

Saint Antony's Fire

by Steve White

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To Sandy, who manages the
increasingly difficult feat of
making me feel young.

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Prologue

The end-less, sag-ging coast-line had a break in it af-ter all.

It was An-to-nio Alaminos who had spot-ted it, of course. The nav-iga-tor had danced along the edges of the Gulf Stream with a skill that had caused some of the more ig-no-rant com-mon sailors to mut-ter dark-ly of pacts with Sa-tan. And he had brought them safe-ly through the nar-row in-let be-tween the bar-ri-er is-lands, in-to the bay where the three car-avels now lay at an-chor.

They had made land-fall and set up a cross on the beach on the third of April, an-no Do-mi-ni 1513, at the height of the East-er sea-son—Pas-cua Flori-da, “the Feast of Flow-ers,” as Spaniards called it. Where-fore their cap-tain-gen-er-al, Juan Ponce de León, ade-lan-ta-do of Spain, had named this land “Flori-da” as he had waved his sword at it and claimed it for His Catholic Majesty Fer-di-nand, King of Aragon, Leon and As-turias and Re-gent of Castile.

Not, he re-flect-ed as he leaned on the quar-ter-deck taffrail of the flag-ship San-ti-ago amid the hu-mid-ity and the in-sects, that King Fer-di-nand will ev-er be like-ly to find any use for such a pile of sog-gy shit.

If pressed, he would have had to grant the place a cer-tain beau-ty, with its ri-ot of un-fa-mil-iar flow-er-ing trees. But on-ly if pressed, for he came of a time and place and class of men who did not ha-bit-u-ally think in such terms. It was gold he was af-ter. Gold and slaves and . . . some-thing else.

He sensed a mo-tion at his left el-bow. It was Diego Bermúdez, cap-tain of the San-ti-ago, a youngish man burn-ing to equal or sur-pass the fame of his broth-er Juan, dis-cov-er-er of the is-land of Bermu-da. Alaminos, the pi-lot, joined them at the rail and stared across the still wa-ters of the twilit bay at the dark-ling jun-gle be-yond. Af-ter a mo-ment, Alaminos gave a chuck-le so low as to be bare-ly au-di-ble above the noise of a mil-lion ci-cadas ashore.

“Have you ev-er no-ticed some-thing about the things the In-di-ans tell us?” Alaminos asked with the fa-mil-iar-ity that had come to ob-tain be-tween him and the hi-dal-gos dur-ing the voy-age. “Back in Puer-to Ri-co, they told us there was a mar-velous spring on the largest of the Ba-hamas that re-stored youth and vig-or to old men. Of course, we learned bet-ter.”

“Yes,” said Bermúdez with a nod of sad ac-cord. “We should have known bet-ter any-way. Springs on coral is-lands in-deed!” He spat feel-ing-ly over the rail.

Five years be-fore, in 1508, Ponce de León had con-quer-ed the is-land the In-di-ans called Bor-in-quen and re-named it Puer-to Ri-co. He had been con-firmed as its gov-er-nor two years af-ter-wards. But lat-er he had been de-posed by schem-ing ri-vals, as the is-land had stopped yield-ing the rev-enues to which the crown had be-come ac-cus-tomed. But how could it be oth-er-wise, at the rate the In-di-an la-bor-ers kept dy-ing off from the pox that on-ly left most white men with pock-marked faces? Odd. It couldn't even be God's judg-ment on them for their hea-then prac-tices, for they un-grate-ful-ly went right on dy-ing af-ter be-ing Chris-tian-ized. Even more un-grate-ful was their propen-si-ty for re-belling and mur-der-ing their bene-fac-tors—which,

of course, re-sult-ed in their dy-ing even faster. And African slaves couldn't be brought in fast enough to re-pace them. There had been on-ly one so-lu-tion: find a new land, with more In-di-ans—hope-ful-ly, health-ier ones. So Ponce de León had equipped this ex-pe-di-tion at his own ex-pense.

“And then,” Alaminos con-tin-ued, “when we asked the In-di-ans in the Ba-hamas about it, they told us about this won-drous is-land to the north-west.” He chuck-led again, with-out hu-mor. “When-ev-er they find out what it is we're look-ing for, they al-ways tell us that, yes, they've heard about it, they know of it . . . some-where else. Some-where over the next hori-zon.”

Ponce de León frowned and ran his fin-gers through his frost-ed beard. “So you think they've just been telling us what-ev-er will get rid of us? That there re-al-ly is no foun-tain of youth?” Hear-ing no re-ply, he pressed on. “But didn't the an-cients speak of such a foun-tain in the Ter-res-tri-al Par-adise? Didn't the En-glish-man John Man-dev-ille see it—and drink from it?”

“So he said,” Alaminos ad-mit-ted. “Of course, he said a lot of things.”

Ponce de León ig-nored the last part. He leaned over the rail and stared through the sub-trop-ical twi-light at the shore, in-def-inite in its marshi-ness. “To-mor-row morn-ing we'll go ashore one more time and see what there is to find—maybe cap-ture some In-di-ans and have my son put them to the ques-tion. We can't give up the search.”

He left un-spo-ken the rea-son why they—or, to be strict-ly ac-cu-rate, he—couldn't give up the search. At fifty-three, he was very near-ly the old-est man he knew. And of course he ought to be thank-ing God for be-ing alive and ac-tive at such an ex-cep-tion-al age. And yet he had felt the chill of on-com-ing win-ter in many ways. In painful joints, in short-ness of breath, in the way the world was more and more blurred in his eyes . . . and in the in-creas-ing-ly fre-quent times he was un-able to take plea-sure from a wom-an—or, even worse, un-in-ter-est-ed in do-ing so. (The con-cept of giv-ing plea-sure to a wom-an was sim-ply too alien.)

No. It was un-think-able that he should nev-er be young again.

“To-mor-row morn-ing,” he re-peat-ed, with even greater em-pha-sis.

Juan González Ponce de León ran a hand through his sweat-soaked black hair as he turned from the ter-ri-fied, bound In-di-an and re-port-ed to his fa-ther.

“I don't know. It's not the same lan-guage as the Tain-os speak on Puer-to Ri-co. But I can puz-zle out some of it, the way you could in Italy if you on-ly spoke Span-ish. And he seems to be say-ing that there's some-thing just south of here—some-thing mag-ical.”

“A foun-tain?” de-mand-ed Ponce de León, with the gruff-ness he ha-bit-ual-ly used to dis-guise his pride in his son. Juan González had been with him in Puer-to Ri-co, and as more than just an in-ter-preter. He had been able to dis-guise him-self as an In-di-an with on-ly min-imal stain-ing of his skin—his An-dalu-sian moth-er had ob-vi-ous-ly had some Moor-ish blood in her, if you went back far enough, al-though of course ev-ery-one po-lite-ly pre-tend-ed not to no-tice that. Spend-ing time among them, he had gath-ered valu-able in-for-ma-tion, at the cost of nu-mer-ous wounds. Yes, hav-ing such a son was yet an-oth-er rea-son he should be sat-is-fied with his life. So why wasn't he?

“No, there's no word for that—or if there is, it's too dif-fer-ent from any-thing in Taino for me to ask him. All I'm cer-tain of is that his peo-ple are ter-ri-fied of it, and avoid it. And . . . he seemed to be try-ing to tell me about corpses. But corpses that were not of men.”

Juan Bono de Que-jo mut-tered some-thing in his na-tive Basque. He was the cap-tain of the San-ta María de Con-so-lación, the sec-ond of the ex-pe-di-tion's ships, and was tak-ing his turn to come ashore while Bermúdez re-mained aboard San-ti-ago. “Demons?” he won-dered aloud.

They all crossed them-selves re-flex-ive-ly. Juan Gar-ri-do looked ap-pre-hen-sive, the whites of his eyes grow-ing large in his dark face. The black Por-tuguese ad-ven-tur-er had been with Ponce de León in Puer-to Ri-co and Guade-loupe, and had al-so served in Cu-ba. Ev-ery-one knew him to be a fear-less and dead-ly fight-er—against hu-man en-emies. “That would ex-plain why the In-di-ans stay away from it,” he said. “Maybe we should too.”

“And yet,” said Ponce de León thought-ful-ly, “they are sim-ple hea-thens. So they wor-ship demons any-way. Isn't it more like-ly that this is of di-vine ori-gin? That would fright-en them more than the pow-ers of dark-ness, in their ig-no-rance of the true faith.”

There was a great fur-row-ing of brows as they all as-sumed un-ac-cus-tomed ex-pres-sions of deep thought. These men were not gen-er-al-ly giv-en to the the-olog-ical anal-ysis that was the province of priests. But Ponce de León was a fa-mous-ly clever man. And his rea-son-ing seemed to hold up. While they were still cog-itat-ing, he turned back to his son.

“Are you sure this couldn't be con-nect-ed with the foun-tain of youth? Ask him if it has any-thing to do with wa-ter.”

“I al-ready did. At first he just looked blank. But then he seemed to be try-ing to tell me some-thing about a pool that was not re-al-ly wa-ter.”

And, thought Ponce de León with a tin-gle of ex-cite-ment, the foun-tain nat-ural-ly wouldn't look like or-di-nary wa-ter, would it? He came to a de-ci-sion.

“We'll in-ves-ti-gate this. Tell the In-di-an we'll pro-tect him from what-ev-er is there. And make sure he un-der-stands what has hap-pened to him up un-til now is noth-ing com-pared to what will hap-pen to him if he doesn't guide us faith-ful-ly.”

At first, they didn't even see the thing.

It wasn't that there was any-thing wrong with their eyes. It was sim-ply that their brains re-fused to ac-cept what their eyes re-port-ed.

The wreck lay amid the for-est, in an area that was ob-vi-ous-ly sec-ond growth. It was im-pos-si-ble to avoid the im-pres-sion that it had it-self dev-as-tat-ed the orig-inal veg-eta-tion, as though it had some-how fall-en from the sky in a crash that had left it ly-ing im-mo-bi-lized at a slight an-gle. But that, clear-ly, had oc-curred years ago, for the vines and the creep-ers and the moss and all the rest had be-gun to re-claim their own. Now it lay shroud-ed in green-ery. But not so shroud-ed as to con-veal its wrong-ness.

First of all, it was made of what seemed to be met-al.

These men knew what could be cast in met-al. Sword blades. Hel-mets. Ar-mor. Ploughshares. Ar-que-bus bar-rels. Even a can-non bar-rel, for the old bom-bards con-struct-ed of hoops and staves of wrought iron were al-ready ob-so-lete in the eyes of sol-diers like these, au courant with the lat-est mil-itary de-vel-op-ments. But this en-tire . . . ves-sel?—what was it, any-way?—was a sin-gle seam-less cast-ing, ap-par-ent-ly in the shape of a disc as wide as a brig-an-tine was long. It was a man-ifest im-pos-si-bil-ity.

And even grant-ing that it could ex-ist, it had clear-ly been sit-ting here long enough for the jun-gle to have be-gun to re-turn. And yet there was not a sin-gle speck of rust on it. Its ex-te-ri-or sur-face was all the same uni-form, gleam-ing, sil-very smooth-ness, al-beit bent and crum-pled in spots and black-ened on its un-der-side, as though an in-tense fire had car-bonized the met-al there.

And how had it got-ten here?

Ponce de León was the first to re-cov-er. He drew his sword and ad-vanced on the ap-pari-tion.

From the In-di-an came a shriek of ter-ror. He strained for-ward against the rope that held him, shout-ing an ap-peal that tran-scend-ed lan-guage—a des-per-ate ap-peal to not ap-proach the mys-te-ri-ous thing any clos-er. His screams brought one of his guards out of shock, and an ar-que-bus butt de-scend-ed on his head, si-lenc-ing him. Ponce de León re-sumed his ad-vance.

With-out warn-ing, a kind of rasp-ing hum was heard, and a crack ap-peared in the im-pos-si-ble metal-lic sur-face—a hair-line crack, sur-round-ing a rect-an-gu-lar seg-ment that pro-ceed-ed, un-aid-ed, to low-er it-self on in-vis-ible hinges un-til it touched the ground, form-ing a ramp lead-ing up to a door-way.

A low moan-ing arose from those be-hind Ponce de León. He turned, and saw his men on their knees, all fran-ti-cal-ly cross-ing them-selves and fin-ger-ing their beads.

“Re-mem-ber,” he shout-ed, “the black arts of sor-cery can-not pre-vail against good

Chris-tian men!” He saw no pur-pose to be served by open-ing the ques-tion of just how good a Chris-tian he, or any of them, was. In-stead, he took in his left hand the cru-ci-fix he wore around his neck and held it up re-as-sur-ing-ly. “But I can-not ask any-one to ac-com-pa-ny me. I will go in alone.”

“No, fa-ther!” wailed Juan González. “Don’t risk your im-mor-tal soul!”

“That’s right, mas-ter,” Bono de Que-jo put in, his voice charged with an ur-gen-cy that thick-ened his Basque ac-cent. “What will be-come of us if you are lost?”

“Our La-dy and the saints will pro-tect me,” Ponce de León de-clared firm-ly. But, just in case, he drew his ex-pen-sive state-of-the-art wheel lock pis-tol and cocked it. Then, sword in right hand, pis-tol in left, he walked to-ward the ramp that had ap-peared so mirac-ulous-ly, and as-cend-ed it.

This was a realm where noth-ing was—or could have been—made out of nat-ural ma-te-ri-als, in any Chris-tian way. Even stranger was the light he was see-ing it all by. He hadn’t re-al-ly ex-pect-ed torch-es. But there were none of the can-dle lanterns or oil lamps that gave light be-low decks on a ship. In-stead, there were long pan-els of some-thing that was translu-cent and yet was not glass, glow-ing with a weird steadi-ness that lacked the flick-er-ing of a flame. And glow-ing with-out heat.

Very lit-tle of what he was see-ing reg-is-tered on him, cut off as he was from any fa-mil-iar ref-er-ence points on which his mind might have got-ten a grip. He be-gan to won-der if that was the true tor-ment of Hell, for he knew with cold cer-tain-ty that he would go mad if he tar-ried here too long.

He stern-ly re-mind-ed him-self that the Ad-ver-sary had no pow-er to cre-ate any-thing, on-ly the pow-er to de-ceive. To be-lieve oth-er-wise was to fall in-to the Manichae-an heresy. And all of this was cer-tain-ly ma-te-ri-al—he pe-ri-od-ical-ly pound-ed a fist on some-thing to con-firm that. He could not be-lieve that he could be tak-en in by a send-ing of this scale, for this long.

But ev-ery time he al-lowed him-self to feel re-as-sured, he hap-pened on-to one of the small but large-head-ed bod-ies, large-ly de-com-posed but with the skele-tons still dis-cernible.

Juan Ponce de León had fought in more wars than most men. He was noth-ing if not fa-mil-iar with dead bod-ies, at all stages of de-cay. He knew very well what hu-man skele-tons looked like. And these skele-tons were not those of men. His stom-ach heaved at the sight of their wrong-ness. He hur-ried on.

Then the awk-ward-ly cant-ed pas-sage-way opened out in-to a space that con-tained a frame-work hold-ing one of the in-hu-man forms in a bet-ter state of preser-va-tion than the oth-ers. Like all of them, it was small; Ponce de León was ac-count-ed a short man, but his hel-met-ed head bare-ly had clear-ance in these spaces. He stared at the face, spin-dle-shaped like the rest but with des-ic-cat-ed parch-ment-like skin still stretched over it. The huge eye-holes he had ob-served be-fore were even more ap-par-ent, and the tiny mouth and the lack of a nose-bridge turned out not to have been il-lu-sions. Nei-ther had the hands, with on-ly three fin-gers and a thumb that was too long and wasn’t at quite the right an-gle to the fin-gers.

He looked away, shud-der-ing, and no-ticed what filled the cen-ter of the cham-ber. And he un-der-stood what the In-di-an had meant about wa-ter . . . but not quite.

The de-pres-sion in the floor—he pre-ferred not to dwell on the re-sem-blance of its shape to that of a cof-fin—held some-thing be-side which all he had seen so far seemed nor-mal and fa-mil-iar. It was as though the air with-in it—no, not the air, some-thing even more fun-da-men-tal than that, some-thing go-ing to the ba-sic right-ness of cre-ation it-self—rip-pled in the way of dis-turbed wa-ter. He wrenched his eyes away, lest his soul drown in that un-nat-ural pool.

His gaze fell on some-thing he had not no-ticed be-fore, amid all the strangeness. It was like one of the head-shaped ef-fi-gies that hat-ters used to dis-play their wares—al-most com-ical-ly or-di-nary, ex-cept for two things. One was that it was made of some-thing that was nei-ther met-al nor wood nor any-thing to which he could put a name. And the oth-er was what it held: a metal-lic

head-band or cir-clet, dec-orat-ed with . . . but no, he was cer-tain they weren't re-al-ly dec-ora-tions, al-though he could not guess what they were. It looked like it would fit on a man's head . . . or, he re-lect-ed, the head on one of the dead be-ings who haunt-ed this place. It sat there, in front of the rel-ative-ly well-pre-served be-ing, as though it was a coro-net be-long-ing to him. Per-haps even a crown.

All at once, he laughed un-con-trol-lably. When he'd got-ten his breath back, some-thing com-pelled him to ad-dress the un-earth-ly be-ing as though it had been alive.

“Well, de-mon, or what-ev-er you are, I've en-tered your realm, and you couldn't fright-en me off. So you've learned some-thing about the men of Spain! And while I may not have gained any-thing else—in fact, I'm sure I haven't, for this has been a fool's er-rand like all the rest of this ex-pe-di-tion—I claim your crown, by right of con-quest!”

He set down his weapons, re-moved his mori-on, and took the cir-clet in his hands. It was lighter than it looked. He placed it on his gray-ing head.

All at once, his soul was no longer his own.

It wasn't that he no longer had a soul. That might al-most have been bet-ter than this to-tal in-abil-ity to re-sist the great roar-ing voice in-side his skull, all the while know-ing he couldn't re-sist it. For a mo-ment, his eyes met the enor-mous emp-ty eye-sock-ets of the dead be-ing . . . and he knew.

He knew what he must do. And he knew that the first of the things he must do was al-so his re-ward. And if his soul had still been his own, he would not have ac-cept-ed that re-ward. He would have re-ject-ed it as the very breath of Sa-tan. This, too, he knew. And that was the mea-sure of his damna-tion.

He walked to the strange pool-that-was-not-a-pool and lay down in its weird-ly swirling depths. And then he learned that there were even worse things than hav-ing no will. This pen-etrat-ed not just his mind, but . . . what was the name of that pa-gan Greek philoso-pher who had pos-tu-lat-ed in-finites-imal par-ti-cles of which ev-ery-thing was ul-ti-mate-ly com-posed? Oh, yes, Dem-ocri-tus . . .

Then his con-scious-ness mer-ci-ful-ly fled—the first mer-cy that had been vouch-safed him. And the last.

They wait-ed, tor-ment-ed by in-sects and ten-sion, snarling at each oth-er at the least provo-ca-tion, or no provo-ca-tion at all. As night ap-proached and their pa-tience be-gan to stretch to the snap-ping point, Juan González Ponce de León pre-pared to call for vol-un-teers to ac-com-pa-ny him through that eerie por-tal in search of his fa-ther.

But at that mo-ment, the fig-ure of the cap-tain-gen-er-al ap-peared. With shouts of joy, they crowd-ed around the ramp . . . and stopped.

If asked, they wouldn't have been able to ex-plain what it was that halt-ed them in their tracks. It was un-de-ni-ably Ponce de León, look-ing no dif-fer-ent . . . at least in any way they could have put a name to. But there was some-thing dif-fer-ent. Per-haps it was some-thing in the way he moved, like a younger man. Or per-haps it was the ex-pres-sion on his face, as though it was some-one else look-ing out through his eyes. Some-one they weren't sure they knew, or want-ed to know.

“Fa-ther . . . ?” Juan González spoke hes-itant-ly in-to the si-lence.

Ponce de León laughed—and it wasn't re-al-ly his laugh. “Have no fear, son, for we are not in the pres-ence of the pow-ers of dark-ness. To-mor-row, I'll show you all! And . . . I will found a church here, in thanks to God for His bless-ing!” He blinked, and all at once was al-most as he had been—not quite, but close enough to al-low them a feel-ing of re-lief. “But now we must re-turn to the ships be-fore night-fall.” He led the way with a spring in his step that none of them had seen in quite a while.

But Juan Gar-ri-do lin-gered be-hind, held by the cu-riosity that his friends had al-ways said would be the death of him. Af-ter the last of them had van-ish-ed in-to the woods, he looked around

furtive-ly, dart-ed up the ramp, and en-tered the por-tal.

His com-rades heard his soul-shak-ing scream of ul-ti-mate hor-ror and de-spair be-hind them, and the noise as he ran with reck-less speed through the un-der-brush. By the time they caught up with him, it was too late. He lay face down in a pool of blood, still clutch-ing the dag-ger with which he had cut his own throat.

One

Don Alon-zo Pérez de Guzmán El Bueno, Duke of Med-ina Sido-nia and Cap-tain Gen-er-al of the High Seas, had fi-nal-ly got-ten over be-ing sea-sick.

Some would say it's about time, he re-flect-ed rue-ful-ly. Af-ter all, he was com-man-der of the great-est war fleet in his-to-ry—the Ar-ma-da of a hun-dred and thir-ty ships and thir-ty thou-sand men as-sem-bled by His Most Catholic Majesty Phillip II for the con-quest of Eng-land and the restora-tion of the true Catholic faith to that be-night-ed land.

His chron-ic sea-sick-ness was on-ly one of the ar-gu-ments he had used in his let-ter to the King, seek-ing to de-cline the ap-point-ment to re-place the Ar-ma-da's orig-inal com-man-der Don Al-varo de Bazán, Mar-quis of San-ta Cruz—who, some whis-pered, had been has-tened in-to a not al-to-geth-er un-wel-come grave by the King's con-stant carp-ing. In ret-ro-spect, he re-al-ized that let-ter had been a mis-take. He should have slept on it, in-stead of in-stant-ly sit-ting down and pen-ning a spate of self-dep-re-ca-tion. In par-tic-ular, he should have known bet-ter than to plead in-abil-ity to spend the lav-ish amounts a fleet com-man-der was ex-pect-ed to con-tribute to an ex-pe-di-tion out of his pri-vate purse. Com-ing from one of the great-est pri-vate land-hold-ers in Eu-rope, a plea of pover-ty had been so patent-ly spu-ri-ous as to weak-en the rest of his case, ev-ery word of which hap-pened to be true.

