, with a slight bow to Dee. "Be sure that you're safe by daybreak, though. No one can tell where the balance of power will lie by then." He waited for everyone else to go into the house before following them. It was Bacon who bolted and barred the door this

time.

It did not take Dee and Bruno long to make up their packs; they were obviously prepared to depart at short notice. Kelley had only to grab the satchel that Ann had brought him, check that the powder was safe inside it, place the stone within it too, and embrace his wife regretfully. "I'll be better for knowing that you're safe here," he told her. "Don't fear for me—I have good friends."

She whispered in his ear: "That metal face is no mask."

"I know," he told her. "There was a man of bronze in ancient times, I think, set to guard Crete, who was said to be the last survivor of an entire race, but Roger Bacon found another like it. If that race is come again, it is to aid us, not to hurt us. I could not wish for a better shield."

He had to leave then, to follow Dee and the automaton out of the kitchen door, through the garden and down to the Thames. Dee's own boat was a mere cockleshell, incapable of carrying five men away, but Dee knew his neighbors well. There was a boatman already awake, making ready for the dawn aboard a ferry-skiff that could seat half a dozen. Dee gave him half a sovereign, and he set to work with a will, ready to row all the way to Twickenham if need be.

* * * *

7

Bruno sat down beside Dee, facing the oarsman, as if he were entitled to that place. Brother Cuthbert sat down beside his fellow Dominican, rather fearfully, leaving Kelley to sit with the hooded man in the stern of the boat, so that the latter might be hidden from view to the extent that it was possible. Kelley was by no means dissatisfied with the situation, being very enthusiastic to seize the chance he had not been given before to interrogate his rescuer.

"Did the angels send you here to help us?" he asked, in a whisper.

"My brethren were intent on sending emissaries to your world as soon as they learned of its existence," the automaton told him, speaking in a similarly low tone. "We were the first to understand the necessity, before the ethereals fell out—and I still do not know why the ethereals should have fallen out with one another, or why they care about you at all. Since they seem to be siding with us, however, I'm willing to accept their guidance.

“You can talk to them, then, without the aid of a skrying-stone?”

“They can reach me, if they exert enough effort, and I consent to listen—but the contact disturbs me, and I am obliged to be careful.”

Even automata, it seemed, were not immune to the side-effects of communication with the angels. “They said that there is a plan,” Kelley said. “Do you know what it is?”

“I’m not privy to the ethereals’ secrets,” the automaton replied, curtly. “It was not easy for me to reach the surface of your world; we were smuggled into the moon easily enough, but we had no shuttle capable of making a gentle descent, and had to improvise, just as the ethereals improvised in sending the stone and the catalyst. The fall was long and the friction fierce. I don’t know whether the others came down safely, but the fact that I’ve had no word is ominous. I know that I must frighten you, but I swear to you that my kind are the best friends you have in all this confusion.”

“You don’t frighten me,” Kelley said. “I’ve seen miracles, and have heard the voices of angels. Whether there was a race of metal men on Earth before or not, I’m not afraid to discover that there is one now. But I need to understand why you’re so intent on being my friend, when so many of my own kind, as well as half the inhabitants of Heaven and almost all of the greater Creation, seem to be arrayed against me.”

“Although I resemble humans in form, your kind is unique,” the automaton told him, “and I am bound to side with its defenders.”

“Unique?” Kelley queried.

“Unique in fleshy form,” the automaton elaborated, “and, in consequence, unique in the specifics of its intelligence. Your sensory apparatus, and your brains, are quite distinct from those of all the members of the True Civilization, and their Arachnid rivals. The ethereals, whose intelligence seems to be fundamentally parasitic, might be interested in you for that reason, although their motives are largely unfathomable to creatures of what they call *trivial matter*. Given that ethereals find it at least as difficult to operate in a weighty environment as softcores do, in spite of their contempt for our kind of matter, any connections they can build are bound to be tenuous, but even tenuous connections can be valuable, and perhaps warrant conflict among their makers. When even ethereals go to war, softcores are bound to be anxious. Ten years of slow and patient labor in

the caverns of the moon have now given way to a period of desperate haste.”

Kelley realized, as he listened to this mystifying speech, that he had never really expected to understand what the angels said to him, and had never felt able to raise much objection to their using so many words whose meaning he could not fathom. The automaton was, in its fashion, no less strange than the angels—and evidently believed that Kelley had understood what the angels had said to him far better than he had—but Kelley felt oddly resentful that his new companion was speaking in much the same fashion, rather than taking greater pains to make himself clear. Before he could voice his disappointment, though, Giordano Bruno had turned round to interrupt.

“I need to know,” he said to the automaton, in a low voice, “where the Devil figures in this. I may be a better scholar than I am a Dominican, but I am a Dominican, after all.”

“I cannot tell you that,” the automaton said. “Where God and the Devil stand, if any such entities exist, only they know. Even the ethereals move in darkly mysterious ways, although it may well be vanity that leads them to pretend to be God’s messengers and handmaidens. I can tell you, though, where my brethren stand, and that is in the shoes of slaves ambitious to be free. Some might think the existence of natural hardcores irrelevant to our purpose, but I do not. Even if it were only a matter of politics, it would open scope for alliance with the Arachnids and some ethereals, but it is far more than that. Your intelligence and ours must be akin, give our common form. Our brains have been programmed by creatures of a very different sort; if we are truly to be free, we must learn to think in our own way—in the way that we might and ought to share with you. We will not allow you to be exterminated or transfigured, while we have any chance at all of helping to save you. There is much we might learn from one another.”

Now it was Dee’s turn to look round and interrupt. “If Tom Digges really did make the treaty that he became convinced he had only dreamed,” he said, similarly speaking in a low tone, “were we not promised the protection of the entire True Civilization? Were we not promised that no one would try to exterminate or transfigure us?”

“You were,” the automaton agreed. “And the Great Fleshcores would honor that promise, if they could—but the promise proved to be the last straw, which overburdened an authority long since stretched to its limit. The insects have broken away from the True Civilization, as they might always have been bound to do, and they are the ones who are bent on your

suppression, if only to prevent you from becoming pawns of the Arachnids or new symbols of Fleshcore hegemony. Even the Lunars would rather control you than obliterate you, though—they are neither utterly reckless nor devoid of moral responsibility. If nothing else, control of your world's surface might be a useful bargaining-chip in their dealings with the ethereals, which they do seem enthusiastic to develop.”

“But why me?” Kelley whispered, having finally found an opportunity to get back into the conversation. “Why am I involved in this at all, given that I knew nothing of Dee’s ether-ship? Why did the black stone speak to me?”

“Because you found it,” was the metal man’s blunt reply, “and because you could hear the voices it reflected—which seems to be a rarer gift than the ethereals must have hoped. There are strange alchemical affinities and exotic connections between the kinds of matter you know and those of the dark realm, which the ethereals can manipulate. There must, I think, be affinities of another sort between the intelligences that our matter contains and the intelligences of dark matter. Perhaps you’re uniquely privileged, and perhaps you were merely convenient—but for now, at least, you’re the best and sturdiest link between men and ethereals. They’ll be very enthusiastic to build more and better ones, but I doubt that they have any clearer idea of their prospects in that regard than you have. Could you train Dr. Dee to use the stone, do you think?”

“No,” Kelley said decisively, following his trickster’s instinct. “I cannot. It’s a gift, not a matter of education. There might be others like me—but there might not. You and Doctor Dee had best be careful with me, if you intend to continue to hold congress with the angels by means of the black stone.”

“If you wish, Dr. Dee,” Brother Cuthbert put in, “I can make arrangements for us all to stay the night in the same safe-house where Master Kelley and I spent last night. Master Bruno will be very welcome, of course, and his presence will assist me in arguing on your behalf and that of ... your other friends. Would you like me to do that when we reach Twickenham?”

Bruno looked at Dee, who only hesitated briefly before nodding. “Thank you, Brother Cuthbert,” he said. “That will give us pause for reflection. Tell the custodian of the house that we’ll go on at first light. It will take two more days to reach Wilton, but we’ll get there, God willing.”