Af-ter-wards, re-al-iz-ing all this, he had pulled him-self to-geth-er and writ-ten a sec-ond let-ter stat-ing forthright-ly his re-al rea-son for not want-ing the stu-pen-dous hon-or of com-mand-ing the Ar-ma-da: the fact that he had no faith it could suc-ceed.

Nei-ther let-ter had had the slight-est ef-fect, of course. He knew full well the King's rea-sons for ap-point-ing him. First and fore-most, he was the se-nior grandee of all Spain, in-hab-it-ing a stra-tum far above jeal-ousy. None of the proud, touchy aris-to-crats who com-mand-ed the Ar-ma-da's squadrons could pos-si-bly take of-fense at be-ing called on to serve un-der him. Fur-ther-more, in his ca-pac-ity as hered-itary Cap-tain Gen-er-al of An-dalu-sia he had di-rect-ed the de-fense of Cadiz the pre-vi-ous year when the En-glish pi-rate Sir Fran-cis Drake had at-tacked it . . . and sub-se-quent-ly with-drawn, leav-ing the town un-sacked. So the claim could be made that he had re-pelled el Draque, whose name Span-ish nurse-maids used to fright-en naughty chil-dren. Non-sense, of course; Drake had sim-ply sailed away as soon as he had done what he had come to do and set the Ar-ma-da's sched-ule back by a year. It sound-ed good, though. And so his two let-ters had been wastes of pa-per and ink. The King had peremp-to-ri-ly or-dered him to Lis-bon to lead the Ar-ma-da to what he had been prac-ti-cal-ly cer-tain was its doom.

The King had as-sured him oth-er-wise. Af-ter all, the Ar-ma-da sailed in God's cause, and there-fore could not fail. And be-sides, one of the Gray Monks of the Or-der of Saint Antony was to ac-com-pa-ny it, with cer-tain equip-ment which was to be load-ed aboard in the strictest se-cre-cy.

The last had not re-as-sured him as he knew it should have.

Part-ly, as he ad-mit-ted to him-self, his reser-va-tions were a mat-ter of his fam-ily back-ground. The Guzmáns had a tra-di-tion of en-mi-ty with the Ponce de Leóns, in-clud-ing old Juan, who had gone to his grave claim-ing to have dis-cov-ered the foun-tain of youth in 1513. Ad-mit-ted-ly, that grave had been an ex-traor-di-nar-ily post-poned one. But to-ward the end, his be-hav-ior had in-creas-ing-ly aroused al-most as much com-ment as his lack of vis-ible signs of ag-ing. And the man-ner of his death, when it fi-nal-ly came, had oc-ca-sioned whis-pered sto-ries that no one want-ed to be-lieve. Equal-ly dis-turb-ing had been the sto-ries that had be-gun to

fil-ter back from the church he had es-tab-lished on the site. Short-ly af-ter its found-ing in 1540, the So-ci-ety of Je-sus had been di-rect-ed to in-ves-ti-gate the mat-ter. The Je-suits sent to Flori-da had re-tur-ned to Spain with a small, heav-ily cloaked fig-ure, and pe-ti-tioned the Church to found a new monas-tic or-der named af-ter Saint Antony of Pad-ua, the thir-teenth cen-tu-ry Fran-cis-can known in his life-time as “the ham-mer of the heretics.” Af-ter a pri-vate au-di-ence, still shroud-ed in se-cre-cy, the Holy Fa-ther had grant-ed the re-quest.

But it was more than just the Ponce De León con-nec-tion—more than just a fam-ily feud. It was the Gray Monks them-selves, who were ap-pear-ing in Eu-rope in in-creas-ing num-bers . . .

It was at that mo-ment that the door to a cer-tain cab-in creaked open for the first time since they had left Corun-na.

Med-ina Sido-nia swung about, star-tled. The Gray Monk stood out-side the door, with a pair of his hu-man acolytes emerg-ing be-hind him.

No, the Duke told him-self stern-ly, set-ting him-self a penance for the men-tal qual-ifi-er “hu-man.” The Gray Monks were hu-man. They must be. Had not the Holy Fa-ther said so? Af-ter emerg-ing from that pri-vate au-di-ence about which strange things were still mut-tered furtive-ly, Pope Paul III had de-creed that the man the Je-suits had brought back from Flori-da had in-deed been just that: a man, pos-sess-ing a soul. And if he looked pe-cu-liar . . . well, so did In-di-ans or Africans.

And yet, the Duke could not stop him-self from guilti-ly think-ing, it's not the same. In-di-ans and Africans might be ug-ly, but they were clear-ly of the moist, sweaty flesh of Adam. The Gray Monks' flesh didn't seem like flesh at all—dry, pale gray, un-pleas-ant-ly thin-seem-ing. And the huge eyes were bot-tom-less pools of un-dif-fer-en-ti-at-ed dark-ness, ut-ter-ly un-like those of any breed of men . . . or, for that mat-ter, any beast. And the nose was an al-most nonex-is-tent ridge. And the mouth was a tiny li-pless slit above the point-ed chin. And then there were those dis-turb-ing hands . . .

No, he thought again, set-ting him-self an ad-di-tion-al penance. The Holy Fa-ther had spo-ken. For any good Catholic, that set-tled the mat-ter.

“Fa-ther Jerón-imo,” he said, in-clin-ing his head with his cus-tom-ary grave cour-tesy.

“My son,” ac-knowl-edged the Gray Monk in the sibi-lant way they al-ways spoke, un-pleas-ant-ly rem-inis-cent of the hiss-ing of snakes, as though they were form-ing hu-man words with-out hu-man or-gans of speech. He re-tur-ned the nod, then looked up to meet the Duke's eyes. He had to look up. Med-ina Sido-nia was not a tall man, but none of the Gray Monks stood much above four and a half feet. “You ap-pear dis-tract-ed.”

“It is noth-ing you need con-cern your-self with, Fa-ther. On-ly a prob-lem of nav-iga-tion, and oth-er such low-ly mat-ters.”

“Ah, but any-thing that touch-es on the suc-cess of this Ar-ma-da is my con-cern. Af-ter all, we sail in the ser-vice of God.” It was im-pos-si-ble to read ex-pres-sions on that face, and the un-nat-ural, whis-per-ing voice seemed de-void of emo-tion. But the Duke could have sworn he de-lect-ed a strange-ly in-ap-pro-pri-ate note of amused irony in the last sen-tence. “Be-sides,” Fa-ther Jerón-imo con-tin-ued, “the King has com-mand-ed you to keep me in-formed of all de-vel-op-ments.”

This, the Duke knew, was true. His or-ders had in-clud-ed in-struc-tions con-cern-ing the Gray Monk which were strange-ly at vari-ance with King Phillip's usu-al nit-pick-ing pas-sion for de-tail. In fact, they went be-yond the in-struc-tion that had com-mand-ed him to fol-low the ad-vice of Don Diego Flo-res de Valdés on the nau-ti-cal mat-ters of which he him-self freely ad-mit-ted he had no prac-ti-cal ex-pe-ri-ence. These or-ders were open-end-ed, ef-fec-tive-ly mak-ing the Gray Monk the Ar-ma-da's co-com-man-der. He was to de-fer to the ad-vice of Fa-ther Jerón-imo in all mat-ters in which the Gray Monk chose to in-ter-est him-self. So far, these had proven to be no mat-ters at all, which had en-abled the un-wel-come or-ders to re-cede in-to the back-ground of the Duke's thoughts. But now the Gray Monk had emerged from seclu-sion, and the or-ders could no longer be ig-nored.

And be-sides, the Duke thought to him-self in a sud-den spasm of self-knowl-edge, he need-ed to vent his frus-tra-tion and de-spair to some-one, on this Sat-ur-day af-ter-noon, the sixth of Au-gust, an-no Do-mi-ni 1588, when for the first time he knew be-yond any pos-si-bil-ity of self-de-cep-tion that the Ar-ma-da was go-ing to fail, and that it had been doomed to fail-ure from the first.

He abrupt-ly turned away and walked across the quar-ter-deck of the flag-ship San Martín. Fa-ther Jerón-imo fol-lowed, and by-standers ner-vous-ly moved aside at the sight of him. He joined the Duke at star-board rail, and the two of them stared ahead at the coast of France, for they were on-ly a few miles from Calais. Astern, the city of hulls and for-est of masts that was the Ar-ma-da blocked their view of the En-glish ships that fol-lowed so in-escapably.

“You know my mis-sion,” the Duke be-gan, speak-ing as much to him-self as to the Gray Monk, “for you were present at the coun-cil back in Lis-bon where the King's or-ders were opened. I am to take the Ar-ma-da up the En-glish Chan-nel and join with the Duke of Par-ma, clear-ing the sea of the En-glish fleet so that he can cross over from the Nether-lands with his army, re-in-forced by six thou-sand of the troops I've brought from Spain.” Crammed in-to ev-ery cu-bic yard of dark air-less be-low-decks space, he thought, many of them sea-sick or with di-ar-rhea. He could of-ten smell the nau-se-at-ing, in-de-scrib-able filth of their quar-ters up here on the weath-er decks. And their vom-it and exc-re-ta seeped fur-ther down, through the stor-age holds con-tain-ing the food they had to eat, and still fur-ther down in-to the bilges they lived atop. “Well, for the last sev-er-al days I have known that I can-not ac-com-pleish the sec-ond part of those or-ders. The En-glish ships are so much more nim-ble than ours that they can al-ways keep the weath-er gauge, as the mariners call it. They can fight or avoid bat-tle at their plea-sure, bom-bard-ing us with the long-range cul-verins they have in far greater num-bers than we, nev-er al-low-ing us to come along-side and board them as our sol-diers wish.”

“Still, you have fought your way up the Chan-nel valiant-ly, suf-fer-ing rel-at-ive-ly small loss.”

“Oh, yes. As long as we main-tain our de-fen-sive for-ma-tion, they can on-ly nib-ble at its edges. But that makes us even less ma-neu-ver-able, for we must keep for-ma-tion with the worst tubs among the mer-chant ships the King col-lect-ed to serve as troop car-ri-ers. We can't touch the En-glish!” For a mo-ment the Duke was un-able to con-tin-ue, choked by wear-i-ness and frus-tra-tion. “No. I can-not clear the seas for Par-ma.”

“Of course you can't, my son. San-ta Cruz couldn't have. No one could have.”

The Duke looked up sharply and met those strange eyes. As al-ways, he could not read them. And he stern-ly or-dered him-self not to feel vin-di-ca-tion at the Gray Monk's ref-er-ence to the revered sea-fight-er San-ta Cruz, whose shoes the King had im-pos-si-bly or-dered him to fill. Any-way, the feel-ing on-ly last-ed an in-stant be-fore black de-spair closed in over him again.

“Your words are a com-fort, Fa-ther. But ear-ly this af-ter-noon I learned that I can't ful-fill the first part of my or-ders ei-ther. I can't join hands with the Duke of Par-ma as the King com-mands!”

“What do you mean, my son?” As be-fore, the Duke dis-trust-ed his in-stincts in in-ter-pret-ing that ex-pres-sion-less voice. But was there a hint of mock-ery?

A mo-ment passed be-fore the Duke replied. He was run-ning over in his mind the se-quence of events that had brought the Ar-ma-da to its present pass.

Their route from Lis-bon had tak-en them out of sight of land on-ly once, when they had crossed the Bay of Bis-cay from Corun-na to the Lizard. So the voy-age had nev-er re-quired deep-sea nav-iga-tion. In-stead, it had all been a mat-ter of coastal pi-lotage, or “cap-ing”—mak-ing one's way from cape to cape with the aid of the books of sail-ing in-struc-tions the French called routiers, a word which the En-glish had bas-tardized in-to “rut-ters” in their usu-al way of plun-der-ing oth-er peo-ples' lan-guages. And the Ar-ma-da car-ried the most ad-vanced pi-lot's tool of all: the at-las of sea-charts and rut-ters com-piled by the Dutch-man Wa-gen-haer. (“Wag-goner,” in an-oth-er typ-ical En-glish bit of lin-guis-tic brig-andage.) All this the Duke had learned, try-ing to rem-edy his in-ex-pe-ri-ence of the sea in prepa-ra-tion for his un-wel-come

task. But there was one thing he had not learned un-til this very day. And now he poured it forth to the Gray Monk be-cause in his dis-tress of soul he must pour it forth to some-one. Wasn't that what a man of God was for . . . even when he was this sort of man?

“At ten o'clock this morn-ing, we sight-ed the French coast, af-ter hav-ing edged away from the En-glish side of the Chan-nel yes-ter-day.” Un-til then, they had hugged that side, on the ex-press or-ders of the King. He had ex-pect-ed the sight of the Ar-ma-da to ig-nite a ris-ing of the En-glish Catholics against the heretic bas-tard Eliz-abeth, for so he had been as-sured by En-glish ex-iles who made their liv-ing by telling him what he want-ed to hear. In fact, the on-ly re-sult had been to force the Ar-ma-da to fight with-in sight of ports from which its en-emies could be read-ily re-sup-plied, while its own stocks of pow-der and shot ran low-er and low-er. “I have con-tin-ual-ly sent pin-naces to the Duke of Par-ma with let-ters urg-ing him to be ready to meet us when we come with-in sight of his port of Dunkirk, al-though I have re-ceived no re-ply. But then, at four o'clock this af-ter-noon, as we were al-ready ap-proach-ing Calais, the pi-lots in-formed me that they can't take us there! As Wa-gen-haer ex-plains, there is a se-ries of sand-banks run-ning par-al-lel to the Flem-ish coast, less than three fath-oms deep—and ex-tend-ing twelve miles out to sea off Dunkirk. Ocean-go-ing ships like ours can't ap-proach clos-er than that.”

“On-ly now they tell you this? But sure-ly there must be a way through the banks.”

“On-ly one very nar-row chan-nel. Wa-gen-haer warns that it is death to try to bring deep-draft ships though it with-out an ex-pe-ri-enced Flem-ish pi-lot. And we have none.” The Duke mas-tered him-self and con-tin-ued. “So we can't fetch Par-ma's army as planned. The on-ly hope is for him to come out and meet us. When I met with my coun-cil of war, most of them were for press-ing on to Dunkirk any-way—they sim-ply couldn't be-lieve it!”

“Un-der-stand-able.” The note of irony in the Gray Monk's strange voice was now un-mis-tak-able. “But you over-ruled them?”

“Yes. I've giv-en or-ders for us to an-chor four miles short of Calais. We'll be there soon. Maybe the wind and tide will car-ry the En-glish on past us be-fore they see what we're do-ing and can drop an-chor, so they'll lose the weath-er gauge.” Even as he said it, he knew he didn't re-al-ly be-lieve it. And Fa-ther Jerón-imo didn't even both-er to com-ment. “I'll con-tin-ue to send mes-sages to Par-ma. I've al-ready asked him to send us armed fly-boats—the light, handy, flat-bot-tomed ves-sels that are the on-ly war-ships that can ma-neu-ver in the Dutch shal-lows. Now it be-comes im-per-ative that he do so, and use the rest of his fly-boats to bring his army out.”

Fa-ther Jerón-imo did some-thing the Duke had nev-er seen him do be-fore. He opened his tiny mouth a lit-tle wider than usu-al—wide enough to re-veal his dis-turb-ing lack of nor-mal teeth—and emit-ted a se-ries of high-pitched hiss-ing sounds. Had such a thing not been al-to-geth-er un-think-able, the Duke would have sworn he was laugh-ing.

“Par-ma has no fly-boats, my son. His 'fleet' con-sists of riv-er barges that can on-ly cross the Chan-nel in per-fect weath-er un-der your pro-tec-tion. If they tried to come out and meet you, the fly-boats of the Dutch rebel Justin of Nas-sau would sink them in the shal-lows where your war-ships can-not go. Af-ter which Par-ma's sol-diers would have to swim back to shore in ar-mor.”

The Duke stared at him, aghast. “How can you know this, Fa-ther?”

“I know many things, of-ten by means you would find mys-te-ri-ous. But there is no mys-tery here. I know it be-cause I am deep in the King's coun-sels . . . and he knew it four months ago.”

Med-ina Sido-nia found him-self with-out the pow-er of speech.

“Even last year,” the Gray Monk con-tin-ued, “Par-ma was send-ing mes-sen-gers to the King, em-pha-siz-ing the lim-ita-tions of his barges. The King in-sists that all com-mu-ni-ca-tions be chan-neled through him, in his of-fice in the Es-co-ri-al. So nat-ural-ly Par-ma in-formed him rather than you. Fi-nal-ly, in April of this year, Par-ma sent Luis Cabr-era de Cór-do-ba, who spoke to the King as bold-ly as any man has ev-er dared, ex-plain-ing to him that the junc-tion of the Ar-ma-da with Par-ma's barges, the crux of the whole plan, is im-prac-ti-cal. From which the King should have drawn the con-clu-sion that the en-tire en-ter-prise was point-less. But he pressed

ahead, not both-er-ing to in-form you. He al-ways as-sumes that God will send con-ve-nient mir-acles to dis-solve any dif-fi-cul-ties. Al-so, he is a man in-ca-pable of ad-mit-ting a mis-take, even—no, es-pe-cial-ly—to him-self.”

The Duke didn't even no-tice the Gray Monk's lèse ma-jesté, which at any oth-er time would have scan-dal-ized him. All he could think of was the point-less-ness of all they had suf-fered al-ready, and the even greater suf-fer-ing that cer-tain-ly lay in their fu-ture.

“Fa-ther,” he heard him-self say, “if you've known this all along, even back in Lis-bon be-fore we sailed, then why didn't you tell me?”

“Be-cause from the be-gin-ning I have want-ed us to come to this point.” The dark eyes held ab-so-lute-ly no feel-ing. If the eyes are the win-dows of the soul, thought the Duke with a shud-der, what sort of soul am I look-ing in-to now? “Short-ly af-ter the Lord High Ad-mi-ral of Eng-land an-chors off Calais, he will un-doubt-ed-ly be joined by Lord Hen-ry Sey-mour, who has been pa-trolling the Strait of Dover in case Par-ma should come out—even though the Dutch could have told him bet-ter. And I want them all to-geth-er.”

“But then we'll be out-num-bered as well as out-gunned,” protest-ed the Duke.

“It is of no mo-ment.” All at once, the mock-ing amuse-ment was back. “You see, the King is quite right: a mir-acle is go-ing to en-able this Ar-ma-da to suc-ceed in spite of ev-ery-thing. I am go-ing to pro-vide that mir-acle, us-ing the de-vices that came aboard with me.”

“What are these things? Holy relics?”

“Far from it. They have been brought from Flori-da over the past year. My acolytes and I will as-sem-ble them in a few of your pin-naces, which will then de-stroy the En-glish fleet. Af-ter-wards they will de-stroy the Dutch as well, if nec-es-sary. Then you will have the leisure to ob-tain the pi-lots you need from Par-ma and pro-ceed down the coast to a point where Par-ma can join you sim-ply by bring-ing his barges out of har-bor at high wa-ter and drift-ing down on the ebb. And Eng-land, de-fend-ed on-ly by a mili-tia of yokels, will lie open to Eu-rope's best pro-fes-sion-al army, led by its best gen-er-al.”

“How will these pin-naces do what all my galleons have been un-able to do?”

“It is very dif-fi-cult to ex-plain in your lan-guage. The de-vices send forth a stream of . . . very tiny par-ti-cles which are the op-po-site of the par-ti-cles of which the world is made. But that doesn't mean any-thing to you, does it? Let us say that their pres-ence in the world is a wrong-ness; when they meet the stuff of the world, they and it both die, and in their dy-ing they re-lease a . . . fire? No, that's not right. It will be as though bits of the sun have been brought to Earth.”

Med-ina Sido-nia chose his words with care. “Fa-ther, my con-science com-pels me to say that I am . . . un-com-fort-able with this. I can-not but think that what you seem to be de-scrib-ing—de-struc-tion of the mat-ter of Cre-ation it-self—is an im-pi-ous tam-per-ing with God's works.”

“What you think is of no con-se-quence.” All at once, the amuse-ment and the dis-cur-sive-ness were gone, re-placed by a cold empti-ness—the very nega-tion of the soul. “Re-mem-ber, we are not tru-ly equals. You know the King's com-mand. And re-mem-ber al-so what hap-pens to those who de-fy the Or-der of Saint Antony. Sure-ly you have heard sto-ries. Be as-sured that they are true.”

The Duke had in-deed heard the sto-ries, as the ten-ta-cles of fear had grad-u-al-ly spread across Spain and fur-ther in-to Eu-rope. He held his tongue and looked in-to those enor-mous un-blink-ing eyes, in-to bot-tom-less dark-ness.

But then the mo-ment passed, and Fa-ther Jerón-imo's mouth opened in that bare-ly per-cep-ti-ble way. This time the amuse-ment held an in-dul-gent note. “Be-sides, my son, why should you of all peo-ple ob-ject? Were it not for me, the Ar-ma-da would fail . . . and you would be the scape-goat for its fail-ure. In-deed, hu-mans be-ing what they are, they might over the course of time con-vince them-selves that you were a fool and a cow-ard, and that the Ar-ma-da would have suc-ceed-ed if on-ly some-one else had been in com-mand. Ut-ter non-sense, of course, as you and I both know. You are an or-ga-ni-za-tion-al ge-nius, with-out whom the

Ar-ma-da would nev-er have set sail with-in the King's dead-line. And your courage is be-yond re-proach, as you've con-sis-tent-ly shown. You have done as well as any-one could have, try-ing to make a fa-tal-ly flawed plan work while giv-ing the King wise ad-vice that he was too pig-head-ed to fol-low. Well, I will see to it that there is no in-jus-tice to your mem-ory. Pos-ter-ity will re-mem-ber you, along with Par-ma, as one of the con-querors of Eng-land!"