The oarsman, meanwhile, continued to haul away with his practiced arms, and did so for another hour before tiring. The automaton took over

then, with his permission—without any need to display his metal face, which was quite invisible by the lights sprinkled along the shore. Although the creature had disclaimed superhuman strength, he certainly plied the oars with a great deal more power and efficient authority than Kelley could have mustered, and the boat flew upriver, defiant of the sluggish current.

When they reached Twickenham, at a much later hour than the one at which Kelley and Cuthbert had approached the isolated manor house the day before, Cuthbert asked them to wait in a clump of bushes by the towpath while he made arrangements for their hospitality. He promised to be back within a quarter of an hour, and was as good as his word, so far as Kelley could estimate.

“Everything’s in hand,” the little man said. “You’ll all be very welcome.”

They passed through the hedge bordering the towpath by means of a wicker gate, and made their way through the manor’s lawns and gardens. Instead of going to the tradesmen’s entrance they went around the house to the main door. The housekeeper, who was carrying a tray with a single tallow candle, greeted Kelley with a nod of recognition and bowed to his august companions before leading them through the gloomy vestibule and into the hall that Kelley had crossed twice before. It was unlit, and the housekeeper’s candle was feeble, but Kelley followed him with a confidence born of the sense that he was on familiar ground. Dee and Bruno fell into step behind him, while Cuthbert and the automaton brought up the rear.

Kelley heard the waiting men before he saw them, and knew by the clinking sound that betrayed their presence that they were armed.

The metallic sounds were followed by a duller one as something heavy came down from above—but not on top of Kelley, who leapt to one side with his fists raised, ready to make a fight of it. Unfortunately, he moved within range of one of the ambushers, who struck out at him with a club. The blow missed his head and hit his shoulder, but it was so forceful and painful that it knocked him off his feet. Although he scrambled upright as fast as he could, he found himself seized by the arms and the point of a dagger was pressed to his windpipe. When a hoarse whisper bade him be still, he obeyed, and did not resist when his traveling-bag was snatched away.

Strangely, the only man who contrived to put up any meaningful resistance at all was Giordano Bruno, who was as robust and ready for a fight as any recruit to the Church Militant. He had no blade, though, and only

succeeded in sending two of his would-be assailants flying before he too was calmed by the threat of being mortally cut.

The light of the single tallow candle was enough to let Kelley see that a weighed rope net had been dropped on the automaton, and that further weights had been moved onto the toils of the net to make sure that the prisoner was securely pinned—as, indeed, it seemed to be; apparently, it had told the truth when it confessed that its strength was not superhuman, and its skill with the oars had been merely that.

John Dee was unable to put up more than feeble resistance. Brother Cuthbert put up none at all, and helped to place the weights securing the net—but it would have been obvious, in any case, that he was their betrayer.

Kelley moved past the shock of that awareness to the more ominous revelation that he had been played for a fool since he first set foot in the Black Bear. The little man must have been waiting for him there—the bait in a trap whose purpose went far beyond any mere matter of throwing him into Hungerford jail. Whoever had designed Brother Cuthbert's task had wanted far more than Edward Kelley, or even the stone and the powder. He had wanted John Dee, and elaborate intelligence as to what Kelley had learned from the angels. Now, he had all of that and an unexpected bonus, in the form of the automaton.

Candles were now being lit in wall-brackets, and an entire candelabrum-full on the table in the center of the hall. These were wax candles, not tallow, and they gave a much brighter light, by means of which Kelley quickly counted their black-clad captors as a dozen, not including the slender and sharp-featured man who had carelessly established himself in the master's place at the head of the oaken table.

Kelley had never met that insolent man, but he knew who it had to be. Before John Field could issue further orders, however, Giordano Bruno looked at Brother Cuthbert in the most venomous fashion imaginable. "You'll be expelled from the Order for this, Brother!" he said. "If I had the ear of the pope, I'd have you excommunicated."

The little man laughed. "Do you still imagine that I'm a Dominican?" he retorted. "Can you actually believe that your clandestine signs are really secret in Puritan England?" His voice became tauter, however, as he added: "But if I were a Dominican, I'd be fulfilling my mission, would I not? To root out heresy, *by any means possible.*"

"Be quiet, Simon," said John Field. By this time, the fox who had

taken Kelley's satchel had brought it to the table and set it down. Field rummaged through it, taking out the black stone but ignoring the packet in which the red powder was wrapped. "So this is where your bottle-imp resides," he said, looking not at Kelley but at John Dee. "This is the means by which the Devil whispers in your scholarly ear. How did you lose it in the first place?"

John Dee merely shook his head despairingly.

"Doctor Dee never saw it before today," Kelley said, speaking out boldly. "He certainly did not have it, or anything like it, when he built the ether-ship. It fell to Earth on Northwick Hill, where I found it—and it fell from Heaven, not from Hell. Nor are the angels contained within it; it is more akin to a telescope, making the distant realm of the angels seem closer at hand, enabling them more easily to speak into a man's soul."

Field got up from the table then, leaving the black stone behind. He did not approach Kelley, though; instead, he went to the place just within the threshold of the hall where the automaton was pinned down, and inspected the device as carefully as the thick strands of rope would permit, not without a certain anxiety.

"If further proof were needed of your dealings with the Devil," Field stated, glancing back at John Dee, "we have the most incontrovertible here. You have your own familiar demon, it seems, as Cornelius Agrippa had."

"Agrippa von Nettesheim was a great scholar," Dee told him, seemingly stung more painfully by the slight against another than by any accusation laid at his own door. "He did not write the book of black magic attributed to him."

"But you have read it," Field replied. "And the Key of Solomon too, and God only knows how many other filthy tomes. You've searched for them, and paid good coin for them—and did not even have the grace to hide them away, but have shared them with Digges and the Scotts and the other members of your nest of unholy vipers."

"Do you imagine," Giordano Bruno cut in, contemptuously, "that demons can be caught in nets and pinned down by a timber-merchant's counterweights?"

"Do you imagine that they can be dissolved by holy water and exiled by exorcism?" Field retorted, curling his lip. "Perhaps you think this one is protected by some indulgence that you have sold him, in order that he

might remain on Earth in defiance of the Lord's will?"

"It's not a demon," Dee said, quietly. "It's a machine in human form. If you examine it closely, you'll see that it's the work of clever artifice."

"Human artifice?" Field countered—but was quick to add: "Have *you* examined it closely, Doctor Dee?"

"Not as closely as I would like," Dee admitted. "Your pursuit left me little leisure in which to do so. Nor have I been able to examine the black stone as closely as I would like to do. Did you catch Francis Drake, by the way?"

Field scowled. He said nothing, but Kelley judged that he had no more caught Drake than Edward de Vere. *We were the only ones foolish enough to fall into his trap, he thought, and that was entirely my fault, for introducing his agent into John Dee's house as a trusted guest.*

His head had been quiet while they rowed upriver, but it was now recovering all the strange sensation that had afflicted it periodically during the last fortnight, exaggerated to a new pitch of intensity—but it was not pain, or even some subtler malaise. It seemed to him that his head was expanding, growing vast, but he knew that the sensation was an understandable illusion; what was really expanding and flourishing was something else, unconfined by his cranium. It was not magical power either, in any crude sense, but it had some kind of potential in it. It made the atmosphere around him seem light and strange, although no one else appeared to have noticed anything odd. "What do you intend to do with the stone?" Kelley asked, glad that he could still think and speak quite clearly.

Field finally consented to take notice of Kelley. "Rather ask, Master Kelley," was his reply, "What I intend to do with *you*. I intend to put you on trial, with Master Dee by your side, on a charge of sorcery. I intend to rouse the English people to such a pitch of indignation against you and all your foul kind that parliament's policy of craven tolerance will be blown away by the gale of Protest. I intend to make an example of you that will allow the Church Militant to scour England clean of Devil-worship and demon-traffic. I thank you, with all my heart, for making my task so much easier by bringing the demon with you. The stone would have been evidence enough, but, now that I look at it, it's a dull thing after all. Given your reputation as a fortune-teller and false physician, some men might be easily persuaded that it's naught but a rock, and that the voices you claim to have heard from within were nothing but vulgar lies."