"I lack all such am-bi-tions, Fa-ther." The Duke's gaze strayed astern, to-ward the Eng-land he could no longer see. Fam-ily tra-di-tion held that the first Guzmáns had come to Spain six hun-dred years ago from Eng-land, of all places—Sax-on ad-ven-tur-ers who had plunged in-to the wars against the Moors and won a rep-uta-tion as re-li-able and ruth-less sol-diers, wad-ing through a sea of blood in-to the ranks of the no-bil-ity. He of-ten won-dered how that line of grim war-riors could have pro-duced him-self, the sev-enth Duke of Med-ina Sido-nia. He had nev-er want-ed any-thing more than to live in the An-dalu-sian sun as the benef-icent land-lord of his vast es-tates, amid the or-ange groves and the vine-yards that yield-ed the wines of Jerez—sher-ry to the En-glish drinkers who had nev-er al-lowed such triv-ial-ities as war to stop them from buy-ing it. "I am here, not from any lust for glo-ry, but on-ly out of du-ty to the King."

"Well, then, if you pre-fer, I will en-able you to suc-ceed in do-ing your du-ty. And nev-er for-get your du-ty to God, as well. Must the En-glish be con-signed to eter-nal damna-tion as heretics be-cause of your quib-bles and qualms?"

It was a fa-mil-iar line of ar-gu-ment. And its force could not be de-nied—at least not pub-licly. Pri-vate-ly . . . the Duke thought back to the freak-ish June storm that had scat-tered the Ar-ma-da and left him sit-ting in Corun-na, won-der-ing for the first time if it was re-al-ly the will of God that King Phillip add the crown of Eng-land to his col-lec-tion.

He an-gri-ly thrust aside the in-sid-i-ous doubt. He had to be-lieve that the Ar-ma-da's cause was God's. Now, more than ev-er, he must be-lieve it.

Of course the En-glish weren't caught by sur-prise when the Ar-ma-da's an-chor chains came thun-der-ing down. They an-chored smart-ly, a cul-verin-shot astern. Three hours lat-er, Lord Hen-ry Sey-mour's squadron joined them, and the fol-low-ing morn-ing the Lord High Ad-mi-ral called a coun-cil of war. The cap-tain's cab-in of the flag-ship Ark Roy-al was bare-ly large enough to ac-com-mo-date all those who had been sum-moned, es-pe-cial-ly now that Sir William Wyn-ter, Sey-mour's Vice Ad-mi-ral, had ar-rived.

At least we don't have to fit Mar-tin Fro-bish-er's big ar-se in, thought Sir Fran-cis Drake. The boor-ish York-shire-man would have been in-suf-fer-able, hav-ing been knight-ed just two days ago. And there was the lit-tle mat-ter of his hav-ing sworn to make him, Drake, "spend the best blood in his bel-ly" over Drake's per-haps slight-ly ir-reg-ular tak-ing of the galleon Rosario as a prize. All things con-sid-ered, it was just as well he wasn't present. In-deed, Drake's own pres-ence at the coun-cil just might have some-thing to do with his ab-sence.

Drake dis-missed Fro-bish-er from his thoughts and fo-cused his at-ten-tion on Wyn-ter, who was ex-pound-ing what he thought was an orig-inal idea.

"And so, my mas-ters," the griz-zled Wyn-ter con-clud-ed, "the Dons have an-chored all bunched to-geth-er, to lee-ward of us in a tidal stream—just the tar-get for an at-tack by fire."

Charles, Lord Howard of Eff-in-gham, Lord High Ad-mi-ral of Eng-land, nod-ded solemn-ly, for all the world as though ev-ery-one in the main En-glish fleet hadn't al-ready thought of fire-ships. Let-ting Wyn-ter think it was his own idea was a diplo-mat-ic ges-ture to-ward Lord Hen-ry Sey-mour, to whom Wyn-ter stood in the same re-la-tion as Drake did to Howard, that of well-salt-ed sea-man to lub-ber-ly aris-to-cratic com-man-der. Sey-mour's hot blood was near the boil-ing point af-ter his en-forced idle-ness guard-ing the Thames against an il-lu-so-ry threat while oth-ers won glo-ry in bat-tle, and he need-ed all the sooth-ing he could get. Howard had grasped that, as he did so many things.

God be thanked the Queen has such a kins-man, thought Drake, not for the first time. Howard wasn't get-ting any younger, and he might not have much more nau-ti-cal ex-pe-ri-ence than the

sea-sick Span-ish duke who com-mand-ed the Ar-ma-da for the same rea-son of daz-zling-ly no-ble blood. But he did not lack de-ci-sive-ness or good judg-ment—in-clud-ing the good judg-ment to lis-ten to Drake. When Drake thought of some of the oth-er blue bloods they might have got-ten for Lord High Ad-mi-ral, he shud-dered.

“Your sug-ges-tion has much mer-it, Mas-ter Wyn-ter,” Howard said gra-cious-ly. “It’s in my mind that the Spaniards may well be even more than usu-al-ly pan-icked by fire-ships, af-ter their re-cent ex-pe-ri-ence with the Hell-burn-er of Antwerp.” A grim chuck-le ran around the ta-ble at the men-tion of the su-per-fire-ship that had sent a thou-sand of Par-ma’s throat-cut-ters to their re-ward.

“All the more so,” Cap-tain Thomas Fen-ner put in, “be-cause they know the Ital-ian Gi-ambel-li, who built it, is now in Eng-land. What they don’t know is that all he’s do-ing for us is try-ing to put a boom across the Thames to keep them from com-ing up-riv-er. They’ll piss in their ar-mor at the thought of fire-ships!”

“And,” Drake added, “they’ll cut their ca-bles in their haste to be off, and put out to sea. Then the wind as well as we will be against them if they try to turn back and join with Par-ma. And once they’re in the North Sea, in the sea-son that’s com-ing on, lack-ing an-chors . . . well, my mas-ters, the Duke of Med-ina Sido-nia will wish he were at home among his or-ange trees—if, in-deed, he hasn’t been wish-ing him-self there all along!”

There was gen-er-al preda-to-ry laugh-ter. The En-glish had an-chored off Calais in a sub-dued mood af-ter the bat-tles in the Chan-nel. The long-range gun-nery of which they’d had such high hopes had proven un-able to do sig-nif-icant harm to the galleons’ stout tim-bers, while the tight Span-ish for-ma-tion had pre-vent-ed them from clos-ing to short range. Now they saw a chance to break up that for-ma-tion, and the close air of the cab-in was thick with their ea-ger-ness.

The coun-cil broke up, and Howard and Drake saw Wyn-ter off with many ex-pres-sions of mu-tu-al es-teem. As Wyn-ter’s boat pulled away to-ward Sey-mour’s flag-ship Van-guard, Drake turned to Howard with a grin.

“If on-ly he knew we’ve al-ready be-gun to pre-pare fire-ships!”

“Yes. A pity the ones we sent for can’t pos-si-bly ar-rive from Dover in time. But there’s been no lack of vol-un-teers to pro-vide ships—like the five you’ve of-fered from your own squadron.”

“It was the least I could do for God and Her Majesty!” Drake struck a no-ble pose.

Howard gave him a sour look. Drake was re-al-ly hope-less at this sort of thing, al-though like ev-ery-one else (ex-cept Fro-bish-er) he could nev-er stay an-noyed at the ir-re-press-ible pi-rate for long. “And of course the fact that you can claim more than the fair mar-ket val-ue of those rot-ting hulks in com-pen-sa-tion had noth-ing to do with it.”

“My Lord! I am deeply hurt!”

“Oh, nev-er mind. It’s all one to me, as long as this works. And it should work, even though we shall have to do with-out Sig-nor Gi-ambel-li’s in-fer-nal ma-chines.” Howard’s gaze strayed to the dark mass of the an-chored Span-ish fleet. “On-ly . . .”

Drake’s ex-pres-sion abrupt-ly hard-ened, and his eyes nar-rowed as they did when he sight-ed a threat-en-ing sail on the hori-zon “? ‘On-ly,’ my Lord?”

Howard did not meet his eyes. “It’s said they have a Gray Monk with them.”

The Au-gust air seemed to get cold-er.

“Well, what of it?” de-mand-ed Drake af-ter a mo-ment, in a voice that clang-ed with de-fi-ance a lit-tle too loud-ly. “He hasn’t worked any sor-cery so far. Or if he has, it hasn’t sunk a sin-gle ship of ours. Why should we be afraid of pa-pist mum-mery from some un-nat-ural spawn of Hell?”

“Of course, of course,” Howard mut-tered. But he didn’t sound con-vinced.

“Well,” said Drake af-ter an-oth-er un-com-fort-able si-lence, “I’d best be get-ting back to Re-venge.” They made their farewells, and it was al-most as it had been be-fore.

But as he was rowed across the wa-ter to his ship, Drake could not rid him-self of an op-pres-sive feel-ing of fore-bod-ing. It made no sense. Ev-ery-thing he had said to the Lord High

Ad-mi-ral had been true and heart-felt. So whence came this vague sense of hor-ri-ble and un-know-able wrong-ness, as though some-thing that had no busi-ness in the world was about to plunge the af-fairs of men out of the realm of rea-son and in-to that of mad-ness?

By the time Lord Hen-ry Sey-mour's squadron ren-dezvoused with the En-glish fleet as Fa-ther Jerón-imo had fore-told, the Duke had al-ready dis-patched yet an-oth-er pin-nace with a let-ter to Par-ma. The fol-low-ing day he sent two oth-ers, each more ur-gent-ly phrased than the last. To-ward the end of the day, a mes-sage fi-nal-ly ar-rived—but it was not the long-await-ed re-ply from Par-ma. In-stead, it was from the Duke's own sec-re-tary, whom he had sent ashore to re-port on Par-ma's prepa-ra-tions. He now re-port-ed that Par-ma's army would prob-ably not be ready to em-bark with-in a fort-night.

Fa-ther Jerón-imo made light of it. “Par-ma has un-der-stand-ably lost faith in the plan. He has al-so grown dis-il-lu-sioned with a King who is nig-gard-ly with re-wards. He is ex-ert-ing the least pos-si-ble ef-fort. But when the news reach-es him that the En-glish fleet is de-stroyed, he will have no choice but to be-stir him-self. He will prob-ably even re-gain his en-thu-si-asm.”

“But we can't re-main much longer in this ex-posed an-chor-age. The weath-er could change at any time. Al-ready our ships have had to drop a sec-ond an-chor be-cause of the tides. And the En-glish are in a per-fect po-si-tion to let the wind and the tide car-ry fire-ships down up-on us.” The Duke couldn't sup-press a shud-der at the worst night-mare of naval war-fare. Wood-en ships were hard to sink, but they burned like torch-es.

“Of course. I'm sure they have al-ready thought of it, and are prepar-ing the fire-ships even now. But I have tak-en this in-to ac-count. Un-der the cir-cum-stances, it would be nat-ural for you to sta-tion pin-naces be-tween the fleets, to grap-ple any fire-ships and tow them away.”

“Yes, Fa-ther,” nod-ded the Duke. “I've al-ready giv-en the or-der.”

“Just so. The En-glish will have no rea-son to sus-pect that those pin-naces are any-thing oth-er than what they seem to be. But in fact they will be my pin-naces. So the sur-prise will be com-plete. And their shock, when they are ea-ger-ly an-tic-ipat-ing putting us to flight, will be all the greater. So the ap-pear-ance of their fire-ships—which I would ex-pect late tonight or in the small hours of the morn-ing—will be our sig-nal for the un-leash-ing of the . . . mir-acle.” Again came the tiny, iron-ic smile. “Would you like to be aboard one of the pin-naces, so you can wit-ness what God has in store for the heretics?”

“My place is here on the flag-ship, Fa-ther.” It was per-fect-ly true, as far as it went. But in fact he want-ed noth-ing to do with the en-gines the Gray Monk's acolytes had been as-sem-bling aboard the pin-naces. En-gines? They seemed too light and flim-sy for such a name, be-ing large-ly con-struct-ed of the strange glass-that-was-not-glass he knew of from hearsay. He could not imag-ine how they could do any-one any harm.

Each pin-nace would car-ry one acolyte, to op-er-ate the de-vice. The small crews were all vol-un-teers, and had been warned to ex-pect su-per-nat-ural man-ifes-ta-tions. Fa-ther Jerón-imo ex-pect-ed them to be par-alyzed by ter-ror any-way, but he had as-sured the Duke that at that point it would scarce-ly mat-ter.

“I, too, should re-main here,” the Gray Monk agreed. “But we can watch from the quar-ter-deck. I think I can promise you rare en-ter-tain-ment!”

It was mid-night when they caught sight of the lights that ap-peared at the edge of the En-glish fleet, across the moon-shim-mer-ing sea. Eight lights, that grew rapid-ly in bril-liance to re-veal blaz-ing ships larg-er than ex-pect-ed, sweep-ing rapid-ly down the tide to-ward the Ar-ma-da's an-chor-age.

They watched from San Martín's quar-ter-deck in hor-ri-fied fas-ci-na-tion. Most of the team the Duke had gath-ered around him to com-mand the Ar-ma-da were there: Don Diego Flo-res de Valdés, the sea-man; Don Fran-cis-co de Bo-vadil-lo, the se-nior gen-er-al of the land troops; and Juan Martínez de Re-calde, Spain's most re-spect-ed ad-mi-ral since the death of San-ta Cruz and,

at age six-ty-two, like a fa-ther to the rest of them—es-pe-cial-ly to the Duke, who at thir-ty-sev-en was the youngest of them all.

These were men who stood out for courage even among Spaniards of their era, in whom courage was as-sumed. But they all shied away from the Gray Monk and made cer-tain sur-rep-ti-tious signs. Fa-ther Jerón-imo took no no-tice. He stared fixed-ly in-to the night and was the first to no-tice the on-com-ing fire-ships.

Diego Flo-res de Valdés cleared his throat and ad-dressed the Gray Monk with ob-vi-ous ef-fort. “Ah . . . Fa-ther, as you know, our ships have been or-dered to buoy their an-chor ca-bles and cut them, and stand out to sea, if any fire-ships get through the screen of pin-naces. Per-haps, just in case, we should alert them.”

“There is no need,” said the Gray Monk, nev-er tak-ing his eyes off the ap-proach-ing fire-ships and the pin-naces that were con-verg-ing on them—as they would have been con-verg-ing on them in any case, in an ef-fort to catch them with grap-nels.

Some-where deep in his soul, the Duke felt a . . . wa-ver-ing in re-al-ity it-self. As though a mo-ment had come when the course of the world was un-steady, and was about to be di-vert-ed in-to un-chart-ed wa-ters—wa-ters nev-er in-clud-ed in God's de-sign. He au-to-mat-ical-ly re-ject-ed the some-how hereti-cal thought.

“Now,” he heard Fa-ther Jerón-imo's hiss-ing whis-per.

Be-tween the pin-naces of the screen and the En-glish fire-ships, light-ning flashed. But it wasn't light-ning as God meant light-ning to be. It fol-lowed a straight line, and it was more blind-ing than any light-ning. And when it touched a fire-ship, that fire-ship did not catch fire or even ex-plode. It be-came a ball of fire, and the sec-ondary erup-tions of the com-bustibles it car-ried were mere flick-ers of dull or-ange flame around the edges of . . . what had Fa-ther Jerón-imo said? Oh, yes: bits of the sun.

He was still try-ing to as-sim-ilate what his eyes were see-ing when the sound reached them—a thun-der-clap that sent then all stag-ger-ing back-wards, clutch-ing at the taffrail.

“Moth-er of God!” gasped the hard-bit-ten sol-dier Bo-vadil-lo. Re-cal-de, whose health had not been good, col-lapsed to the deck.

On-ly Fa-ther Jerón-imo was un-fazed. He spoke with the calm-ness of one who was see-ing on-ly what he had ex-pect-ed to see. “The acolytes have been told what to ex-pect, and they have their in-struc-tions. These weapons are light, short-ranged ones, you un-der-stand—think of the swiv-el guns your ships mount against board-ers. But at any time now the pin-naces should come with-in ex-treme range of the En-glish fleet.”

At that mo-ment, the un-nat-ural light-nings be-gan to flash across the wa-ter to the dark mass of En-glish ships—which im-me-di-ate-ly ceased to be dark, as night be-came a ghas-tly day. Ship af-ter ship, at the touch of what the Gray Monk had tried to de-scribe—“an-ti-mat-ter,” the Duke thought, even as the ul-ti-mate bringer of evil was to be the “An-tichrist”—erupt-ed in that hor-ri-ble con-ver-sion of its own sub-stance in-to the fires of Hell.

It on-ly last-ed a lit-tle while. As though from a great dis-tance, the Duke heard Fa-ther Jerón-imo ex-plain-ing that the weapons could on-ly put forth their light-nings for a lim-it-ed time. And it no longer mat-tered. What was left of the En-glish fleet was dis-solv-ing in-to a chaot-ic rout as cap-tains, in-sane with ter-ror, cut their ca-bles. It was the fate they had planned for the Spaniards with their fire-ships. But of-ten it proved to be too late, as flam-ing de-bris from the shat-ter-ing ex-plo-sions crashed in-to ship af-ter ship, set-ting them afire—nat-ural fire, the Duke thought numbly. Not the sort of fire he had just seen. He had seen Saint Antony's fire.

The Gray Monk turned to face their stares. He showed no emo-tion what-ev-er as he stood sil-hou-et-ted against the holo-caust that had been the En-glish fleet. “You must now send a pin-nace to Par-ma with-out de-lay. The weapons will be . . . re-newed in time to dis-pose of the Dutch, if nec-es-sary. So the way to Eng-land is now open.” He turned to go to his cab-in, then paused and gave the Duke his mock-ing look. “You seem dis-turbed, my son.”

“What are you?” whis-pered Med-ina Sido-nia.

“What-ev-er do you mean? The Holy Fa-ther has ex-plained—”

“What are you?” the Duke re-peat-ed as though he had not heard.

“Does it re-al-ly mat-ter? And at any rate, it is not your con-cern. All you need to know is that this Ar-ma-da is ded-icat-ed to the ser-vice of God, and that God has sent the mir-acle on which the King re-lied.” The mock-ing look was un-abat-ed. “And there-fore any means—any means what-ev-er—that per-mit-ted this mir-acle to oc-cur are God's means, and not for you to ques-tion.”

“In-clud-ing the pow-ers of dark-ness?”

“Ah, but if they ad-vance the cause of the true Catholic Church, how can they be the pow-ers of dark-ness? Do not trou-ble your-self with these mat-ters, my son. Mere-ly do your du-ty, and spare your-self the tor-ture of doubt. On-ward, to purge Eng-land with fire and cleanse it with blood!” He turned with a swirl of gray robes, and was gone.

It must be true, thought Med-ina Sido-nia in his agony of soul. God moves in mys-te-ri-ous ways. Who am I to ques-tion them?

And be-sides . . . if it isn't true, what will my life have meant?

Alon-zo Pérez de Guzmán, whom men called El Bueno, “The Good,” turned to his sub-or-di-nates and pro-ceed-ed, as al-ways, to do his du-ty to his King and his faith.

Two

The smoke of burn-ing Lon-don still clung to Cap-tain Thomas Winslow as he rode his lath-ered, ex-haust-ed horse through the late-af-ter-noon streets of Ply-mouth. Or at least he as-sumed he must smell of it, from the way peo-ple stared.

“What news?” some of the peo-ple called out. He rode on with-out an-swer-ing, for the sum-mons that brought him here al-lowed of no de-lay. And be-sides, they want-ed re-as-sur-ance and he had none to give.

He didn't pause as he rode past the Bar-bi-can, the dis-trict whose denizens spe-cial-ized in sep-arat-ing sailors from their shares of prize mon-ey. The off-watch mem-bers of his own crew were un-doubt-ed-ly there now, en-rich-ing the whores and tav-ern keep-ers with what lit-tle re-mained of the pro-ceeds of their last voy-age. He hoped they hadn't got-ten in-to too many fights with tav-ern ruffraff who'd taunt-ed them with cow-ardice be-cause they were still in Ply-mouth.

He did, how-ev-er, stop at the dock-side where the Heron was tied up, prac-ti-cal-ly alone. Even the man who had sum-moned him took sec-ond place to his ship.

“Boatswain!” he shout-ed with-out dis-mount-ing.

Mar-tin Gorham ap-peared at the quar-ter-deck rail and touched the place where a fore-lock would have been if his hair hadn't re-ced-ed. “Cap'n! Now God be praised! Are we to weigh an-chor?”

“How stands the ship?” Winslow de-mand-ed with-out di-rect-ly re-ply-ing to a ques-tion he couldn't yet an-swer.

“Well enough, Cap'n. We've kept her in readi-ness to sail as you or-dered, and it'll take me lit-tle time to haul the men out of the gut-ters.” On-ly in the last gen-er-ation had it be-come cus-tom-ary to re-fer to ships as fe-male, but by now the us-age was so well es-tab-lished that even old hands like Gorham did it. The boatswain turned to the watch. “What're you wait-ing for, you whoresons? Low-er the gang-way for the Cap'n!”

“Be-lay that,” said Winslow. “I've no time. I must meet some-one at the Red Li-on.”

“You'll not come aboard, Cap'n? But when do we sail?”

“Soon.” Winslow hoped it wasn't a lie.

Af-ter the Span-ish fleet had been sight-ed on Ju-ly 25, ev-ery-thing that could float and fire a gun—even mer-chant ships that could do lit-tle more than “put on a brag”—had fol-lowed the Queen's war-ships out of Ply-mouth har-bor. But Heron, a race-built three-hun-dred-ton-ner mount-ing a dozen guns, had stayed be-hind, and her cap-tain had trav-eled to Lon-don, for he'd had his or-ders.

Gorham leaned over the rail and his ruddy face wore a beseeching look Winslow had never seen on it. "Cap'n, some of the rumors we've heard . . . some of the tales of what befell Lord Howard's fleet . . . the work of the Devil . . . Cap'n, what's happening?"

Winslow squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. Then he turned his horse's head away. "I'll tell you everything when I return," he called out over his shoulder as he rode off.

The Red Lion was Plymouth's best inn. The big half-timbered building was surrounded by watchful guards—surprisingly, for a great show of soldiers was not usually the way of the man Winslow had come to see. A letter in that man's hand, presented to the scowling guard captain, got him admitted with only a slight intensification of the scowl. A soldier led him to a large upstairs room.