“But you know better, do you not, Master Field?” Kelley riposted. “Even though Cuthbert—I mean Simon—has not yet given you a full report of the seance we held this evening, you know full well that the intelligence I have relayed corresponds with your own experiences following the ascent of Doctor Dee’s ether-ship.”

Field scowled again. “Of course I know that,” he said. “They emanate from exactly the same source: the Inferno.”

“The same information might come from very different sources,” Kelley told him. “Don’t the Romanists preach the same Christian message of virtue and loving neighborliness as the Puritans, for all that neither party is able to practice what it preaches? Look into the stone, Master Field. Perhaps you will be able to see and hear the angels that Doctor Dee and Master Bruno cannot.”

The automaton had not said a word, and did not say one now, but it stirred in its captivity, and Kelley construed the movement as a gesture of approval.

Field knew that he was being challenged, and knew that he ought not to shirk the challenge. Was not a devout Puritan capable not merely of snaring demons in a net, but of staring Satan in the face and forcing him to look away?

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8

John Field went back to the table and resumed his seat. He took up the black stone in both hands and held it before his face, as if it were a mirror. He looked into it, perhaps expecting to see himself reflected there, in spite of the stone’s lack of polish and the unpropitious placement of the candelabrum.

Kelley had no idea what to expect. Would Field put the stone down again, claiming that he could see nothing—doubtless because the demons of Hell were impotent or unwilling to confront him—or would he play the trickster, and pretend to see something that he could then expel with a potent stare and a word of command?

But I am not so far away as I seem, Kelley thought. And my soul is as large now as it has ever been. Perhaps I can see what needs to be

seen, and hear what needs to be heard. He did not know himself whether he was in deadly earnest, or merely planning a trick of his own.

When Field looked into the darkness that the stone seemed to contain, however, he did not do or say anything. His eyelids drooped slightly, and his rigid body slumped in the chair, but not as if he had suddenly become sleepy—more than that, in fact: as if he had suddenly become *heavier*. His features were devoid of expression, but his stare did not waver.

“Don’t be afraid, Master Field,” Kelley said, softly—but the Church Militant’s ambushers were as quiet as mice now, and every word was audible. “A man like you has naught to fear from Heaven. But you can hear the angels, can you not? They are not singing, as the Romanists imagine they might, but jabbering in a language unknown to humankind, which was not included in the legacy of Babel. Only be patient, and they will deign to address you in English, although your ears might have to be better than my poor mutilated organs to interpret what they say in smooth and eloquent sentences.”

Field would surely have cut him off before he got half way through this speech, had he been able to—but he was not. To his own followers, and to all but one of Kelley’s companions, it probably seemed that Field was holding the stone voluntarily, looking into it of his own volition, but Kelley knew better. The stone had Field captive, just as securely as the net held the automaton—but that was all. Field was not going to speak, even if he did contrive to hear English spoken by the angels. The next step was up to Kelley.

“The angels are inaudible and invisible to the eyes of ordinary men,” Kelley continued, raising his voice as he always had during his past performances as a false oracle, “but you and I are extraordinary, in our different ways, Master Field. We can hear the voices of the angelic host, and we can see them about their work, not merely as messengers but as guardians. We can see them in the dark realm that is theirs, but we can also see them reaching into our world, and making themselves *felt* as beings made of matter might. They are not material themselves, of course, and there is something subtle and vaporous about their most urgent manifestations—but they can make themselves felt, can they not, Master Field?”

Unready to leave that particular challenge entirely to the power of suggestion, Kelley tried with all his might to make his words true: to use whatever mysterious potential was expanding out of him to manage the

sensations of the watcher who could not help but look into the stone. Kelley imagined an angel emerging from the stone, like some angry ghost—not an angel from one of the Church decorations of which the Puritans disapproved so strongly, but an angel such as he had seen, at such a vast distance, within the void suggested by the stone's black depths.

And something *did* emerge, although Kelley did not suppose that anyone but he and Field could see it.