Two men were in the room. One, wearing the long robes of a scholar, stood at a window, gazing westward at the harbor. Winslow thought he looked vaguely familiar, but promptly dismissed him from his mind. The other man sat behind a heavy oak table spread with papers—a lean man in his mid-fifties dressed in Puritan black that was relieved only by his white ruffled collar and a gold chain of office. His face was long and sharp-featured, with darkly sallow complexion and a neatly trimmed iron-gray beard. He gazed at the newcomer with hooded dark-gray eyes that missed nothing.

Winslow stood before the table and bowed. "Mr. Secretary."

Sir Francis Walsingham, Privy Councillor and Principal Secretary of State, had been knighted a decade before, but people still addressed him as "Mr. Secretary." Somehow, it sat more easily on him than "Sir Francis." They even called him "Mr. Secretary" in the third person, so completely had he made the office of Principal Secretary his own. The undefined nature of its duties and powers had been, to him, an opportunity rather than a vexation. If nothing was specified, neither was anything ruled out. Building on the foundation laid by his predecessor William Cecil, Lord Burghley, he had gathered more and more of the reins of government into his supremely capable hands. He had also developed something so new in the world that it did not even have a name. It would be a long time before anyone thought of the term "secret service."

"Greetings, Captain Winslow," he said, inclining his head in return. "I'm glad to see you here safe. You've ridden hard."

Winslow was suddenly and acutely aware of the state of his clothes, caked in dust and speckled with blown spittle from a succession of horses. "I came in haste as your messenger commanded." He reminded himself that it was never a good idea to try to withhold anything from Walsingham, and added, "I paused only to assure myself that all was well with my ship."

"And quite rightly, too. You must be exhausted. Sit down and pour yourself some wine." Walsingham indicated a flagon and goblets.

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary." Winslow lowered himself into a chair and poured wine with a hand whose shakiness made him conscious of the fatigue he had been holding at bay. He wanted to gulp the wine, but he made himself sip it slowly. It was well to keep one's wits about one when Mr. Secretary Walsingham wanted information . . . as he always did.

Long before becoming Principal Secretary—perhaps even before his stint as ambassador to France in the early 1570s—Walsingham had begun constructing a network of informers that extended far into Europe, and beyond into the Near East and North Africa. Indeed, some said he'd cultivated his first sources of intelligence in his early twenties while studying Roman civil law at the University of Padua, that hotbed of the new Machiavelian statecraft. Such would normally have been dismissed as beyond the range of human foresight. But in Walsingham's case it was actually believable. Knowledge is never too dear was his favorite saying, and he had spent most of his life acting on it. By now he sat at the center of a web that included at least five hundred paid spies of various kinds and degrees, from lowlifes of the London streets and the Southwark theatrical demi-monde to relatively respectable merchant travelers, and on upward to suborned diplomats and

no-bles, in lay-ers of re-dun-dan-cy and labyrinths of com-part-men-tal-iza-tion. And then there was the sup-port sys-tem of code-break-ers, hand-writ-ing ex-perts, forg-ers . . . and trans-porters of agents and mes-sages, like Thomas Winslow, mer-chant ad-ven-tur-er of Ply-mouth.

“I al-ready know,” Wals-ing-ham be-gan, “of what tran-spired af-ter Par-ma's forces land-ed. But you were there. Could any-thing have been done?”

“No, Mr. Sec-re-tary. The Dons land-ed at Mar-gate and ad-vanced through Kent, south of the Thames. Our main army was north of it at Tilbury.”

“Yes,” Walsin-gahm nod-ded. “Her Majesty had planned to go to Tilbury and re-view the troops. I be-lieve she in-tend-ed to make a speech to them. But then the word ar-rived of what had hap-pened to the fleet. She still want-ed to go, but was dis-suad-ed. At any rate, I have heard that the bridge of boats across the Thames was rushed to com-ple-tion.”

“Yes, Mr. Sec-re-tary. What hu-man ef-fort could do, was done. And it suf-ficed to get the troops across the Thames—as many of them as hadn't de-sert-ed.” Re-mem-ber-ing the hor-ror that had run through the camps at the news from the fleet, Winslow won-dered that they hadn't all de-sert-ed. He wasn't even cer-tain he would have blamed them. These men hadn't tak-en up arms to fight the pow-ers of dark-ness. “They joined the men of Kent, and made a stand on the Med-way, near Rochester. But . . .”

“Yes,” Wals-ing-ham nod-ded. “I have had re-ports of what hap-pened to the Earl of Le-ices-ter's army.”

Le-ices-ter! thought Winslow with a bit-ter-ness he dared not re-veal. It was not for such as him to crit-icize a no-ble-man, even though he had spent years ply-ing back and forth across the nar-row seas with re-ports for Wals-ing-ham on how the war in the Nether-lands was be-ing lost thanks to Le-ices-ter's in-com-pe-tence. Well, he re-mind-ed him-self with a kind of vi-cious sat-is-fac-tion, Le-ices-ter's plump body is food for the crows now. But the flame of rage with-in him last-ed on-ly a mo-ment be-fore gut-ter-ing out, banked down by sod-den aware-ness that it wouldn't have made any dif-fer-ence if the Cap-tain Gen-er-al had been a sol-dier who had known what he was do-ing. He wouldn't have had any-thing to do it with.

There might have been a time, as the tales of chival-ry as-ert-ed, when war had been a mat-ter of in-di-vid-ual hero-ics. Winslow doubt-ed it. And even if it were true, that time was long past. Nowa-days un-trained men, how-ev-er nu-mer-ous and how-ev-er brave, were meat for pro-fes-sion-als like the Span-ish ter-cios: reg-iments whose train-ing meshed ar-que-bus and pike in-to a sin-gle killing ma-chine with a thou-sand bod-ies, one brain and no soul. That ma-chine had ground up the mili-tias of Es-sex and Kent at Rochester, and dis-posed of what re-mained of the Trained Bands of Lon-don at Kingston-up-on-Thames, all with bare-ly a pause. Then Par-ma had swung around to the north and marched east through West-min-ster, ar-riv-ing at the gates of Lon-don a week af-ter land-ing at Mar-gate.

“I've had on-ly frag-men-tary re-ports from Lon-don,” said Wals-ing-ham, as though read-ing his mind. “Was it . . . ?”

Winslow found he must for-ti-fy him-self with a swal-low of wine be-fore meet-ing Wals-ing-ham's eyes. “It was Antwerp all over again.”

Wals-ing-ham winced as though he could hear the screams of the tor-tured men and raped wom-en and chil-dren, and smell the stench of roast-ed hu-man flesh. Ev-ery-one knew what had hap-pened when that city had fi-nal-ly sur-ren-dered to Par-ma three years be-fore.

“Ah, Mr. Sec-re-tary,” Winslow spoke af-ter a mo-ment, “I have no knowl-edge of Her Majesty. In all the chaos . . .”

Wals-ing-ham's fea-tures smoothed them-selves out in-to their usu-al mask of bland im-per-turba-bil-ity. “Don't wor-ry. We spir-it-ed the Queen away from Lon-don in time. That was why she had to be per-suad-ed not to go to Tilbury. It was clear that Par-ma planned to sweep around Lon-don to the west, pre-cise-ly for the pur-pose of catch-ing her in his net.” He paused, and when he spoke his voice was care-ful-ly ex-pres-sion-less. “You have no knowl-edge, I sup-pose, of my es-tate at Barn Elms?”

“No, Mr. Sec-re-tary,” said Winslow mis-er-ably.

“Ah, well. There's not much doubt, is there? It was prac-ti-cal-ly in Par-ma's path.”

“As was my home at Mort-lake, on-ly a few miles away at Rich-mond,” said the man stand-ing at the win-dow, whose pres-ence Winslow had al-most for-got-ten. “At least word was sent in time for our fam-ilies to de-part for the north.” He turned and faced them, a tall man of about six-ty, with mild blue eyes and a long but smooth-ly combed whiten-ing-blond beard. His speech held a slight Welsh ac-cent. “Hel-lo, Thomas.”

Winslow al-most spilled his wine in his sur-prise, and half rose to his feet. “Doc-tor Dee! But . . . but I thought you were—”

“At Krakow, in the em-ploy of Prince Al-bert Lasky, where you last saw me,” Dee fin-ished for him. “And so I was, un-til re-cent-ly. I'd still be there, in the or-di-nary course of events. But in case it's es-caped your no-tice, events have ceased to be or-di-nary. The Gray Monks be-gan to take an in-ter-est in me.”

A chill seemed to in-vade the room.

“They know a threat when they see one,” Dee ex-plain-ed par-en-thet-ical-ly, with his char-ac-ter-is-tic mod-esty. “Even-tu-al-ly, Prince Al-bert yield-ed to their pres-sure and ex-pelled me. Sev-er-al of his re-tain-ers had been found dead, their bod-ies in a con-di-tion I'll not de-cribe. At least the Gray Monks didn't suc-ceed in killing me. They did kill Ed-ward Kel-ley.”

Winslow mur-mured con-ven-tion-al con-do-lences, but pri-vate-ly he re-gard-ed Kel-ley as no loss.

He had first met Doc-tor John Dee—em-inent math-emati-cian and lin-guist, as-trologer to the Queen, ex-per-imeter in alche-my, and, it was wide-ly whis-pered, sor-cer-er—years be-fore, go-ing to him for ad-vice on nav-iga-tion-al the-ory as had many oth-ers, up to and in-clud-ing Fran-cis Drake. (In fact, Dee was no stranger to voy-ag-ing him-self, hav-ing ac-com-pa-nied Mar-tin Fro-bish-er's arc-tic ex-pe-di-tion of 1576, when his di-vin-ing rod had proven em-bar-rass-ing-ly un-suc-cess-ful at dis-tin-guish-ing re-al gold from the fool's va-ri-ety.) On-ly lat-er had he learned that they were cowork-ers in the Wals-ing-ham or-ga-ni-za-tion. Dee had re-li-ably pro-duced horo-scopes show-ing the stars to be un-fa-vor-able to poli-cies the Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary op-posed, like the Queen's pro-posed mar-riage to the Duke of An-jou. He had al-so re-cruit-ed cer-tain of his fel-low Cam-bridge alum-ni, no-tably the play-wright Christo-pher Mar-lowe, as in-for-mants. Most im-por-tant-ly of all, per-haps, he had pos-sessed in his vast li-brary at Mort-lake—doubt-less ash-es, now—the sup-pos-ed-ly lost code book writ-ten by Jo-hannes Trithemius a cen-tu-ry be-fore. Us-ing that and his own lin-guis-tic gift, he had de-vised un-break-able codes for Wals-ing-ham. In-deed, when Dee claimed to have dis-cov-ered the “Enochi-an” lan-guage in his ef-forts to sum-mon an-gels, there were those who sus-pect-ed that it was re-al-ly just an-oth-er code. Winslow knew bet-ter. Dee gen-uine-ly be-lieved that he and Kel-ley, his medi-um, had re-vealed the na-tive lan-guage of the an-gels. Winslow had thought that non-sense—ev-ery-one knew they spoke En-glish!—and could nev-er un-der-stand how so wise a man could be so gullible as to be tak-en in by an ob-vi-ous rogue and trick-ster like the failed Ox-ford stu-dent Kel-ley, un-der whose in-flu-ence he had grad-u-al-ly aban-doned all his non-oc-cult pur-suits and de-part-ed for Krakow. He had con-tin-ued to per-form oc-ca-sion-al ser-vices for Wals-ing-ham, how-ev-er . . .

“I can see why you at-tract-ed the Gray Monks' at-ten-tion,” Wals-ing-ham re-marked with a frosty chuck-le. “Your prophe-cy of vi-olent storms in the north-ern seas this year made it dif-fi-cult for Phillip of Spain to get enough sailors for his Ar-ma-da.”

“I mere-ly re-port-ed what the stars fore-told,” Dee de-clared lofti-ly. “The storms will in-deed come to pass. If our fleet had forced the Ar-ma-da in-to the North Sea, with no way home to Spain save around Scot-land and Ire-land, its fate would have been sealed.” He shook his head, dis-miss-ing the might-have-beens. “But yes, Par-ma doubt-less con-sid-ered the lo-ca-tion of Mort-lake when he planned his line of march. The lo-ca-tion of Barn Elms, too,” he added in a gra-cious aside to Wals-ing-ham. “I be-lieve the Span-ish am-bas-sador once wrote, ‘This

Wals-ing-ham is of all heretics the worst.'? ”

“So he did. Sel-dom have I re-ceived a more val-ued com-pli-ment.” Wals-ing-ham didn't need to add that he had read the diplo-mat-ic cor-re-spon-dence be-fore King Phillip had. He laid his hands flat on the ta-ble in a get-ting-down-to-busi-ness ges-ture. “Well, they didn't catch ei-ther of us, did they? And now it is time to con-fer on the course of ac-tion for which God has spared us.” He reached be-hind his chair and pulled a cord. A ser-vant en-tered silent-ly. “Ask Sir Wal-ter and his com-pan-ion to join us.”

Winslow start-ed, for he knew who “Sir Wal-ter” must be: Sir Wal-ter Raleigh, fa-vorite of the Queen and Vice-Ad-mi-ral of the West Coun-try, re-spon-si-ble for the de-fense of the coun-ties of Corn-wall and De-ven near whose com-mon bound-ary they sat. More and more, he un-der-stood the ver-ita-ble pha-lanx of guards around this inn. He al-so be-gan to feel acute-ly con-scious of his own mod-est so-cial sta-tus. “Uh, with your per-mis-sion, Mr. Sec-re-tary, I'll take my leave.”

“No, Thomas.” It was the first time Wals-ing-ham had ev-er ad-dressed him by his Chris-tian name, but it did noth-ing to soft-en his ha-bit-ual un-der-stat-ed tone of com-mand. “You will re-main. I know how weary you must be, but you are a full mem-ber of our coun-cil of war.”

“I, Mr. Sec-re-tary?” Winslow's voice rose to an in-cred-ulous squeak.

“You.” Wals-ing-ham ad-just-ed a pa-per on the ta-ble as though ad-just-ing his thoughts. “First of all, I must take you in-to my con-fi-dence. As I told you, the Queen es-caped from Lon-don. I failed to men-tion that she is here.”

“Here? In Ply-mouth?”

“Yes. It was the log-ical place to bring her. Of all parts of the king-dom, this is the most loy-al. First of all, De-ven is Protes-tant to the mar-row. Sec-ond-ly, the sea-far-ing fam-ilies that con-trol Ply-mouth are Her Majesty's strongest sup-port-ers—and with good rea-son, since her 'Let-ters of Reprisal' gave le-gal im-mu-ni-ty to Hawkins and Drake and—” Wals-ing-ham's lips quirked up-ward as he re-gard-ed Winslow “—oth-er sea dogs.” He paused sig-nif-icant-ly. “Haven't you won-dered why I re-quired you to keep your ship here at Ply-mouth, when you want-ed with all your heart to sor-tie out with Lord Howard and Drake and the rest, and bring the Spaniards to bat-tle?”

“I have, Mr. Sec-re-tary. I know now that if you hadn't I'd be dead and the Heron would be less than ash-es, con-sumed by the fires of Hell. So I know I should feel grat-itude to you—and maybe some-day I'll be able to feel it. But I still don't un-der-stand.”

I re-al-ly must, Winslow thought, be drunk with ex-haus-tion, to speak so to Mr. Sec-re-tary. But what does it mat-ter, now? What does any-thing mat-ter?

“Then un-der-stand this, Thomas. I need-ed to hold a stout ship, with a cap-tain I knew I could trust, in re-serve.” Wals-ing-ham leaned for-ward, and Winslow could look nowhere but in-to those dark-gray eyes. “You are go-ing to be the agent of Her Majesty's es-cape from Eng-land.”

Winslow gulped the rest of his wine.

Three

Winslow had nev-er met Sir Wal-ter Raleigh, but there was no mis-tak-ing him as he strode through the door. He was renowned for be-ing ex-traor-di-nar-ily tall—a full six feet—and hand-some, with his wavy dark hair and exquisite-ly point-ed beard. He was al-so a not-ed fash-ion plate even by the stan-dards of Eliz-abeth's court, and while he now wore a cuirass in to-ken of his ac-tive mil-itary sta-tus he man-aged to make it look like some-thing for a court-ly pa-rade, es-pe-cial-ly with the splen-did cloak that half-cov-ered it. Winslow didn't know how much cre-dence to give the sto-ry that he'd once spread a cloak like that over a mud pud-dle for the Queen to walk on. But be that as it might, it was easy to see why he had be-come a fa-vorite of hers.

The man who ac-com-pa-nied him was non-de-script by com-par-ison—ac-tu-al-ly, most peo-ple were non-de-script by com-par-ison to Raleigh. He was of av-er-age height and build,

plain-ly dressed, with a short beard and hair that was be-gin-ning to re-cede even though he looked to be on-ly in his ear-ly for-ties. That hair was par-tial-ly hid-den by a ban-dage around his head, and Winslow's first thought was that he must have been wound-ed in the fight-ing against the Ar-ma-da. But there was no blood in ev-idence; this was not a fresh wound.

Wals-ing-ham in-tro-duced Raleigh, and Winslow bowed as was prop-er. As he did so, he risked a sur-rep-ti-tious look at the ex-change of glares that seemed to freeze the air of the room with the chill of a well-known an-imos-ity.

Wals-ing-ham and Raleigh were liv-ing proof that op-po-sites did not al-ways at-tract. Ev-ery-thing about the flam-boy-ant courtier was an af-front to the Pu-ri-tan in Wals-ing-ham. Not that Raleigh was a mere play-boy. He was a po-et and friend to po-ets, and a founder of the "School of Night," de-vot-ed to the study of nat-ural phi-los-ophy . . . in-clud-ing, some whis-pered, oc-cult mat-ters and the anato-my of stolen corpses. Wals-ing-ham wasn't nar-row-mind-ed in the way of those carp-ing, ar-ro-gant-ly ig-no-rant Pu-ri-tan preach-ers who so of-ten drove the Queen to ex-ceed even her usu-al leg-endar-y ca-pac-ity for pro-fan-ity. Far from it: he was a pa-tron of the the-ater (which most Pu-ri-tans re-gard-ed as an an-techam-ber of Hell) and an as-so-ciate of John Dee. But the odor of athe-ism that clung stub-born-ly to the School of Night stank in his nos-trils. And late-ly his dis-taste for Raleigh had ac-quired a very tan-gi-ble ba-sis.

Wals-ing-ham's great-est tri-umph in his self-as-sumed role as the Queen's watch-dog had been the foil-ing of the Babing-ton plot a year ear-li-er. Hang-ing, draw-ing and quar-ter-ing An-tho-ny Babing-ton and his equal-ly dreamy co-con-spir-ators had been sec-on-dary to the ob-tain-ing of con-clu-sive ev-idence that Mary Stu-art had been an ac-ces-so-ry to their plot to as-sas-si-nate Eliz-abeth. Ten years be-fore, the Queen of Scots had fled to Eng-land to es-cape the judg-ment of that coun-try's no-bles for her com-plic-ity in the mur-der of her ad-mit-ted-ly con-temptible hus-band Darn-ley and the at-tempt-ed coup of her lover Both-well. Ev-er since, she had re-paid her cousin Eliz-abeth's hos-pi-tal-ity by com-pul-sive-ly in-trigu-ing against her, and serv-ing as an all-too-will-ing fo-cus for the dis-con-tent of Catholics who re-gard-ed her as the le-git-i-mate claimant to the En-glish crown. As long as she lived and plot-ted, Wals-ing-ham had known Eliz-abeth could nev-er sit se-cure-ly on her throne. But Eliz-abeth—un-der-stand-ably re-luc-tant to set a pre-ce-dent for the ex-ecu-tion of an anoint-ed Queen—had tem-po-rized and vac-il-lat-ed un-til her "Moor," as she called the swarthy Wals-ing-ham, had pro-vid-ed her with Mary's bla-tant-ly trea-sonous cor-re-spon-dence with Babing-ton. Even then, Eliz-abeth's in-ner con-flicts had been enough to cast Wals-ing-ham out of fa-vor af-ter three strokes of the ex-ecu-tion-er's axe had sent Mary's head thud-ding to the scaf-fold at Fotheringay Cas-tle.

The roy-al dis-fa-vor couldn't have come at a worse time for him. The death in the Nether-lands of his son-in-law and close friend Sir Phillip Sid-ney had dealt a body-blow to his per-son-al fi-nances, which were as chron-ical-ly un-set-tled as his health. (It was said that nei-ther had ev-er ful-ly re-cov-ered from his am-bas-sador-ship in Paris, when mobs of mur-der-ous Catholic fa-nat-ics had run amok on Saint Bartholomew's Day and it had been far from cer-tain that diplo-mat-ic sta-tus could shield a Protes-tant from them.) He had count-ed on re-ceiv-ing at least part of Babing-ton's for-feit-ed es-tates from the Queen whose as-sas-si-na-tion he had pre-vent-ed. In-stead, she had giv-en the lot to Raleigh.

Now Wals-ing-ham wore a care-ful-ly neu-tral ex-pres-sion as he re-sumed the in-tro-duc-tions. "And, this," he said, in-di-cat-ing Raleigh's com-pan-ion, "is Mas-ter John White of Lon-don."

"Mas-ter White!" Winslow ex-claimed. "Of course I know of you. I've seen your mar-velous paint-ings of the lands and peo-ples of Amer-ica."

"At-lantis," John Dee cor-rect-ed ir-ri-ta-bly. "On-ly the ig-no-rant have fall-en in-to the fad of nam-ing the west-ern con-ti-nent af-ter that Ital-ian char-la-tan Ameri-go Vespucci! I have con-clu-sive-ly iden-ti-fied it as the At-lantic is-land de-scribed by Pla-to."

"Didn't At-lantis sink?" Winslow in-quired, all bland in-no-cence.

For an in-stant, Dee seemed to ex-pand as though gath-er-ing his forces for a crush-ing re-tort,

and Wals-ing-ham smoth-ered a chuck-le. But then Raleigh in-ter-vened with an in-dul-gent smile for his old as-so-ciate in the School of Night. “Well, Dr. Dee, what-ev-er we call the con-ti-nent as a whole, I've named the province dis-cov-ered by my ex-pe-di-tion of four years ago 'Vir-ginia,' af-ter our beloved Vir-gin Queen. Mas-ter White was on that first ex-pe-di-tion, and al-so the sec-ond one I dis-patched the fol-low-ing year, as artist.”

“Yes,” said White, with a far-away look. “Noth-ing in my life can ev-er equal my first sight of that world, where all was new and un-touched. I record-ed ev-ery-thing: the plants, the an-imals, and the life of the In-di-ans we en-coun-tered and be-friend-ed. But then . . .” His voice trailed off, and Winslow re-called what he had heard about the sav-agery and in-com-pe-tence of Ralph Lane, mil-itary com-man-der of the 1585 ex-pe-di-tion, who had so an-tag-onized the lo-cal Sec-otan In-di-ans that the ex-pe-di-tion had been left iso-lat-ed in its fort on the is-land of Roanoke, grate-ful to be evac-uat-ed by Sir Fran-cis Drake the fol-low-ing year. “Last year, when Sir Wal-ter made me gov-er-nor of the colony he dis-patched to Vir-ginia, I knew I couldn't un-do the harm that had been done. But I hoped for a fresh start, for we were to set-tle fur-ther north, on the shores of the great bay the In-di-ans call Chesa-peake. But thanks to our treach-er-ous pi-lot, Si-mon Fer-nan-dez, we were led in-to one dif-fi-cul-ty af-ter an-oth-er, and fi-nal-ly left strand-ed on Roanoke Is-land, the last place we want-ed to go. And then . . .” Once again White could not con-tin-ue. He had, Winslow thought, the look of a man who had known too much sor-row and dis-ap-point-ment.

“Yes,” Winslow prompt-ed af-ter a mo-ment. “I heard sto-ries—things went wrong, and you had to re-tur-n to Eng-land for help. But weren't you sup-posed to re-tur-n with a res-cue ex-pe-di-tion?”

“Oh, yes. Ear-ly this year I man-aged to ob-tain per-mis-sion to try with two small ships. We de-part-ed in April. French pi-rates at-tacked us off Madeira. I re-ceived two wounds in the head, by sword and pike, from which I am still re-cov-er-ing.” White ges-tured at his ban-daged head. “At that, I sup-pose I should be grate-ful to God. The French-men stole our car-go but spared those of us who had sur-vided the fight, leav-ing us to limp back to Eng-land. By then, the Ar-ma-da was ex-pect-ed and no ships could be spared for a sec-ond at-tempt. So the colonists still await res-cue . . . in-clud-ing my daugh-ter Eleanor Dare, and her daugh-ter Vir-ginia, the first En-glish child born in that land.”

“A sor-ry tale,” nod-ded Wals-ing-ham. “Which, as it hap-pens, is very per-ti-nent to our dis-cus-sion to-day. This is why you are here, Mas-ter White, in case you'd won-dered.”

“Ac-tu-al-ly, Mr. Sec-re-tary, I had,” White ac-knowl-edged in his dif-fi-dent way.

“Then let us pro-ceed. Please be seat-ed, ev-ery-one.” The four of them pulled chairs up to the long ta-ble at whose head the Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary sat.

“I have,” Wals-ing-ham be-gan, “ap-prised Cap-tain Winslow of what the rest of us al-ready know. But to re-ca-pit-ulate: noth-ing in Eng-land can stop the Spaniards now—”

“The men of De-ven and Corn-wall will fight them all the way to Land's End!” Raleigh in-ter-rupt-ed in-dig-nant-ly. “We will make them pay in blood for ev-ery foot of En-glish earth! If they take the Queen, it will on-ly be be-cause not a man of the West Coun-try still lives who can lift a sword or draw a bow!”

Wals-ing-ham wait-ed out the dra-mat-ics, then re-sumed as though they had nev-er oc-curred. “My sources of in-for-ma-tion in-di-cate that Phillip of Spain plans to be-stow the En-glish crown on his daugh-ter Is-abel-la. We must not de-ceive our-selves. We are fac-ing an-oth-er reign like that of Mary Tu-dor. On-ly this time it will be even worse, be-cause the Gray Monks will now ex-tend their reach in-to Eng-land.”

Ev-ery-one, even Raleigh, was si-lenced by Wals-ing-ham's usu-al piti-less re-al-ism. They all re-mem-bered the bad times of Bloody Mary when the air of Eng-land had reeked with the charred flesh of hun-dreds of Protes-tants. And they had all heard sto-ries of the things that hap-pened to those who op-posed or even in-con-ve-nienced the Or-der of Saint Antony in coun-tries un-der the rule or in-flu-ence of Spain. The Pu-ri-tans re-ject-ed the tra-di-tion-al Catholic de-monol-ogy as a

ves-tige of pa-gan-ism, but they in-sist-ed that the Gray Monks were not men, if on-ly be-cause the Bish-op of Rome—the An-tichrist, in their eyes—had de-clared that they were. And it was said that both Spain and the See of Rome were be-com-ing more and more the in-stru-ments of those weird be-ings.

“And this time,” Wals-ing-ham con-tin-ued in-ex-or-ably, “there will be no Protes-tant heir for the god-ly to pin their faith on, as we did on the Princess Eliz-abeth in the days of Bloody Mary. If Her Majesty dies—as she will, if the Gray Monks and their Span-ish pup-pets cap-ture her—then all hope is gone. She must be tak-en to a refuge be-yond Eng-land. The on-ly ques-tion is where.”

When no re-sponse emerged from the mi-as-ma of de-pres-sion in the room, Winslow spoke up. “Uh, sure-ly not the States of the Nether-lands, Mr. Sec-re-tary. With-out the sup-port of a Protes-tant Eng-land, they can-not hold out much longer, stub-born though they are.”

“No, they can-not. Like-wise, the Protes-tant par-ty in Scot-land will nev-er keep con-trol over young King James with-out our back-ing, es-pe-cial-ly with a Span-ish army just over the bor-der.”

“All too true,” agreed Raleigh. “She must go to one of the Protes-tant prin-ci-pal-ities of Ger-many.”

“But how long can they en-dure?” in-quired Wals-ing-ham. “Phillip of Spain will sure-ly aid his Aus-tri-an Haps-burg rel-a-tives in stamp-ing out the true re-li-gion in the Holy Ro-man Em-pire. The Gray Monks al-ready op-er-ate freely there, as Dr. Dee can at-test. He was for-tu-nate to leave the Em-pire in-side his whole skin.”

“The Can-tons of Swit-zer-land, then! Or the Luther-an king-doms of Den-mark or Swe-den.”

“That, too, on-ly post-pones the in-evitable. Phillip has made clear his in-ten-tion of ex-ter-mi-nat-ing Protes-tantism through-out Eu-rope. And he has cor-rect-ly iden-ti-fied Eng-land as the chief ob-sta-cle to his plans. Now, with that ob-sta-cle gone . . .”

“Well, what do you have to of-fer us?” de-mand-ed Raleigh, ex-as-per-at-ed. “You seem to have ruled out all pos-si-bil-ities.”

“Not quite all,” Wals-ing-ham de-murred. “I will now ask Dr. Dee to ad-dress the meet-ing.”

Dee, like many oth-er poly-maths, had used a lu-cra-tive pro-fes-sion to fi-nance the not-so-lu-cra-tive stud-ies that re-al-ly in-ter-est-ed him. In his case, the pro-fes-sion was that of as-trologer to the rich and pow-er-ful. Suc-cess in that field re-quired a con-vinc-ing show of au-thor-ity. He had ac-cord-ing-ly de-vel-oped a style of hi-er-at-ic por-ten-tous-ness, which he now let flow in full force. But the sor-cer-er's words were, by his stan-dards, mat-ter-of-fact.

“While I was still able to trav-el and work freely in Krakow and Prague, I made it my busi-ness to study the Gray Monks. I could not pen-etrate in-to the deep-est se-crets of their ori-gin and na-ture; they have made it a point to con-ceal these mat-ters. But, at the cost of con-sid-er-able toil and dan-ger, I was able to learn one thing: their re-al rea-son for de-sir-ing a Span-ish con-quest of Eng-land.”

“What?” Raleigh leaned for-ward with a kind of tru-cu-lent in-com-pre-hen-sion. “But Dr. Dee, we all know Phillip's mo-tives. Our sea dogs have raid-ed his colonies and trea-sure ships, and our mon-ey and arms have kept the Spaniards bleed-ing away in-to the open wound of the Dutch re-bel-lion. And he's con-vinced him-self that he has a claim to the En-glish throne on his moth-er's side—some non-sense about fore-bears who mar-ried daugh-ters of John of Gaunt two hun-dred years ago. For a long time, all that stopped him was the knowl-edge that if he un-seat-ed the Queen from her throne he would have had to put Mary Stu-art on it. Ev-ery pa-pist in Eu-rope, from Pope Six-tus on down, would have de-mand-ed it. And her fam-ily con-nec-tions were with the French roy-al house, which Phillip couldn't love any less if they were Protes-tant. But then he got a promise from her to dis-in-her-it her son James and sup-port his claim. And now, with the Scots Queen dead—”

“Ahem!” Dee gave Raleigh the kind of look cus-tom-ar-ily be-stowed by a school-mas-ter on a boy who had made an ob-vi-ous mis-take in his Greek con-strues. “If you will re-call, I re-ferred not to Phillip's mo-tives for con-quer-ing Eng-land, but to those of the Gray Monks for en-abling

him to do so.”

“Well . . .” Raleigh had the baffled look of a man who thought the answer to a question almost too obvious to put into words. “God’s teeth, Doctor! They’re papists, aren’t they?”

“Are they, truly? I have reason to wonder about the genuineness of their Catholicism. I sometimes think they are silently laughing at all religion, while using it to manipulate humans. Be that as it may, I am quite certain that they don’t care a fig for Phillip’s political interests, much less his dynastic claims. They support him simply because he has the desire—and, with their help, the means—to destroy England.”

“But why?” Winslow blurted. “You say they aren’t even true papists. So why do they hate England so much?”

“I don’t think they do. Indeed, I sense in them a void that holds neither love nor hate nor anything at all except a cold contempt for all besides themselves that lives. No, England is just in their way.”

They all stared at the magus, except for Walsingham, who was hearing nothing new. Dee, who always relished being the center of attention, dropped his well-trained voice another octave.

“The hints that I have been able to gather together are mad-denyingly vague and obscure, as though they deal with matters that lie beyond mortal ken. But they all point in the same direction. There is even a clue in the saint for whom their profane order is named. All the Catholic world thinks Saint Antony of Padua was chosen because of his reputation as ‘the hammer of the heretics,’ and the Gray Monks have been content to let them think so. But there is a double meaning, for he is the patron saint of ‘those looking for lost objects.’ The Gray Monks are searching for something—seeking it avidly, almost desperately. I believe it has to do in some way with their origin, from which they entered our world.”

“But Doctor,” asked White reasonably, “if it’s where they came from, then how can they not know its location?”

“I have no idea. But they now think they have learned, in general, where it is.” Dee turned his hypnotic blue eyes on Raleigh. “It is in that region of Amer—I mean Atlantis where you, Sir Walter, have planted an English colony. Thus it is that we stand in their way.”

“But,” protested Raleigh, “I wasn’t trying to thwart any deviltry of the Gray Monks when I dispatched my expeditions to Virginia! I sought to establish a base from which to raid the Spanish treasure fleets on their way from the Indies to Spain.”

“Ah, but they don’t know that. They can only regard us as a threat.” Dee somewhat spoiled the effect he had created by lapsing into didacticism. “As well they might! My studies have established that England has a claim to those lands which far pre-dates those of the Spanish and Portuguese, arising from King Arthur’s conquest of Esotiland, a country which, as I have conclusively demonstrated, was located—” Walsingham gave a polite but firm cough, and Dee reeled himself in. “The point is, they must stop us English before we settle that coast and prevent them from carrying on their search. And the fact that we have colonists there now makes it urgent for them; we might find whatever it is they are looking for first.”

“How would we know it if we did find it?” wondered John White.

“Who’s to say?” Dee spread his hands theatrically. “But if it is as uncanny as I am coming to suspect it must be, then perhaps it will be something too extraordinary to be missed. And if we can destroy it, then perhaps we will cut off the Gray Monks’ demonic power at its source. Or possibly we could take control of it, and bend that power to our own use.”

“You’ve mentioned that last possibility before.” Walsingham looked grave. “When you first raised it, I was troubled by its implications. Any traffic with the inhuman foulness of the Gray Monks must surely carry with it a risk to our souls.”

“I admit the dangers,” said Dee. “But if it is possible, have we any choice but to try?”

“Perhaps not. Indeed, we have few choices of any kind in this evil hour. If there is to be any hope at all for England and the true religion, the Queen must—”

“And what, ex-act-ly, is it that the Queen must do, my Moor?”

Winslow was sit-ting with his back to a side-door. It was from that di-rec-tion that the sud-den in-ter-rup-tion, in tones of high-pitched fe-male fury, came. So he could not see its source. All he saw was the men at the ta-ble get-ting to their feet with a haste that sent chairs top-pling over, and then go-ing to their knees—Raleigh and White prac-ti-cal-ly falling, Wals-ing-ham and Dee low-er-ing their ag-ing joints a lit-tle more care-ful-ly. He could on-ly fol-low suit. Once on his knees, he kept his eyes low-ered and saw the hem of a vo-lu-mi-nous skirt as its own-er swept in-to the room.

“Well, Wals-ing-ham, you rank Pu-ri-tan, what are you plot-ting be-hind my back?”

“I crave par-don for my un-hap-py choice of words, Your Majesty. But I seek on-ly to se-cure your safe-ty, and the res-cue of the realm.”

“Ha! More like-ly you seek the ad-vance-ment of your fel-low Pu-ri-tans. Sweet Je-su, but they bore me with their un-end-ing de-mands for fur-ther ref-or-ma-tion of the Church of Eng-land of which I am the supreme head on Earth! God's blood, isn't it al-ready re-formed enough?”

“Soon, Your Majesty, I fear it will no longer be re-formed at all.”

Winslow ex-pect-ed thun-der-bolts, but he heard on-ly a snort which he could have sworn was half amused. “Oh, get up, all of you!” the Queen com-mand-ed in a voice that was mere-ly im-pe-ri-ous.

As Winslow rose, he saw the Queen hitch up her far-thin-gale and set-tle in-to a chair with its back to the west-ward-fac-ing win-dow, with the blaze of sun-set be-hind her head, so he could make out no de-tails—on-ly a fringe of pearls around hair that the set-ting sun turned ev-er red-der than its dye. A pair of ladies-in-wait-ing moved in-to flank-ing po-si-tions as she sur-veyed the five men.

“Sir Wal-ter, thick as thieves with Wals-ing-ham! Well, let no one say the days of mir-acles are over! And you, Dr. Dee—I might have known. But who are these oth-er two schemers?”

“Mas-ter John White, gen-tle-man of Lon-don, Your Majesty,” an-swered Wals-ing-ham. “And Cap-tain Thomas Winslow, mer-chant ad-ven-tur-er, on-ly just ar-rived from Lon-don.”

“Lon-don.” The roy-al head with its rud-dy nim-bus turned in Winslow's di-rec-tion. “So you were there when . . . ?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he mum-bled. “By God's mer-cy, I es-caped ahead of the Spaniards, un-like so many oth-ers.”

“Many, in-deed.” The head low-ered, and when she spoke again it was to her-self and to her mem-ories. “Sweet Robin,” she whis-pered.

Le-ices-ter, Winslow re-al-ized af-ter an un-com-pre-hend-ing mo-ment. And it came to him that she was see-ing in her mind's eye the young Robert Dud-ley whose bold Gyp-sy charm still lived, for her, in-side the fat, florid, wheez-ing earl Winslow him-self had known. That in-so-lent rogue would have won her youth-ful hand if any man could have. But she had nev-er once been able to put out of her mind the head-less corpse of her moth-er Anne Bo-leyn and its grim les-son in what could be-fall a wom-an who gave con-trol of her fate to a man as all wom-en had to do . . . all wom-en be-sides her-self.

Now her sweet Robin was dead, and her own youth was dead too, for she could no longer pre-tend that she was the girl who had loved him.

“Your Majesty,” Wals-ing-ham said be-fore the si-lence could stretch be-yond en-durance, “we must not de-ceive our-selves with false hopes. Such army as we could muster is dead or fled, and Cap-tain Winslow has con-firmed our worst sup-po-si-tions about the fate of Lon-don. The men of the west and north will re-sist valiant-ly, I'm sure,” he added hasti-ly with a glance in Raleigh's di-rec-tion. “But they can-not pre-vail. If you re-main in Eng-land, it can on-ly be to fall cap-tive to the Spaniards . . . and there-fore to the Gray Monks.”

The Queen rose to her feet, and the last glare of the sun-set out-lined her en-tire body. “You would have me aban-don my peo-ple to their fate?” she asked in a dan-ger-ous-ly qui-et voice.

“Your Majesty, there is no choice—”

“Bad enough that I let you per-suade me not to go to Tilbury and speak to the troops there,” she con-tin-ued, over-rid-ing him. “God, how much I want-ed to say to them! I want-ed to tell them that that I was not afraid to come among twen-ty thou-sand armed men, de-spite the cau-tious coun-sel of such as you, Wals-ing-ham. I want-ed to tell them that I knew I had noth-ing to fear, be-cause I loved them and I know they loved me be-cause they loved Eng-land and I am Eng-land. No: that they and I are Eng-land, and that we are joined in an in-sep-ara-ble bond. ‘Let tyrants fear,’ I want-ed to say to them. I want-ed to tell them . . . oh, how did I have it worked out in my mind? ‘I know I have the body of a weak and fee-ble wom-an, but I have the heart and stom-ach of a king, and of a king of Eng-land too, and think foul scorn that Par-ma or Spain or any prince of Eu-rope should dare to in-vade the bor-ders of my realm.’ Or . . . well, some-thing like that. I was still work-ing on—” She came to a flab-ber-gast-ed halt as the room-ful of men fell to their knees again.

“Be-fore God, madam,” whis-pered Wals-ing-ham, “I re-gret that I did let you go to Tilbury! On-ly . . .” The re-al-ism that Eliz-abeth knew was in-dis-pens-able to her even as it in-fu-ri-at-ed her re-assert-ed it-self, and Wals-ing-ham rose slow-ly back to his feet. “No, Your Majesty. I do not re-gret it. You would have giv-en our na-tion some-thing to cher-ish as part of its her-itage—but there would have been no na-tion left to cher-ish it. You might have sum-moned up from the soul of Eng-land some-thing that could have stood against Par-ma and his hired killers, but noth-ing could have stood against the foul and un-nat-ural sor-cery of the Gray Monks. And if you had died, Eng-land’s last hope would have died with you. You must”—Wals-ing-ham un-flinch-ing-ly used the for-bid-den word—“de-part Eng-land, to Sir Wal-ter’s colony of Vir-ginia, from whence Dr. Dee be-lieves you may well be able to re-turn in tri-umph to the lib-er-ation of your peo-ple. That is why Cap-tain Winslow is present, for his ship will con-vey you there.” Wals-ing-ham took on a crafty look. “My on-ly con-cern is whether Your Majesty will be up to the hard-ships of the voy-age.”

“What?” Wals-ing-ham quailed—or seemed to quail—un-der the roy-al glare. “How dare you? I’m a year younger than you. And I can dance a gal-liard and ride a horse for miles while you can bare-ly stand up with-out your joints creak-ing, or pass an hour with-out the flux send-ing you run-ning lest it gush forth!”

“Your Majesty’s un-abat-ed vig-or is an in-spi-ra-tion to us all,” Wals-ing-ham mur-mured.

The Queen ad-vanced to-ward Winslow, and as she left the sun-set-glare of the win-dow he could fi-nal-ly see her face clear-ly: the face of a sharp-nosed, thin-lipped wom-an of fifty-five, caked in white make-up, with dark-brown eyes that speared his very soul. “So, Cap-tain, do you think your-self up to the task Wals-ing-ham has set you of get-ting me across the ocean alive? Or am I too de-crepit an old crone?”

Af-ter-wards, Winslow could nev-er clear-ly re-mem-ber what went through his mind. But he looked up and met those dark-brown eyes, and spoke from his soul be-cause he could not do oth-er-wise. “No, madam. You are Glo-ri-ana, and you are age-less.”

Si-lence slammed down on the room. Af-ter a mo-ment, the Queen gave a short laugh. “God’s toe-nails, Cap-tain Winslow, but you’re a pret-ty flat-ter-er! Sir Wal-ter, you had best have a care for your lau-rels in the courtier’s art!”

“I protest be-fore God, madam, that I do not flat-ter,” Winslow heard him-self say, in a voice that shook with emo-tion. “My up-bring-ing has not been in any arts.”

Eliz-abeth of Eng-land leaned clos-er, and her eyes pen-etrat-ed to depths Winslow hadn’t known he pos-sessed. “Dev-il take me if you don’t re-mind me of Drake, Cap-tain Winslow.” She turned to Wals-ing-ham. “I sup-pose Drake . . . ?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Wals-ing-ham said somber-ly.

“Ah. Of course.” The Queen said no more. There was lit-tle speech to be spared for grief, in this sea-son of death. “And who is to ac-com-pa-ny us, Wals-ing-ham? You, for one, I’m sure. If you fell in-to their hands, the In-qui-si-tion would de-vise some-thing tru-ly spe-cial.”

“No doubt, Your Majesty. And Dr. Dee and Mas-ter White must al-so come, for it is by

means of the former's learning and the latter's experience that we hope to find what we seek in Virginia."

"As you say. Lord Burghley is too old to endure a voyage even if he were here, and I know he has already departed for his estates. The Spaniards will find him there, of course, but they'll probably put him to work administering the country for them. They know he served my half-sister Mary as best he was able, because at bottom his concern all along has been for the right ordering of the realm." The Queen turned to Raleigh. "And you, Sir Walter?"

"My place is here, Your Majesty. As Vice Admiral of the West Country, I will endeavor to hold these counties against your return from across the seas."

"You are so certain of that return, Sir Walter?" A note of tenderness entered the Queen's voice.

"As certain as I am of the loyalty to you that is the only thing Mr. Secretary Walsingham and I have in common—in deed, probably the only thing that could have made us sit down together at the same table."

"You really must guard against these attacks of honesty, Sir Walter. They will be the ruin of you as a courtier." The Queen straightened up, and everyone in the room stood straighter. "So be it, then. I leave the preparations for the voyage in your hands, Captain." She started to turn away, then paused and took another look at Winslow. "By God, but you put me in mind of Drake! I hope I'm not mistaken. For the sake of the realm, I hope I'm not mistaken." She swept away. England departed.