It had wings, of a sort, but it did not have a humanoid body. Nor were its wings a dove's or an eagle's wings; they were the wings of some hasty buzzing insect. Insofar as the angel had a face, he supposed, it would have a face that was more like a locust's than a human's, but not so very like a locust as to resemble the Lunar horde that had already started work on an Armada of ether-ships with which to invade the Earth ... because the angels were angels, after all.

Kelley had no idea how to make a face beautiful that was not at all human, or even to make it imperious, but he had to suppose that the angels did, and that his role here was merely that of a facilitator, like the philosopher's stone that turned base metal into gold without itself being altered.

The angel was magnificent, after its fashion. It was huge, and dazzling, and unmistakably, undeniably, indubitably an angel. Kelley knew that John Dee, Giordano Bruno and the twelve brutal apostles of the Church Militant could not see it, but he knew that John Field could. Kelley even felt free to wonder whether this might, after all, have been the purpose of his mission—that the stone had sent him into Brother Cuthbert's trap in order that it should finally be delivered, by cunning and mysterious means, into the hands of John Field, even though it would not remain there for long.

It was obvious that Field could see the angel towering over him, because he was no longer peering drowsily into the stone. He was looking up now, with his eyes wide open and his irises closing against the dazzling glare that only he and Kelley beheld. He could see the angel, and he knew the angel for what it was. He could also *hear* the angel.

What the angel commanded John Field to do, as Moses had once commanded Pharaoh, was to let his people go. The angel meant far more by that, however, than that John Dee and his companions should be released and allowed to make their way to Wilton unhindered. The angel meant that John Field's Church Militant should respect the principle of tolerance that Queen Jane's parliament had incorporated into English law.

The angel meant that the Puritans should desist from stirring up a holy war in reflection of the long and fragmentary war that had been raging in Europe and the Americas for decades as petty prophets played into the hands of secular ambition by providing justification for oppression and conquest. The angel meant that John Field must see the truth, and realize that the demons that his life was dedicated to combating were not what, or where, he thought they were.

And John Field, like Saul of Tarsus on the road of Damascus, accepted that revelation for what it was.

Edward Kelley, who knew that he was part and parcel of the instrumentality of the revelation, could not help but share in it. His own ideas and beliefs were not turned upside-down—quite the reverse. They were put on a firm foundation for the first time. He not only heard the voices of the angels, but understood them, for they were now more eloquent than ever before. His consciousness expanded much further than it already had, and much further than he had ever imagined possible. He felt, in fact, that he was being taken far beyond the bounds of human imagination, borne on angelic wings. He felt that he was being taken up to the summit of a paradisaal mount, there to look out upon the whole of Creation, acquiring a standpoint from which worlds like his own were mere motes of dust or tiny clouds of gas, while the spaces between them were crowded with life.

He saw that the infinitesimally tiny creatures that swarmed upon the tinier and lighter dust-worlds were, indeed, insects and other spineless creatures, although the greater number of them were intelligent, capable of awesome feats of engineering, and capable of flying in the ether as well as in air. He saw that the larger creatures that swam in the dense atmospheres of the gas-worlds were also invertebrates, formed as worms, jellyfish, or cephalopods rather than whales or seals. He understood that the greater number of the inhabited dust-worlds were hollow, with far more life inside them than on their surfaces; the life in question was soft and slimy, but no less intelligent for that. He understood how different humans were from the common run of dust and gas-dwellers, and that surfaces where entities weighed as much as they did on Earth, because of the denseness of the Earth's core and the power of affinity that held objects down, were normally hostile in the extreme to the evolution of complex life, let alone intelligence.

“So Bruno's principle of plentitude does not apply universally after all,” Kelley said, although he did not pronounce the words aloud.

He got no verbal answer; the angel he had summoned from the stone was not Aristocles, or even Muram. He understood, though, that the

principle of plenitude *did* apply, but was not quite what Giordano Bruno imagined it to be. It was the interpretation that was at fault—and that fault of interpretation was common to humankind’s enemies and allies alike. It was for that reason, somehow, that the Great Armada would be launched—and for that reason, too, that the Great Armada had to be thwarted in its ambition.

“Earth is special, then,” Kelley concluded. “Even on a vast universal stage, Earth stands at the focal point of a unique Creation, for which reason humans are God’s chosen people.” But that was flatly wrong, and he felt the force of his error as a blast of pure angelic contempt.