"Well, Thomas," said Walsingham after a moment, "how soon can you be ready to sail?"

Winslow thought furiously. "Mr. Secretary, I know the Dons aren't far behind us. But we can't undertake this voyage without preparation. The stores—"

"Letters in my name should get you what you need."

"All well and good. But no one in his right mind ventures across the Atlantic with a single ship—especially this late in the year. What if something befalls that one ship?"

"Set your mind at rest. I have arranged for a smaller vessel to accompany the Heron."

"But what about shallops? I remember from Master White's accounts that we'll be traversing shallow waters."

"That also has been attended to." Winslow wondered why he was even surprised, knowing the man with whom he was dealing. "I suggest you see to your ship. We sail with the morning tide."

Four

"Now, Boatswain," said Winslow in a voice that sounded almost as harried as he felt, "you must understand that we are going to have the Queen herself aboard, and two of her ladies-in-waiting—Mr. Secretary Walsingham managed to persuade her that we could carry no more than that. You must understand that these are not . . . ah, they're not the sort of women with whom the crew are accustomed to associating. So there are going to have to be some, well, changes in the way the men customarily behave. I'm thinking in particular of the language that occasionally escapes them in moments of stress."

"Oh, have no fear, Cap'n," Martin Gorham assured him with great seriousness. "I'll allow no God-damned profane talk among the men. If any of these sons of nose-less whores fail to observe the niceties, I'll hand 'em their balls to use as holy-stones!"

Walsingham's eyes twinkled. He was what was known as a worldly Puritan. "With your example before them, Master Boatswain, their deportment can hardly fail to be exemplary."

"Thankee, yer lord-ship," Gorham beamed. "Rest assured that every swinging dick of this crew will be a model of prim and proper behavior." An eruption of shouting confusion on the dock-side caught his attention, and he leaned over the rail. "Have a care with those casks, you pox-eaten lubbers!" he bellowed, and with a hurried "Excuse me, Cap'n," he hastened off.

“Ac-tu-al-ly,” John Dee re-marked with a twin-kle of his own, “I sus-pect the sailors could learn a thing or two from Her Majesty about the art of swear-ing.”

Winslow was in no mood to be amused. He had begged Wals-ing-ham for more time, but the Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary had been adamant. Time was a lux-ury they did not pos-sess. The Span-ish army would be com-ing west to-ward Ply-mouth as soon as Par-ma could flog the af-ter-ef-fects of the sack of Lon-don out of it. Fur-ther-more, Dee was cer-tain that the Spaniards would lose no time in send-ing a naval ex-pe-di-tion to Vir-ginia—prob-ably ma-jor el-ements of the Ar-ma-da, as soon as they could be re-fit-ted and re-pro-vi-sioned. He was con-fi-dent that cer-tain new nav-iga-tion-al the-ories of his would en-able Heron to use the short-er, more norther-ly lon-gi-tudes, bet-ter-ing the usu-al time for such a voy-age and avoid-ing the Span-ish is-lands of the Ca-naries and the In-dies. Winslow was on-ly too will-ing to fol-low his ad-vice. Spaniards aside, he had no de-sire to daw-dle in the trop-ical seas that, this time of year, were al-ready spawn-ing hur-ri-canes. In fact, they would ar-rive off the treach-er-ous coast of Vir-ginia at the height of hur-ri-cane sea-son. And the longer their de-par-ture was de-layed, the worse it got.

So they had toiled through the night, and Winslow had passed be-yond ex-haus-tion in-to a state be-yond the reach of fa-tigue. One of the first mat-ters to be set-tled had been that of ac-com-mo-da-tions. The Queen and her ladies-in-wait-ing would, of course, have the cap-tain's cab-in. Winslow would move just for-ward of that in-to one of the mates' cab-ins, which he would share with Wals-ing-ham, Dee and White, evict-ing the cur-rent oc-cu-pants to the fore-cas-tle, and so on, with the lowli-est sailors shar-ing the 'tween deck with the sol-diers who were aboard sim-ply be-cause it was un-think-able for the Queen to go any-where with-out a guard of hon-or. San-itary ar-range-ments weren't as much of a com-pli-ca-tion as some might have thought. Cham-ber pots would nat-ural-ly be pro-vid-ed in the cap-tain's cab-in, from whence they could be tak-en di-rect-ly out on-to the stern gallery to be emp-tied in-to the sea. (A sin-gle ex-pe-ri-ence, Winslow thought grim-ly, would teach the ladies-in-wait-ing the wis-dom of do-ing so from up-wind.)

As for pro-vi-sions, Walsingam's let-ters, de-liv-ered by sol-diers pound-ing on doors at night, had proven mar-velous-ly ef-fec-tive at per-suad-ing ship chan-dlers to be flex-ible about their busi-ness hours. The load-ing had gone on through the night, and was on-ly now com-ing to com-ple-tion un-der the boatswain's bel-low-ing su-per-vi-sion. In ad-di-tion to the usu-al stores, they were bring-ing a con-sign-ment of cop-per im-ple-ments. White had ex-plained that the In-di-ans of Vir-ginia set great store by cop-per, and had been im-pressed by the En-glish-men's rel-ative-ly ad-vanced tech-niques for work-ing it.

Stor-age re-quire-ments for the ad-di-tion-al pro-vi-sions had left no space to store the two shal-lops Wals-ing-ham had pro-cured in the usu-al way, dis-as-sem-bled in the hold. In-stead, they would have to be towed, run-ning the risk of los-ing them in heavy weath-er. But it could not be helped, for the light, shal-low-draft boats were in-dis-pens-able. On-ly they could ap-proach Roanoke Is-land, whose in-ac-ces-si-bil-ity had been its main at-trac-tion to Raleigh, in search of a base for pri-va-teer-ing.

Nor was that the on-ly prob-lem caused by the over-load-ing of the ship. The 'tween deck was so clut-tered with men and car-go that there was no room for the guns—sak-ers and min-ions, with six cul-verins in the waist—to re-coil. So Winslow had or-dered them tied down, which meant in ef-fect that they could be fired just once, for in the heat of bat-tle there would be no prac-ti-cal way to reload them. He fer-vent-ly hoped that Heron would meet no threats more formidable than sea scav-engers who could be fright-ened off by a sin-gle broad-side.

As promised, Wals-ing-ham had en-gaged an aux-il-iary ves-sel: Grey-hound, an ag-ing six-ty-ton car-avel cap-tained by one Jonas Hal-leck. Winslow had nev-er met the man, and had bare-ly had a chance to ex-change cour-te-sies with him in the torch-lit chaos of the fre-net-ic night. He could on-ly trust in Wals-ing-ham's well-known abil-ity as a judge of men.

Now, fi-nal-ly, the load-ing was com-ing to com-ple-tion in the dawn light un-der the boatswain's blas-phe-mous urg-ings, and a car-riage was ap-proach-ing along the dock-side,

followed by a cart. Soldiers cleared a space, and Sir Walter Raleigh descended from the coach, offering a hand. No spread cloak, Winslow noted. The Queen took it, and as her feet touched the dock all grew unaccustomedly quiet.

She had dressed as plainly and practically as she ever did, as though for riding. Any encouragement Winslow felt from that died a swift death at the sight of the number of chests being unloaded from the cart. He wondered where, even in the relatively commodious captain's cabin, they could possibly fit. But then Raleigh conducted the Queen up the gangway, and as she came aboard everyone knelt.

"Arise, Captain Winslow." Elizabeth seemed to be in a high good humor. "It's hardly fitting that you should kneel here. Ever since that boldascal Drake took it upon himself to shorten Thomas Doughty by a head, English sea captains have asserted a kind of monarchy aboard their own ships."

"Only under God and Your Majesty," Winslow demurred as he rose. "And as for Thomas Doughty, from everything I've heard of that voyage his head hadn't been doing him much good anyway."

"I wasn't mistaken about you, Captain: you're another saucy rogue like Drake. You'd best hope I'll be able to forgive you anything, as I always could him."

"I only hope you'll forgive me the cramped and uncomfortable quarters that are the best Heron can offer, Your Majesty."

"Bah! You're as bad as Walsingham." Elizabeth paused to spear that worthy with a glare. "Anyone would think I was made of spun sugar! Have the two of you forgotten that I was once imprisoned in the Tower? If I survived that, I think I can survive your fine ship, Captain Winslow."

Except, Winslow thought, you were in your early twenties then. And the Tower of London didn't pitch and roll and lurch with the waves. And it wasn't loud all day and all night with the constant creaking of a ship at sea. And it wasn't headed into the height of hurricane season. And it couldn't sink.

"You may show me these 'cramped and uncomfortable quarters,' Captain," the Queen interrupted his thoughts.

"This way, Your Majesty," said Winslow with a bow, offering her his arm. "My cabin is yours."

She took the sight of it very well, he thought. But then she turned to him and said, "Very fine, Captain. Only . . . where is the rest of it?"

"This is 'the rest of it,' Your Majesty," he explained miserably.

"Ah. Thank you, Captain." Elizabeth Tudor kept her features composed and swallowed once. "But if this is your cabin, where will you be sleeping?"

"In the mates' cabins, through which we passed just before we entered here, Your Majesty."

"What? You mean that is all the space you'll have?"

"Actually, Your Majesty, I'll be sharing it with the Principal Secretary, and Dr. Dee, and Master White."

"Ah. Thank you, Captain," the Queen repeated with a gracious nod of dismissal. As Winslow withdrew, he heard a low, "Jesus! I never fully appreciated my sea dogs until now."

As he emerged on deck, Raleigh was taking his punctiliously polite leave of Walsingham. Then he turned to White with more warmth. "Master White, I pray to God that you'll find my settlers in good health on that wretched island! I still don't fully understand why they ended there, and not on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay as I intended. You say it was the pilot, that renegade Portuguese rogue Simon Fernandez—"

"Yes, Sir Walter. We thought we had reason to trust in his experience. After all, he had been on the expedition of 1585, when one of the three inlets through the barrier islands was named 'Port Ferdinand' in his honor. But from the first, it was as though he was creating

de-lays and dif-fi-cul-ties. Then he load-ed us up with foul wa-ter and poi-sonous fruit when we stopped for pro-vi-sions in the Vir-gin Is-lands, with which he was fa-mil-iar. And once we ar-rived at Vir-ginia, he made mis-takes some-one who knew those wa-ters nev-er should have. And fi-nal-ly he aban-doned us where we could on-ly die—on Roanoke Is-land, where we were on-ly sup-posed to pay a call on the small gar-ri-son that had been left there, be-fore pro-ceed-ing on to the Chesa-peake Bay.”

Raleigh gave a head-shake of an-gry frus-tra-tion. “Well, Fer-nan-dez died with Lord Howard's fleet, which was too good for him if what you say is true. We'll suc-cor the colonists now—and all of Eng-land with them, if Dr. Dee is right. Cap-tain Winslow, I wish you a pros-per-ous voy-age. You car-ry the hopes of our coun-try . . . and the most pre-cious pas-sen-ger in the world.” With a last glance aft, to-ward the cap-tain's cab-in, he de-part-ed. White watched him go, then ex-cused him-self.

Dee turned to Wals-ing-ham and raised one eye-brow. “It does seem a very strange sto-ry, doesn't it?”

“What do you mean?” Wals-ing-ham's tone was odd, Winslow thought—de-lib-er-ate-ly flat and emo-tion-less. And it wasn't like the Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary to be will-ful-ly ob-tuse.

“The fate of Raleigh's colonists,” Dee per-sist-ed. “How could so much have gone so wrong? One would al-most think the ex-pe-di-tion was de-lib-er-ate-ly wrecked. And not from with-out, ei-ther, but be-trayed from with-in.”

Wals-ing-ham tried to turn away. But Dee moved in front of him and held his eyes with that hyp-not-ic blue gaze of his, while Winslow looked on, be-wil-dered.

“And,” Dee con-tin-ued in the same qui-et but re-lent-less way, “I hap-pen to know that Si-mon Fer-nan-dez was one of those you had a hold over. In fact, he owed you his life. In 1577, he was a pi-rate want-ed for mur-der by the Por-tuguese. He was ar-rest-ed, but for some strange rea-son re-leased. And a year lat-er, in-stead of hang-ing as he so rich-ly de-served, he was pi-lot-ing Sir Humphrey Gilbert's ex-pe-di-tion to the New World!”

Wals-ing-ham pushed past Dee and stood at the rail, star-ing out in si-lence, while Winslow be-gan to think the un-think-able.

“Why?” Dee asked very qui-et-ly. “Raleigh's aim was to strike at Spain—and you are the most con-sis-tent en-emy Spain has ev-er had, or prob-ably ev-er will have. I know what you think of Raleigh, but sure-ly per-son-al dis-like couldn't make you—”

Abrupt-ly, Wals-ing-ham whirled to face Dee, and for the first time in Winslow's ex-pe-ri-ence his fea-tures, al-ways so care-ful-ly con-trolled, were a mask of anger from which the ma-gus flinched back. “Do you tru-ly be-lieve that I have no greater ends in view than pet-ty per-son-al jeal-ousy or spite?” He mas-tered him-self, turned back to the rail, and spoke tone-less-ly with-out fac-ing them. “For more than ten years, I have been play-ing a very del-icate, very sub-tle game against the King of Spain—a game for the safe-ty of Eng-land and Her Majesty, to say noth-ing of the true re-li-gion. Ev-ery-thing has been painstak-ing-ly bal-anced. All our moves against Spain have had to be co-or-di-nat-ed with all the oth-ers, their ef-fect pre-cise-ly mea-sured and their con-se-quences care-ful-ly con-sid-ered. And then came Raleigh, with the Queen's fa-vor and ideas too large for him. He was un-con-trol-lable, like . . . like . . .” Wals-ing-ham thought a mo-ment, then turned to Winslow and spoke with seem-ing ir-rel-evance. “Thomas, a ship's heavy guns are at-tached to the bulk-heads by ca-bles. I'm told that some-times, in bat-tle or storm, those ca-bles break and the gun is free to roll back and forth across the deck with the rolling of the ship, too heavy for any-one to halt, crush-ing all in its path un-til it fi-nal-ly strikes a bulk-head hard enough to smash through and fall in-to the sea.”

“Uh . . . that's true, Mr. Sec-re-tary. A loose can-non is one of a sea-man's night-mares.”

“Yes, that's it: a 'loose can-non.' A use-ful phrase, which I'll have to re-mem-ber.” Wals-ing-ham re-sumed star-ing out be-yond the rail. “Raleigh's plan for es-tab-lish-ing a base in what the Spaniards con-sid-er their ter-ri-to-ry for the pur-pose of raid-ing their trea-sure fleets had no part in my de-sign. It could have up-set ev-ery-thing. It had to be stopped.”

Winslow stared. All he could think of was that there had been a hundred and sev-en-teen colonists, twen-ty-eight of them wom-en and chil-dren. And . . .

“Mas-ter White's lit-tle grand-daugh-ter Vir-ginia Dare,” he heard him-self say.

Wals-ing-ham winced as though from a sharp pain, and would not meet Winslow's eyes. “My ser-vice to Her Majesty has re-quired many things of me that will al-ways weigh on my con-science. Af-ter a time, the con-science be-comes ac-cus-tomed to the bur-den. Too ac-cus-tomed, per-haps. Small ad-di-tion-al weights are too eas-ily as-sumed . . . like the weight of a new-born in-fant.”

“And in the end,” Dee said slow-ly, “you lost your game af-ter all. Eng-land is fall-en.”

“On-ly be-cause of a fac-tor that no one could have pre-dict-ed or ac-count-ed for: the Gray Monks. Had they not en-tered the world from God or the Dev-il knows where, I swear I would have won my game, and the Ar-ma-da would even now be leav-ing its wrecks on ev-ery coast of Scot-land and Ire-land.” Wals-ing-ham gave a chuck-le that had no hu-mor in it. “If I had known then what I know now, I would have done ev-ery-thing in my pow-er to pro-mote Raleigh's ven-ture. For he—blind-ly, ig-no-rant-ly—was strik-ing at one place where the Gray Monks can be hurt. And now his colony holds Eng-land's last hope.”

“If his colony still ex-ists,” said Dee somber-ly. De-spite your best ef-forts was a qual-ifi-er that hung silent-ly in the air.

Be-fore any-one could think of any-thing else to say, Mar-tin Gorham came puff-ing up the gang-way. “Par-don, Cap'n, but all is aboard. And the tide is ris-ing.”

“Just so, Boatswain.” Winslow be-gan to give or-ders, and the con-trolled chaos of the night seemed to reawake. Soon the ropes were let slip and Heron be-gan to edge away from the dock.

Stand-ing on the poop, Winslow looked over the port rail and down-ward. Eliz-abeth stood on the stern gallery, as if to catch the last pos-si-ble glimpse of Eng-land. Sud-den-ly, she looked up and called out to him.

“Cap-tain! It seems we've for-got-ten some-one.”

Winslow looked back along the dock. A young man was rid-ing a horse—none too ex-pert-ly, and both were clear-ly ex-haust-ed—along the sea-wall, try-ing to catch Heron.

“Stop!” the man cried. The sailors re-spond-ed with a gale of laugh-ter. “I mean, ahoy! Or what-ev-er will serve to halt you.”

“You're too late, fel-low!” Winslow called out. “You'll have to take your chances with the Dons.”

“But I bring ur-gent dis-patch-es for the Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary!” the man shout-ed, not so much dis-mount-ing from his horse as falling off. “You must take me!”

Wals-ing-ham leaned over the rail. “What 'dis-patch-es,' buf-foon? From whom?”

“From Christo-pher Mar-lowe, in Lon-don,” the man gasped, run-ning along the dock to catch up with Heron.

“Mar-lowe!” ex-claimed Dee. “Not just any-one would know he was one of your agents.”

“No, in-deed. And I'd rather not leave those who do know be-hind, for the Spaniards to put to the ques-tion.” Wals-ing-ham turned to Winslow. “Thomas, per-haps we'd best look in-to this fur-ther.”

“Boatswain!” Winslow or-dered. “Cast a line!”

A line swung out just as Heron's stern cleared the jet-ty. The man grabbed it and was swept off his feet, land-ing in the wa-ter to the fur-ther hi-lar-ity of the sailors, who hauled him aboard. He col-lapsed in a wet heap on the deck.

“God bless you, Cap-tain,” he gasped. He ap-peared to be in his ear-ly to mid-twen-ties, of no great stature, with brown hair al-ready be-gin-ning to ex-hib-it that slight re-ced-ing from the tem-ples which pre-saged mid-dle-aged bald-ness. His ex-pres-sive mouth was sur-round-ed by a thin youth-ful at-tempt at a mus-tache and beard. His on-ly re-mark-able fea-ture was his eyes: hazel, large and ex-traor-di-nar-ily lu-mi-nous. “I can on-ly pay you with thanks—the ex-che-quer of the poor.” He mo-men-tar-ily took on a look of con-cen-tra-tion, as though he was fil-ing that

turn of phrase away in some com-part-ment of mem-ory for fu-ture use, be-fore re-sum-ing. “But I’m sure the Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary will re-ward you.”

“I am the Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary,” said Wals-ing-ham, push-ing past Winslow, “and kind-ly per-mit me to be the judge of where re-wards should be dis-pensed. Now, how is it you hap-pen to know Christo-pher Mar-lowe?”

“I on-ly ar-rived in Lon-don a year ago, Mr. Sec-re-tary. Since then I have worked in a va-ri-ety of fields—”

“What a sur-prise,” Dee re-marked in an un-der-tone.

“—in-clud-ing act-ing, in which ca-pac-ity I’m not al-to-geth-er ill-re-gard-ed. It was thus that I made the ac-quain-tance of that em-inent play-wright. I have some small am-bi-tions in that di-rec-tion my-self, you see, and—”

“Yes, yes, get to the point!” Wals-ing-ham de-mand-ed testi-ly. “What of Mar-lowe? Does he still live?”

“I can-not say he does not, but I doubt that he does. He at-tempt-ed to de-part Lon-don ahead of the Spaniards, but ran afoul of a pa-trol and was wound-ed. I hap-pened to be the on-ly one avail-able to whom he had con-fid-ed his . . . sec-ond ca-reer as an in-for-mant. So he en-trust-ed these to me.” The young ac-tor held out a sealed satchel he had been car-ry-ing slung over his shoul-der. Wals-ing-ham took them with an ab-sent mur-mur of thanks and de-part-ed, in close con-ver-sa-tion with Dee.

Winslow looked aft. Ply-mouth har-bor was re-ced-ing astern. He turned to their some-what wordy new ar-rival. “Well, it’s too late to put you ashore. I don’t sup-pose your ‘va-ri-ety of fields’ has in-clud-ed sea-man-ship.”

“Ah . . . not ex-act-ly, Cap-tain.”

“Some-how I thought not.” More over-crowd-ing! he thought dis-gust-ed-ly. “Well, Boatswain, can you find some-thing to keep a land-lub-ber oc-cu-pied?”

Gorham looked du-bi-ous. “I sup-pose so, Cap’n.”

“Good.” Winslow start-ed to turn away, then had an af-terthought. “Oh, by the way, what’s your name?”

“Shake-speare, Cap-tain,” said the new crew-man, duck-ing his head. “William Shake-speare, late-ly of Strat-ford-up-on-Avon in War-wick-shire.”

Five

For most of the voy-age, their weath-er-luck held. Head-ing south-west, they avoid-ed the north-ern tem-pests John Dee had fore-told, and which he con-tin-ued to in-sist would have been the Ar-ma-da’s ru-in had it been forced past the Straits of Dover in-to the North Sea. Then, while still well north of the Ca-naries, they took a star-board tack and struck out in-to the track-less spaces of the At-lantic.

Colum-bus and ev-ery-one who had fol-lowed him had swung far to the south and let the cur-rents and the pre-vail-ing winds car-ry them to the In-dies. But Dee in-sist-ed that his pro-ject-ed route, more di-rect if not so ef-fort-less, would be quick-er if it worked at all. Of course, he could not de-ter-mine their lon-gi-tude ac-cu-rate-ly—an in-abil-ity that ir-ri-tat-ed him ex-treme-ly, even though the prob-lem was equal-ly in-tractable to ev-ery-one else. But he as-sured Winslow that their progress was as his the-ories pre-dict-ed, and ev-ery-thing seemed to bear him out.

The Queen, far from bur-den-ing Winslow with com-plaints, seemed to be ac-tu-al-ly en-joy-ing the voy-age, and thriv-ing on it. The on-ly fem-inine whin-ing came from the ladies-in-wait-ing, and most of their com-plaints con-cerned the looks they imag-ined the sailors kept giv-ing them, which may not have been en-tire-ly imag-inary; they were both dis-tinct-ly mid-dle-aged, but sea-men ac-quire new stan-dards of beau-ty. Wals-ing-ham, whose health was nev-er ro-bust, suf-fered sto-ical-ly, as it be-fit-ted a Pu-ri-tan to en-dure with-out com-plaint what-ev-er in-flic-tions God saw fit to send as tests.

Even Shake-speare man-aged to make him-self fair-ly use-ful. Heron's hur-ried de-par-ture had left them short of fresh-caught lands-men, and the grudg-ing help of the Queen's guards didn't al-to-geth-er make up the dif-fer-ence. The young ac-tor was will-ing to learn, and fared bet-ter among the sailors than Winslow would have ex-pect-ed. He'd prob-ably had ex-pe-ri-ence with de-cid-ed-ly mixed com-pa-ny in the the-atric-al stews of South-wark.

Once, on a day of ex-cep-tion-al-ly fine weath-er, Winslow was strolling the up-per deck amid-ships, where Shake-speare was work-ing at the dai-ly chore of man-ning the bilge pump. "So, Will, shall we make a sea-man of you yet?"

Shake-speare paused, leaned on the pump, and sighed. "At the mo-ment, Cap-tain, I'd give a thou-sand fur-longs of sea for an acre of bar-ren ground." His fea-tures took on the look they some-times did af-ter he'd said some-thing: an in-stant of in-tense con-cen-tra-tion fol-lowed by a quick, sat-is-fied nod. "Nev-er again will I ven-ture so far from home."

"Oh, come! You're no stay-at-home—you left War-wick-shire for Lon-don. What was it? Many things send men to sea. De-sire to see the world, or a nag-ging wife, are fre-quent-ly named."

"You see through me, Cap-tain. In truth, it was both of those. At eigh-teen I mar-ried a wom-an six years my se-nior. We had three chil-dren—a daugh-ter, and then boy and girl twins. But af-ter-wards . . ." Shake-speare sighed again. "If there be no great love in the be-gin-ning, heav-en may de-crease it up-on bet-ter ac-quain-tance." Con-cen-tra-tion and nod. "I left, and for a time sup-port-ed my-self as a school-mas-ter, and in oth-er ways, be-fore join-ing a com-pa-ny of ac-tors. But I've al-so sup-port-ed my fam-ily, send-ing them mon-ey the while."

"A com-mon enough ar-range-ment," Winslow nod-ded. And so it was, as young men moved to the bur-geon-ing metropo-lis of Lon-don like iron fil-ings to a mag-net.

"So com-mon as to in-clude your-self, Cap-tain?" Shake-speare in-quired.

"Eh? No, I have no wife. I could nev-er have sup-port-ed a fam-ily while work-ing my way up from the fore-cas-tle. And since I've achieved my cap-tain-cy . . . well, the oc-ca-sion has nev-er arisen." Winslow sud-den-ly won-dered why he had let him-self be drawn in-to con-ver-sation by the lowli-est mem-ber of his crew. Of course, Shake-speare was al-so an ed-ucat-ed man, which made it dif-fi-cult to know how to deal with him, as he lay out-side the usu-al so-cial cat-egories. And there was some-thing about him that en-cour-aged con-fi-dences—in-deed, drew them out. Still . . . "Well, back to the pump," Winslow com-mand-ed, strange-ly aware that he sound-ed stuffy, and even more strange-ly em-bar-rassed by the fact. He moved on.

Yes, he re-flect-ed, turn-ing his mind to oth-er things and gaz-ing at the placid sky, the weath-er has fa-vored this voy-age. God must ap-prove of the quest on which we are em-barked.

It was, of course, ex-act-ly the wrong thing to think. The gods of the sea, far old-er than the one God who had sup-plant-ed them and all their kin, hate noth-ing so much as self-sat-is-fac-tion in mor-tals.

Winslow knew they were in for a storm when the clouds be-gan scud-ding across the sky from west to east. That al-so told him that the coast on which they might be wrecked was not too far re-mote. He could on-ly or-der the sails hauled in and hope for the best.

When the storm struck, it did not dis-ap-point. Gales buf-fet-ed them for days, and rain choked the decks with wa-ter that sloshed back and forth as the ships pitched and heaved. Even many of the ex-pe-ri-enced sea-men were sick, and the lands-men suf-fered ter-ri-bly. Wals-ing-ham had, at this worst pos-si-ble time, got-ten the flux from drink-ing wa-ter that had gone bad as it al-ways did on long voy-ages. The com-bi-na-tion of that and sea-sick-ness left Winslow and Dee fear-ing for his life. The Queen was sick too, but bore it tight-lipped. The ladies-in-wait-ing were in too much agony even to com-plain.

John White suf-fered as much as any of them. But through it all he had on-ly one ob-ses-sive con-cern: the towed shal-lops. If those craft were lost, he de-clared, they all might just as well have stayed in Eng-land.

The on-ly mem-ber of their com-pa-ny who seemed to find any re-deem-ing fea-ture in the storm was Shake-speare. Dur-ing one brief lull in the rains, Winslow was in-spect-ing the weath-er deck when he saw the young ac-tor clutch-ing the han-dle of the bilge pump and retch-ing. But when his stom-ach was emp-tied, his look was the fa-mil-iar one that sug-gest-ed he was com-mit-ting a line to mem-ory. Over the moan-ing of the winds and the rum-bling of the thun-der, Winslow caught: “And thou, all-shak-ing thun-der, strike flat the thick ro-tun-di-ty o’the world!” Shake-speare gave a par-tic-ular-ly self-sat-is-fied nod.

“So you can find in-spi-ra-tion even in this, Will?” Winslow shout-ed over the noise.

Shake-speare looked up, wiped the residue of vom-it from his mouth, and ac-tu-al-ly smiled. “Oh, yes, Cap-tain. How could it be oth-er-wise, in the midst of some-thing this . . . vivid?”

“? ‘Vivid!’ You might have oth-er words for it if we’re ship-wrecked. Most of the is-lands peo-ple used to think dot-ted the At-lantic have turned out to be fa-bles, but you nev-er know.”

“Ah—fa-bles. The very word! Just think: we might be ship-wrecked on a fab-ulous is-land of mag-ical be-ings!”

“I’d pre-fer that we not be ship-wrecked any-where, thank you very much.”

“But think of the pos-si-bil-ities!” Shake-speare took on a far-away look that a re-newed gust of wind and rain did noth-ing to dis-turb. “A ma-gi-cian, liv-ing on the is-land in ex-ile . . . and his daugh-ter, who has nev-er seen men oth-er than her aged fa-ther, and knows on-ly mon-sters and faërie . . . what a brave new world, she would think, that had such peo-ple in it . . .”

Winslow sighed, gath-ered his cloak around him against the re-newed rain, and re-sumed his in-spec-tion.

When the storm fi-nal-ly lift-ed, Grey-hound was nowhere to be seen. But a shore lay ahead. John White peered at it.

“Cape Fear,” he an-nounced.

“Good name,” Gorham was heard to mut-ter.

“Con-grat-ula-tions, Dr. Dee,” said Winslow. “We’ve ar-rived on-ly a lit-tle south of our des-ti-na-tion.”

“On-ly a lit-tle dis-tance,” White cau-tioned, “but a great deal of dif-fi-cul-ty. I well re-call my sec-ond voy-age to these shores, with their rip-tides.”

His dour-ness was jus-ti-fied. The winds were still con-trary, and they wast-ed days beat-ing around the haz-ardous shoals of Cape Fear be-fore they could be-gin fol-low-ing the coast north-ward. The smells waft-ing sea-ward from the marsh-es and pine forests to port tan-ta-lized them.

Present-ly, they sight-ed the bar-ri-er is-lands. The weath-er was still blus-tery and un-set-tled, and when a break in the sand-bars ap-peared Winslow was sore-ly tempt-ed to take Heron through it in-to the shel-tered wa-ters of the sound be-yond.

“No, Cap-tain,” in-sist-ed White. “I rec-og-nize that is-land over there—Woco-con, the In-di-ans call it. On the sec-ond ex-pe-di-tion, we tried what you’re think-ing of. Be-lieve me, these wa-ters are far more haz-ardous than what we went through at Cape Fear. All we ac-com-plished was to run aground, un-der the pi-lotage of that rogue Si-mon Fer-nan-dez. No, we must con-tin-ue up the coast to Port Fer-di-nan-do.” He said the name with ob-vi-ous dis-taste. Wals-ing-ham, who had re-cov-ered suf-fi-cient-ly to stand on the quar-ter-deck with the rest of them, was care-ful-ly ex-pres-sion-less.

“But from what you’ve told us, Heron can’t en-ter there in safe-ty any more than here.”

“No. But if you an-chor just out-side Port Fer-di-nan-do, you can ac-tu-al-ly see Roanoke Is-land in the dis-tance. The shal-lops won’t have far to go . . . al-though hon-esty com-pels me to say that the go-ing is treach-er-ous.”

“Is there any oth-er kind along this damned coast?” Winslow de-mand-ed ir-ri-ta-bly. But when he made eye con-tact with Wals-ing-ham, the Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary nod-ded. Their hopes rest-ed on White’s hard-won knowl-edge. “Very well,” he said with-out any great en-thu-si-asm. “We’ll pro-ceed north-ward.”

They con-tin-ued up the coast, con-stant-ly tak-ing depth sound-ings, while Winslow watched the hori-zon for Grey-hound. He had hoped the storm would have car-ried the small-er ship to the same stretch of coast, but so far there was no sign of her, and he be-gan to fear the worst.

Soon they were pass-ing an-oth-er bar-ri-er is-land that aroused White's mem-ories of the ear-li-er voy-ages. "Croa-toan," he told them. "Birth-place of Man-teo, the Sec-otan In-di-an who was such a help to us, and who jour-neyed to Eng-land with us af-ter our first ex-pe-di-tion here, four years ago." His face wore its fre-quent ex-pres-sion of un-com-pre-hend-ing hurt, of blight-ed hopes. "It was al-most as though we had ven-tured in-to the Gar-den of Eden, or the Gold-en Age of which the pa-gan po-ets tell. The Sec-otan wel-come-d us with ci-vil-ity and friend-ship. Granganimeo, broth-er of King Wininga of the Sec-otan, made us wel-come. Both are dead now, thanks to that mad-man Ralph Lane, who left this land in chaos."

"And yet," Winslow ven-tured, "didn't you go to Croa-toan last year, af-ter you and the colonists had been left on Roanoke Is-land?"

"Yes. My first task as gov-er-nor was to or-der the hous-es re-paired in Lane's fort, which fif-teen of his sol-diers had been left to hold when Drake evac-uat-ed ev-ery-one else. All we found of them was the bleach-ing skele-ton of one. Once that had been at-tend-ed to, I per-suad-ed Cap-tain Stafford, com-man-der of the pin-nace that had been left to us, to take some of us, in-clud-ing Man-teo, to Croa-toan. Man-teo had many kin-dred still liv-ing there, in-clud-ing his moth-er. I need-ed to know if the Croa-toans were still dis-posed to friend-ship to-ward us, in spite of ev-ery-thing Lane had done. At first I de-spaired, for they seemed hos-tile, and fled when we went for our guns. But then Man-teo called to them—they hadn't rec-og-nized him in his En-glish clothes, you see—and af-ter that all was well as soon as we pledged not to plun-der any of their food as Lane had. They promised to in-ter-cede for us with the rest of the Sec-otan—the peo-ple of Sec-ota and Aquasco-goc and Pomio-c and oth-er places. But in the end, the Croa-toans couldn't mend the dam-age done by Lane's mur-der of Wininga. We were at-tacked. One of us, George Howe, was killed. We re-tal-iat-ed—I should have re-sist-ed the de-mands for that, but I didn't, to my shame. By the time I went back to Eng-land for help, Croa-toan was the on-ly place left where our peo-ple had any hope of find-ing friend-ship."

"Thanks to Man-teo," Winslow ob-served.

"In-deed. Aside from the birth of my grand-daugh-ter, my on-ly plea-sur-able mem-ory of my fi-nal days of Roanoke Is-land is that I was able to re-ward Man-teo in some mea-sure for his faith-ful ser-vice. You see, Sir Wal-ter had de-cid-ed to ex-er-cise his pow-ers un-der Her Majesty's grant and make him feu-dal lord of Roanoke, to hold that coast in Her Majesty's name while we went north and set-tled on the Chesa-peake Bay as orig-inal-ly planned. So, af-ter he was bap-tized, I ex-er-cised my pow-ers as Sir Wal-ter's deputy and de-clared him Lord of Roanoke and Dase-munkepeuc."

"Uh . . . Das . . . ?"

"No-body else could pro-nounce it ei-ther," White ad-mit-ted. "So we just called him Lord Man-teo. He is now his peo-ple's gov-er-nor as Her Majesty's vas-sal. I look for-ward to see-ing him again al-most as much as I do to greet-ing my own peo-ple."

The weath-er con-tin-ued un-set-tled, and at the north-ern end of Croa-toan Winslow sent the shal-lops to do sound-ings in search of a breach. But the shoals were too labyrinthine, and White was no help here. So they worked their way on-ward to the north, with in-fi-nite cau-tion now that Heron was a ves-sel alone, con-tain-ing all their lives as well as the hope of Eng-land.

Fi-nal-ly they sight-ed what White, with vis-ible joy, de-clared to be Ha-torask Is-land. Be-yond was the open wa-ter of Port Fer-di-nan-do. To the west of it stretched the shal-low wa-ters of the pro-tect-ed sound. And in the dis-tance, a speck against the mys-te-ri-ous con-ti-nent be-yond, an is-land could be glimpsed. White stood at the port rail and stared at it long-ing-ly.

"Roanoke Is-land," Winslow stat-ed rather than asked.

White nod-ded, with-out tak-ing his eyes off that bare-ly vis-ible is-land.

“Well,” said Winslow, squint-ing at the wes-ter-ing sun, “it’s too late to try for it now. To-mor-row morn-ing we’ll launch the shal-lops.”

White nod-ded again, as though bare-ly hear-ing. Winslow doubt-ed he would get much sleep.

In the morn-ing, Wals-ing-ham and Dee both want-ed to be in the shore par-ty, the for-mer from a sense of du-ty and the lat-ter out of sheer cu-ri-ous-ity. Winslow, as-sert-ing his au-thor-ity as cap-tain, over-ruled them. He knew the pas-sage, how-ev-er short it seemed, would not be with-out its risks. On-ly able sea-men—in-clud-ing Winslow him-self—would ac-com-pa-ny White in one of the shal-lops. The oth-er would go in the op-po-site di-rec-tion to near-by Ha-torask, for the fresh wa-ter of which they were des-per-ate-ly in need.

“Fire the sak-ers and min-ions,” he or-dered Gorham, “with a few sec-onnds spac-ing be-tween each shot. That should let them know we’re here.”

“Yes,” White agreed avid-ly. “They’ll prob-ably ac-knowl-edge by build-ing a fire on the shore.”

The guns’ crash-ing re-port echoed across the wa-ter, fill-ing the air with the rot-ten-eggs smell of burned pow-der and send-ing flocks of star-tled seabirds screech-ing aloft. The land-ing par-ty got awk-ward-ly in-to the boat. The weath-er was still more un-set-tled than Winslow liked, and the boat pitched alarm-ing-ly in the chop-py wa-ter. A man fell over the side, and it took time to re-trieve him. It took still more time to ma-neu-ver away from Heron, and when they ap-proached the Port Fer-di-nan-do breach it be-came ap-par-ent that the in-rush-ing wa-ter of the ris-ing tide, which they could see break-ing over the bar, had turned the chan-nel in-to a churn-ing caul-dron. They hung on grim-ly, the men strain-ing at the oars while Winslow strug-gled to keep the craft bow-on in-to the swells lest they cap-size.

Fi-nal-ly they crossed the breach, and Winslow could spare a glance at the dis-tant is-land in search of the an-tic-ipat-ed sig-nal fire. But no smoke was to be seen.

It took hours to row across the un-set-tled wa-ters of the sound. All the while, White stared fixed-ly ahead as though by sheer will he could force the ap-pear-ance of smoke. Fi-nal-ly the shal-lop ground ashore on-to the sand of Roanoke Is-land.

No one was in sight. The lack of any hu-man sound made the noise of the wind and the waves and the birds seem like dead si-lence.

“Well, Mas-ter White,” said Winslow, a lit-tle too loud-ly, “do you know where you are?”

“I think so.” White’s fea-tures were a study in mixed ea-ger-ness and be-wil-der-ment. “The set-tle-ment should be in this di-rec-tion. It’s where Lane had built his fort. We found it dis-man-tled af-ter be-ing left here, but built new cot-tages there.”

They set out along the sand and scrub, fol-low-ing the shore around the north end of the is-land, skirt-ing the aro-mat-ic for-est of loblolly pine. Present-ly, White sprint-ed ahead, scram-bling up a sandy bank he clear-ly rec-og-nized. Be-fore the rest of them could catch up to him, he had stopped dead.

There was a clear-ing ahead. But that wasn’t what White was star-ing at. Just in front of him was a tree. Carved in its bark were the let-ters “CRO.”

“What does it mean, Mas-ter White?” de-mand-ed Winslow. “Is it in a code?”

“No.” White shook his head. His face was a sea of con-flict-ing emo-tions, but he spoke calm-ly. “At the time I re-turned to Eng-land for help, the colonists were con-sid-er-ing go-ing to the main-land and mov-ing to some place per-haps fifty miles in-land, away from dan-ger from the Sec-otan vil-lages Lane had pro-voked in-to be-ing our en-emies. In or-der that I could find them on my re-turn, it was agreed that they would carve the name of the place they had gone on trees, or on the doors of their cot-tages. And if they were in dis-tress, they were to carve be-side it a Mal-tese cross. There is no such cross here!” For an in-stant, hope came up-per-most in the chaot-ic strug-gle his face re-flect-ed.

Winslow shook his head. “But where is ‘CRO’?”

“I don’t know. It is mean-ing-less. So if they are gone . . . how will we find them?” White’s look of hope van-ished in pan-ic like the sun go-ing be-hind a dark cloud. With an inar-tic-ulate cry, he

sprang for-ward. Winslow and the sea-men could on-ly fol-low.

This time, White was on his knees. His face re-flect-ed a de-spair too ab-so-lute for weep-ing.

A clear-ing was be-fore them, hold-ing a crude wood-en pal-isade, di-lap-idat-ed, over-grown with weeds, and quite ob-vi-ous-ly de-sert-ed. No one, Winslow es-ti-mat-ed, had been here for at least a year.

“My daugh-ter Eleanor,” White whis-pered. “And her hus-band Ana-nias Dare. And their ba-by girl Vir-ginia. And the ba-by boy born af-ter-wards to Dy-onis and Margery Harvie. And all the oth-ers. Gone. Even the hous-es. Gone.”

Dis-in-clined to dis-turb such ut-ter des-ola-tion, Winslow walked around him and looked around. Noth-ing.

The sailors al-so dis-persed about the clear-ing, look-ing about cu-ri-ous-ly. In-side the pal-isade they found a scat-ter of items—iron bars, shot for the sak-ers that had been left be-hind, and oth-er items that might well have been left be-hind as too heavy to car-ry. All was over-grown with grass and weeds.

Sud-den-ly, one of the men called out to Winslow. “Cap'n! These here look like fair let-ters. Can you . . . ?”

“Let's have a look, Grim-son.” Winslow walked over to where the il-lit-er-ate sailor was point-ing—a post by the right side of the en-trance to the pal-isade. He stared for a mo-ment, then re-leased a whoop of laugh-ter. “Mas-ter White! Come here. I think this is a sight that will make your heart sing.”

White stum-bled to his feet and joined Winslow. At first he sim-ply stared. Then he fell to his knees again, but this time in an at-ti-tude of thanks to God. And this time his tears flowed.

“Croat-toan!” he shout-ed. “Of course! That was what 'CRO' meant, but some-one nev-er had the chance to fin-ish it. So now we know where they went. And . . . no Mal-tese cross! They are safe, with our Sec-otan friends on Croa-toan Is-land!”

The sailors crowd-ed around White, pum-mel-ing his back and shout-ing rough con-grat-ula-tions. He stood up and faced Winslow, his face a blaz-ing sun of joy. “Cap-tain, now we know where they are. If on-ly we had fired sig-nal guns when we passed Croa-toan! But we must go there at once!”

Six

In fact, go-ing to Croa-toan wasn't as sim-ple as that. Winslow tried to ex-plain that to his lis-ten-ers in Heron's cab-in, but with dif-fi-cul-ty. Wals-ing-ham and the Queen were land-lub-bers of the deep-est dye. Dee's knowl-edge of nav-iga-tion was in ad-vance of his era in many ways, but his prac-ti-cal ex-pe-ri-ence of the sea—un-til re-cent-ly, at least—was lim-it-ed to his voy-age to Baf-fin Is-land with Mar-tin Fro-bish-er. And John White, who had crossed and re-crossed the At-lantic more times than all but a few men, was afire with an ea-ger-ness that made naught of ob-sta-cles.

“You must un-der-stand,” Winslow told them, “that we've al-ready passed north of Croa-toan. And the weath-er is still un-set-tled. The sound was chop-py when we rowed the shal-lops back. Mas-ter White can tell you how dif-fi-cult that was. I've dou-bled our ca-bles, be-cause I think a storm is com-ing soon—I can feel it in the clam-my air.” He sought for the words that would con-vey to these peo-ple a sea-man's sense of the sea and its moods. He knew its mood now. He knew it in the roil-ing chan-nel of Port Fer-di-nan-do.

“But Thomas, won't the wind be with us now, sail-ing south-ward?” asked Wals-ing-ham.

“It should be—but I'm not re-ly-ing on that, in these dis-turbed seas. We'll have to stay close to Ha-torask Is-land, lest those same winds blow us be-yond Croa-toan so that we'd have to fight our way back north-ward against con-trary winds. That will mean risk-ing the shoals as we try to work our way past the point of land south of Ken-ricks Mounts.”