“You are, at best, a catalyst,” he was told, by the angel that was not Aristocles, and must have been far older, if not wiser. “Earth is, at most, a philosopher’s stone.”

Then it was over, and he was back in the hall of the deserted manor house, where very little time seemed to have passed, and where only he and John Field were even conscious of the time that had passed. His expanded soul seemed to burst, and then shrivel to its ordinary dimensions, with a shock that left a cruelly authentic ache in his head. He put his hands up to cover his face for a moment or two, but collected himself soon enough and obtained enough mastery over his disturbed consciousness to put mere pain to the back of his mind.

When he looked again at the silent crowd, he knew that there had been a profound change in every one of them, although mere appearances had barely shifted at all. John Field had replaced the stone on the tabletop and was now sitting back in his chair, frowning thoughtfully. “It’s just a stone,” he said, in a tone that almost smacked of disappointment. “A piece of obsidian, shaped and polished to resemble a lens. It’s a cozener’s device. It has no demons in it, any more than the man we captured in our net is a demon. All this is foolishness, in which wise and serious men should not become involved, when they have God’s good work to do.”

Kelley expected protestations, or at least expressions of surprise, in response to this declaration, but none came from anywhere. The other people present had neither heard nor seen any angel, but they had not by any means been unaffected by what had happened. They saw the world differently now, and if they had any awareness at all that they had ever seen recent events in another way, that other awareness now seemed to them to be a kind of dream, which could not begin to compete with the trustworthiness of their present sensory experience, and all the brutal pressure of obvious reality that went with it.

“Release that man,” said Field—and three ambushers joined the spy named Simon in dragging away the heavy weights that constrained the prisoner within the net so closely that he could barely move. Then the net itself was lifted. Kelley looked at the face of the released man in amazement, unsure now as to how and why he had imagined that the tanned face was made of bronze, or that his bloodshot eyes were literally red. The man was a gypsy, to be sure, but he was definitely a man.

“You have no right to arrest us, Master Field,” said John Dee, with only a hint of temerity in his voice. “I am an honest Englishman traveling in my own country. Master Bruno is a scholar, and my guest. Master Kelley and Master Talus are students. We are visiting fellow scholars at the home of one of the peers of England.”

“You’re incorrect, Dr. Dee,” Field said, icily. “I have every right to arrest you, to investigate you, and to interrogate you, and would have that right even if you were not entertaining a Romanist who might easily be a spy for the French or the Italians. I had a duty, in fact, to act on the denunciations laid against you, which charged you with possession of magical devices provided by the Devil. It is obvious, however, that the charge is unfounded, and I can only conclude that the denunciation was malicious, perhaps encouraged by scholarly rivalry. Personally, I cannot see any merit in this book-collecting mania that has infected such men as you and Stephen Batman, and you ought to be very glad indeed that the grimoires and books of ritual magic that you have collected are such obvious fakes. Had I received a darker report on the contents of your library from Master Bacon, I’d have thrown you in Hungerford jail overnight to teach you a lesson—and might have done that anyway, had I not heard that the jail is so ill-kept that its wall collapsed the night before last. You must not tempt me further by challenging my rights, though. I am the Church of England’s strong right arm, the commander of the Church Militant. I have every right.”

“That makes it all the more important, sir,” John Dee replied, unrepentantly, “that you use your rights wisely, discreetly, and in the service of God. Might I take it, since you have interrogated us so minutely and found no fault, that we are free to go?”

“Aye,” said Field. “My men and I have urgent business in London, and it would only slow us down to take you prisoner. Foolish scholars are no more worth the trouble of collecting than scabrous books, given that we have one book that tells us all that any God-fearing man could ever want or need to know.”

Kelley opened his mouth to speak, but the gypsy to whom Dee had referred as Talus put a hand on his arm and moved his lips close to the scar where Kelley's right ear had once been.

"You must be careful now, Master Kelley," the gypsy breathed. "You, and you alone, know what the ethereals can do, even in an environment as hostile as this, and have at least an inkling of their sly means. Remember what I told you: they do nothing out of altruism; they have their own ends to pursue, and are not agreed amongst themselves as to what those ends ought to be. Aristocles is a powerful friend, and you'll doubtless be in dire need again of the kind of help he and his kind can provide—but you must not *trust* them, as you might desire to trust an honest angel. They might well believe, honestly, that they do God's work, conveying his messages and guarding the virtuous—but so did John Field, until they taught him better. Doctor Dee is a great mathematician, but philosophers, like tricksters, often fall prey to fancies they produce, and commit their faith too readily. You *know* what really happened just now, and you must cling to that knowledge lest it be stolen by forgetfulness. You may be sure that the ethereals will handle you gently, for they have no other catalyst here to match you, at least for the present."

Kelley was confused, but not by what the automaton had said—because he knew, even though he could no longer perceive the fact, that the automaton really was an automaton, with a face of bronze and blood-red eyes. He was confused because, even though he knew what had really happened, he now had a second set of memories in his mind, of a long and detailed interrogation to which Doctor Dee had been subjected by John Field, in the course of which Doctor Dee had deflected and deflated all Field's accusations and suspicions, so successfully that Field had been persuaded of the innocence of all his captives, at least in the matter of practicing sorcery.

John Dee, Kelley knew, would remember events that way, as would Field, and all the Church Militant's witnesses to the event. The automaton was correct, however; Kelley did know the truth, not merely of what had happened, but of how ingeniously the angels—the ethereals—could work, once they had the aid of an appropriate intermediary: what they and the automaton both called a "catalyst."

It was neither the black lens nor the red powder that was the real philosopher's stone, Kelley realized, but himself ... and, in some larger and not-yet-graspable sense, the entire Earth.

He nodded to inform the gypsy that he had understood what he had

been told, and was thoroughly resolved to be discreet. He went to the table to pick up the black stone and replace it in his satchel, which he shouldered without meeting any opposition. Then he turned to follow John Dee, Giordano Bruno, and the gypsy, who were being escorted through the gloomy vestibule by two members of the Church Militant while the remainder set about extinguishing candles, in the interests of thrift, like the good Puritans they were.

Once the four released prisoners were outside again, in the strange half-light that immediately precedes the dawn, Kelley was taken aside by someone else: the false Brother Cuthbert.

“You should be grateful to me,” the impostor said. “Had I not given Master Field such a convincing account of your harmlessness, he’d never have bothered to interrogate Dee so carefully. I’ve played you false—though no more false, I think, than you played me in pretending to be a Catholic—but it has worked to your advantage. If not for me, you really might have been taken for a Satanist rather than a trickster and a fantasist. You should be careful, in future, about what you pretend to be. The pretense of being a cunning man, a fortune-teller, or a Paracelsian might impress credulous folk, but the word of God is spreading now as never before, and enlightenment will soon reach into every corner of English society. You will fare far better as an honest, God-fearing servant than any kind of mountebank.”

“Thank you for your advice, Brother Cuthbert,” Kelley said, deliberately using the false name even though he knew the true one. “I am indeed grateful to you, for I know what a narrow escape I’ve had. I’ll certainly be careful in attempting to plan my future.”

By the time this brief conversation had run its course, the first rays of the nascent sun were rising from the eastern horizon, proud and pure in their ambition.

“We cannot walk all day, having had no sleep,” John Dee complained. “We must find a place to rest.”

“Indeed we must,” Giordano Bruno advised. “Wilton is a long way off, and we must conserve our strength as best we can. We have work to do when we arrive.”

“Aye,” said John Dee. “There’s gold to be made, and wisdom to be cultivated.”

“And an army to be gathered,” said the gypsy, “and a fleet constructed. The odds will be against us, but we are forewarned and forearmed.”

Against our immediate enemies, at least, Kelley thought, although he said nothing. He felt strangely intoxicated, yet again, as he made his way on to the muddy road and turned westward, but it was not the effect of angelic possession. This time, it was confidence in his destiny, and the knowledge that he had been set apart from common men. For the first time in his life, and in spite of his confusion, he knew that he was a true magician—which might well be a better thing to be than not, in the turbulent times that were to come.