White's eyes plead-ed with him. “Cap-tain, my daugh-ter and grand-daugh-ter and all the oth-ers are there. We've come so far, and are now so close!”

"I know. And with all my heart I want to risk this ven-ture. But I can-not for-get the fact that Heron is alone on this treach-er-ous coast. And I can-not ig-nore what she is car-ry-ing..." Winslow's gaze strayed to the head of the ta-ble, where the Queen sat in si-lence.

"Cap-tain Winslow," she said qui-et-ly, "are we agreed that my faith-ful sub-jects are on Croa-toan Is-land, await-ing suc-cor?"

"Such seems to be the case, Your Majesty."

"And you would have me aban-don them out of fear for my own safe-ty?" Eliz-abeth shook her head. "Sovereign-ty is more than pow-er and priv-ilege, Cap-tain. It car-ries a bur-den as well. For most monar-chs, most of the time, the trap-pings of pow-er and priv-ilege hold the bur-den so far at bay that it can eas-ily be for-got-ten. But it is al-ways there. And now fate has stripped me of those trap-pings and left me here off this wild weath-er-beat-en coast, all alone with the bur-den. Those few score En-glish sub-jects on Croa-toan are my king-dom now—all the king-dom I have left." She rose to her feet, and the oth-ers per-force rose with her. "I do not wish to go be-fore my Mak-er know-ing that I failed, out of fear, to bear the bur-den to which I was born."

"Al-so," Dee put in with un-char-ac-ter-is-tic dif-fi-dence, "they may have dis-cov-ered that which the Gray Monks are seek-ing. For all we know, that was why they re-moved to Croa-toan. As long as that pos-si-bil-ity ex-ists, we must pur-sue it."

"Very well," sighed Winslow. "We'll make the at-tempt."

They lost two an-chors off the Ken-ricks Mounts point, as the ship plunged in the swells and Winslow fought to keep it from run-ning aground on the bar. By sheer in-stinct, he steered Heron along a deep chan-nel be-tween the shoals un-til they were past Ha-torask. There was a lull in the weath-er as they brought Croa-toan in sight—al-though not a lull Winslow liked, for it was the sort that por-tend-ed a storm. Nor did he like the fact that he had on-ly two an-chors re-main-ing, in hur-ri-cane sea-son. He dropped one of them and was about to or-der the fir-ing of a sig-nal gun when a look-out cried, "Sail ho!" and point-ed south-ward.

Squint-ing in-to the dis-tance, Winslow made out a flag with the cross of St. George. So had oth-ers, for cheers rang out. It was Grey-hound.

The lull con-tin-ued long enough for Cap-tain Jonas Hal-leck to be rowed across to Heron. Winslow had on-ly met him briefly be-fore they had de-part-ed Ply-mouth. He was a stocky man in his ear-ly for-ties with a thick salt-and-pep-per beard fram-ing a weath-ered face. Winslow rec-og-nized him as a mem-ber of a van-ish-ing breed of sea cap-tain: il-lit-er-ate, tough as brine-soaked leather, full of growl-ing dis-dain for the rut-ters and the oth-er new print-ed nav-iga-tion-al aids that he couldn't read. But he knew how to es-ti-mate lat-itude, us-ing the cross-staff, to with-in thir-ty miles on a good day.

"Af-ter the storm eased, we raised the coast well to the south," he rum-bled, still avert-ing his eyes from the ex-alt-ed com-pa-ny in Heron's cab-in. The crowd-ed meet-ing al-so in-clud-ed Gorham, whom Winslow had de-cid-ed it would be well to in-vite, and who was prac-ti-cal-ly dig-ging his toes in-to the deck in his em-bar-rass-ment at his so-cial in-fe-ri-or-ity. There was bare-ly room for the stew-ard who kept their wine gob-lets full. "I feared we would en-counter the Dons, in those lat-itudes. And in-deed, we sight-ed one of their sails. But he was on a south-south-west course, run-ning be-fore the wind, and al-ready astern of us."

"Still," Wals-ing-ham mut-tered, "it means they're pa-trolling this coast. And if you sight-ed them, it's pos-si-ble that they sight-ed you as well. So it's al-so pos-si-ble that, as soon as that cap-tain makes his re-port, they'll know we're here."

"I doubt if it will af-fect mat-ters much," said Dee. "If my sources of in-for-ma-tion are to be trust-ed, they'll be com-ing to this coast in force any-way."

"I as-sume that is meant to re-as-sure me," said Wals-ing-ham dry-ly.

"At all events," Hal-leck re-sumed, "by God's grace we worked our way up the coast and round-ed Cape Fear safe-ly, de-spite the rip-tides. But one thing I must tell you. Look-ing astern as we came up from the south... Well, I have feel for these things. And I swear that there's a

hur-ri-cane brew-ing down there. I can smell it.”

A hur-ri-cane, with the Spaniards maybe com-ing be-hind it, Winslow brood-ed.

“Your Majesty, my lords,” he said somber-ly, “if a hur-ri-cane catch-es us off this coast we’ll be blown God knows where, and may very well not be able to re-turn this sea-son. If we are to at-tempt a land-ing on Croa-toan, it must be now.”

“Yes,” said Wals-ing-ham with a de-ci-sive nod. “And this time, Thomas, I will ac-com-pa-ny the land-ing par-ty.”

“And I,” Dee put in hasti-ly. “If what-ev-er un-can-ny thing the Gray Monks seek is on Croa-toan, I will be the most like-ly to rec-og-nize it for what it is.”

“And I will al-so go, Cap-tain,” stat-ed the Queen. She held up a hand to si-lence any protest. “I wish to feel sol-id land un-der my feet again. And if I un-der-stand Cap-tain Hal-leck, those who go ashore may well be in bet-ter case than those who re-main aboard ship, wait-ing for the hur-ri-cane.”

Winslow start-ed to open his mouth, but then closed it . . . and not just to avoid lèse ma-jesté. The fact was that the Queen, be-sides be-ing the Queen, was ab-so-lute-ly right. She would stand a bet-ter chance ashore—al-ways as-sum-ing that White was cor-rect about the friend-li-ness of the lo-cal In-di-ans. And he doubt-ed that Wals-ing-ham would sur-vive a hur-ri-cane aboard ship, even on the large as-sump-tion that the ship it-self sur-vived.

“Your Majesty’s wish-es are my com-mand,” he said smooth-ly. “But I can-not be re-spon-si-ble for the com-fort or dig-ni-ty or safe-ty of your ladies-in-wait-ing. They must re-main aboard ship.” He gave the boatswain a sig-nif-icant look. Gorham re-turned it. No words were nec-es-sary. The ladies-in-wait-ing would be left alone in the Queen’s ab-sence.

For an in-stant, Eliz-abeth seemed about to take ex-cep-tion to the word must. But then she sub-sid-ed and nod-ded short-ly. “Yes. You are right, Cap-tain. But my guards shall ac-com-pa-ny me, for the sake of the roy-al dig-ni-ty.”

And the squad of sol-diers, com-mand-ed by a young but com-pe-tent-seem-ing lieu-tenant named Fen-ton, might well come in handy, Winslow re-flect-ed. “Of course, Your Majesty. All shall be as you com-mand. And at any rate, there’ll be lit-tle use for any men but ex-pe-ri-enced mariners aboard the ship in the storm.” He held out his gob-let for a re-fill. As he did, he no-ticed the iden-ti-ty of the stew-ard: Shake-speare, per-form-ing one of the tasks Gorham had de-cid-ed he could prob-ably man-age. Moved by a sud-den, ob-scure im-pulse, he added, “For the same rea-son, we’ll take Mas-ter Shake-speare ashore. I sus-pect an ac-tor would be even less use in a storm than sol-diers.” There were chuck-les around the ta-ble.

“Cap-tain Hal-leck,” Winslow re-sumed, “while I am ashore with the land-ing par-ty, you will be in com-mand of the fleet.” He forced him-self not to smile at the word fleet. “If a hur-ri-cane does in-deed strike, you will en-deav-or to ride it out. But if the sur-vival of the ships is at stake, you will run be-fore it. Do I make my-self clear?”

“Aye,” Hal-leck rum-bled, meet-ing Winslow’s eyes. They both knew that might well mean that the land-ing par-ty, in-clud-ing the Queen, would be out of reach of suc-cor for a year—not that any help was like-ly to come from con-quer-ed Eng-land next year, or ev-er. But nei-ther saw any need to men-tion it.

“Very well,” said Winslow. “We’ll go ashore in the morn-ing. Boatswain, see to the prepa-ra-tions. And fire the sig-nal guns.”

But, as at Roanoke, there was no an-swer-ing fire ashore.

It was the ris-ing sea that let Winslow know, with sick-en-ing cer-tain-ty, that they were in for it. He knew that feel-ing, that coil-ing, tight-en-ing ten-sion. Be-neath the sullen sur-face, na-ture was gath-er-ing its forces and mus-ter-ing its malev-olence, build-ing up to an ex-plo-sive re-lease. When it came, he knew it would be sud-den.

They were bare-ly ashore on Croa-toan when the wind shift-ed with an abrupt-ness that even the land-lub-bers among them no-ticed. The Queen turned to Winslow with a look of con-cern.

She point-ed at the for-est be-yond the beach.

“Should we take shel-ter un-der the trees, Cap-tain?”

“No, Your Majesty. There's go-ing to be much light-ning. We must stay here in the open.” He turned to the sailors. “You know what to do. Lieu-tenant Fen-ton, I'll be obliged if your men lend a hand.”

The sailors need-ed no fur-ther in-struc-tions, for they knew what was com-ing. With the clum-sy but will-ing help of the sol-diers, who could sense the im-mi-nence of dan-ger, they up-end-ed the boats and stretched a sail-cloth be-tween them, cre-at-ing a large, crude tent. De-spite the wax-ing wind, they were all slick with sweat in the damp trop-ic air that wind was bring-ing with it from the womb of hur-ri-canes.

“Your Majesty,” said Winslow, in-di-cat-ing the cramped space in the shel-ter, too low to stand up, “I re-gret the in-dig-ni-ty, but—”

“Faugh!” The Queen scram-bled un-der the can-vas awning. She had bare-ly done so when the whistling sigh of the wind abrupt-ly rose to a roar, and the sailors as-signed to hold the ropes at the sail's cor-ners bare-ly man-aged to hold on.

The hur-ri-cane was like an el-emen-tal prin-ci-ple of ma-li-cious fury as it came blast-ing up the coast. The howl-ing, shriek-ing roar of the wind rose still high-er, but it was drowned out by a con-tin-uous can-non-ade of thun-der. Light-ning stabbed with in-sen-sate vi-olence, and rain fell in sheets that pe-ri-od-ical-ly drenched them de-spite the mus-cle-strain-ing ef-forts of re-lays of men to hold the ropes down. For what seemed an eter-ni-ty of mis-ery, they hud-dled un-der the can-vas. Dur-ing a lull in the din, Winslow heard Shake-speare, close be-side him, mut-ter, “I will shroud here till the dregs of the storm be past.” Even at this mo-ment, the young ac-tor gave his quick brow-fur-row-ing nod, like a clerk fil-ing some-thing in its prop-er place.

Fi-nal-ly the storm passed, leav-ing in its wake an eerie com-bi-na-tion of damp air and clear sky. The hot af-ter-noon sun shone down on a beach lit-tered with the de-tri-tus of the storm. Aside from them-selves, the is-land seemed emp-ty of hu-man-ity.

They stum-bled to their feet as the sailors drew back the can-vas and be-gan to fold it, let-ting the sun warm their shiv-er-ing bod-ies and dry their wet clothes. With a dead lack of hope, Winslow looked sea-ward. He was not dis-ap-point-ed in his pes-simistic as-sump-tions. Not a sail was to be seen on the hori-zon. Heron and Grey-hound were wher-ev-er the storm had tak-en them. He dared to hope that place was not the bot-tom of the ocean.

“Well, Mas-ter White,” he said heav-ily, “it seems we must go in search of your colonists. Dr. Dee, per-haps you should come too. Lieu-tenant Fen-ton, you and your men will re-main here on the beach and guard Her Majesty and the Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary.”

“You would leave us here while you go ad-ven-tur-ing, Cap-tain?” the Queen in-quired arch-ly. “I be-lieve I've had quite enough of this beach for the present.”

“Very good, Your Majesty. But please fol-low well be-hind us with your guards and lis-ten for any cries of alarm from us up ahead.”

“What dan-gers do you an-tic-ipate, Cap-tain, on an is-land in-hab-it-ed by friend-ly In-di-ans and our own loy-al sub-jects?”

“Hope-ful-ly none, Your Majesty. But I can-not for-get that there was no re-ply to our sig-nal gun.”

On that some-what damp-en-ing note, they struck out in-to the for-est of loblol-ly and live oak, heavy with the scent of wild mus-ca-dine grapes. Present-ly they as-cend-ed the top of a sandy ridge. All at once, White could stand it no longer. “Hal-lo!” he shout-ed. “It is I, Gov-er-nor White, fa-ther of Eleanor Dare, and I have re-turned as I promised. Come out!”

And, slow-ly, fig-ures that had been in-vis-ible be-cause of their mo-tion-less-ness be-gan to emerge from the sur-viv-ing woods.

The sailors clutched their weapons and formed a de-fen-sive cres-cent as the In-di-ans silent-ly ap-proached. They looked like John White's paint-ings come to life: near-ly naked brown-skinned men whose black hair was shaven on the sides, leav-ing a crest on top. Their black eyes, squeezed

in-to slits by their high cheek-bones, peered out from elab-orate-ly tat-toed faces. They were armed with bows which didn't look very pow-er-ful to Winslow's eye but which, he imag-ined, would do well enough at this range.

For a mo-ment, the tableau held. Then the In-di-ans part-ed, mak-ing way for an in-di-vid-ual who had the same racial char-ac-ter-is-tics as the rest of them, in-clud-ing the tat-toos, but who dif-fered from them in two im-por-tant ways. First, he was smil-ing. Sec-ond-ly, he was wear-ing the re-mains of an En-glish taffe-ta blouse cov-ered by a dou-blet that had quite ob-vi-ous-ly nev-er been washed in its en-tire not-in-con-sid-er-able lifes-pan.

Winslow and his sailors could on-ly stare at this ap-pari-tion. But John White, af-ter an in-cred-ulous in-stant, bound-ed for-ward with a joy-ous whoop and em-braced the In-di-an, who burst in-to an En-glish-sound-ing laugh and re-tur-ned the hug, re-peat-ed-ly ex-claim-ing, "Old friend, old friend!" Then White cleared his throat, as-sumed a pose of for-mal-ity, and turned back to his non-plussed com-pan-ions.

"Cap-tain, Dr. Dee, I crave par-don for so for-get-ting my-self in the ex-cite-ment of the mo-ment. We are in the pres-ence of no-bil-ity. Al-low me to present you to Lord Man-teo of Roanoke and Dase-munkepeuc."

Af-ter the barest hes-ita-tion, Winslow bowed. Dee and the sailors fol-lowed suit. Man-teo in-clined his head with a gra-cious dig-ni-ty that would have done cred-it to Hamp-ton Court.

"And will you not in-tro-duce us as well, Mas-ter White?" came the Queen's voice from be-hind them as she stepped for-ward. Lieu-tenant Fen-ton and his sol-diers, not know-ing what to make of the scene but know-ing bows and ar-rows when they saw them, start-ed to raise their weapons. The Queen halt-ed them with a peremp-to-ry ges-ture and stood be-fore her feu-dal vas-sal.

Man-teo stared in-tent-ly at the bedrag-gled wom-an in the still-damp rid-ing out-fit, so dif-fer-ent from the elab-orate-ly gowned and made-up fig-ure to whom he had once been pre-sent-ed at court. Then his eyes widened with dawn-ing recog-ni-tion and he fell to his knees.

"Weroan-za Eliz-abeth!" he cried. Then he turned, still kneel-ing, to his fel-low tribes-men. "Weroan-za Eliz-abeth!" They all dropped their bows and prac-ti-cal-ly fell on their faces.

"What is he say-ing, Mas-ter White?" Wals-ing-ham want-ed to know.

"It is their ti-tle for Her Majesty, Mr. Sec-re-tary." White seemed em-bar-rassed.

"Yes, but what does it sig-ni-fy, ex-act-ly?"

"Well, er . . . it means 'Big Chief Eliz-abeth.'? "

For an in-stant Winslow thought the Queen was go-ing to ex-plode with the ef-fort of hold-ing back a de-light-ed guf-faw. "Well," she fi-nal-ly gasped, smooth-ing out her fea-tures and tak-ing a deep breath, "on my re-tur-n to Eng-land I shall as-sured-ly ask Par-lia-ment to add that to the list of my of-fi-cial ti-tles." She looked down in-to the beam-ing, tat-toed brown face and be-stowed a smile that could have won the heart of a Pu-ri-tan. "Arise, Lord Man-teo. It glad-dens us to greet our loy-al sub-jects of Vir-ginia. And know this: while you have had wis-er and might-ier Big Chiefs, you have had none who loved you bet-ter."

Man-teo, his face trans-fig-ured, rose. He turned to his fel-low tribes-men and trans-lat-ed. They leaped to their feet, wav-ing their bows and shout-ing "Weroan-za Eliz-abeth," al-though the name was bare-ly rec-og-niz-able on their tongues. Winslow could bare-ly hear Shake-speare mut-ter-ing be-hind him, but he caught the words most roy-al.

"But," the Queen con-tin-ued when she could make her-self heard, "we would al-so greet our loy-al En-glish sub-jects on this is-land, where we have been giv-en to be-lieve that they sought refuge among you."

"That's right!" John White, in his ea-ger-ness, came close to com-mit-ting the in-con-ceiv-able sole-cism of in-ter-rupt-ing the Queen. "We saw the word 'Croa-toan' carved on a tree on Roanoke, to let us know they had come here. Where are they? My daugh-ter Eleanor Dare and grand-daugh-ter Vir-ginia Dare, and all the rest?"

Man-teo's face fell, and he spoke in his care-ful but very good En-glish. "Some of them came

here, yes. Your daughter and her infant were among them. But now they are gone.”

“Gone?” White’s features froze. “You mean dead?”

“No. I mean . . . gone.” Man-teo looked deeply troubled. “What happened to them was a wrongness. Something that should not happen, for it violated God’s laws.”

“The Gray Monks!” gasped John Dee. He stepped forward eagerly. “Tell us! Describe what happened.”

Man-teo’s eyes slid away. “One of the Englishmen remains here, in our village. You should ask him. Perhaps he understands. As for me . . . well, you know I am a good Christian.”

“Of course, Man-teo,” White soothed. “Did I not preside over your baptism last year?”

“Then you know I do not speak lightly when I say it was like something out of the old, dark, stupid ways before you brought the true faith to us. It was like something that God—the God of this world—never meant to allow.”

“I fear he may be right,” Dee murmured.

Man-teo’s village was as John White remembered: a fence-like palisade surrounding almost twenty longhouses roughly constructed of poles and draped with rush mats that could be rolled up to admit light.

They passed through the palisade in silence and proceeded between the longhouses and past the central fire-pit. All of them but White stared at the residents, especially the women: even more heavily tattooed than the men, and with breasts partially exposed by the knee-length deer-skin garments they wore. Those garments left them quite naked behind, as the sailors did not fail to notice the first time one of them turned around.

The stares they got in return were of a curious quality: not stares of amazement, for English people were no longer a novelty here, but rather of apprehension, as though the English had become linked in these people’s minds with uncanny and ill-omened things.

Man-teo, who was rapidly proving himself as indispensable as White had said he was, broke the mood by announcing the identity of the red-haired English woman, and shouts of “Weroanza Elizabeth” rang out. Then he led them to one of the longhouses. The sailors and soldiers sank gratefully to the ground outside and ate the food the Indian women brought. But the Queen, Walsingham, Dee, Winslow and White followed Man-teo into the smoky interior, where a man in the remnants of English clothing lay on a pallet. He was scraggly-bearded and unhealthy-looking, and his left leg was wrapped in some kind of large leaves.

“Dick Taverner!” exclaimed White.

The man lifted himself on one elbow and stared through the gloom. “Master White?” He shook his head. “No, it can’t be. The fever must be back.”

“It’s I, Dick. I promised I’d be back, didn’t I?”

“But . . . you said you’d be back in three months. How long has it been? We gave up on you.”

“I tried, Dick. As God is my witness, I tried. But much has happened in the world beyond this coast. Which reminds me . . .” He cleared his throat and spoke with awkward formality. “Your Majesty, I present your loyal subject Richard Taverner.”

Taverner’s expression passed into something beyond bewilderment as the Queen stepped into his line of sight. “The fever . . .” he mumbled, blinking stupidly. But then he shook his head violently and stared. “No . . . I’ve gone mad in this place.”

“You are not mad, Master Taverner,” said the Queen with a smile, “and I honor you for remaining faithful. . . . No, be still!” she added hastily as Taverner tried with obvious pain, to bring his legs under him and kneel.

“But . . . but,” stammered Taverner as he sank gratefully back down, “how can it be that Your Majesty is here?”

“I dare say Lord Man-teo has wondered the same thing.” The Indian’s expression gave ample confirmation. “But I have waited until we could speak privately, for these are not the tidings you wish to hear. I have come seeking refuge.” The Queen took a deep breath. “You must

re-mem-ber that war with Spain was in the air even be-fore you de-part-ed Eng-land last year.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. The Scots queen was two months dead when we set sail. The air was full of ru-mors of the Ar-ma-da the King of Spain was prepar-ing. Just weeks be-fore our de-par-ture, Sir Fran-cis Drake had set out from Ply-mouth. Ev-ery-one said he was to at-tack the Ar-ma-da be-fore it could sail.”

“Aye!” The Queen's eyes flamed. “Drake sailed in-to Cadiz har-bor like the dar-ing cor-sair he was. As he him-self said af-ter-wards, he 'sing-ed the King of Spain's beard.'?” The fire in her eyes gut-tered out. “But it was all for naught. Drake de-layed the Ar-ma-da's sail-ing, but it sailed this year. And as God is my wit-ness, we would still have seen it off, if we'd had on-ly men to con-tend with! We were de-feat-ed not by men, but by un-nat-ural sor-cery.”

Tav-ern-er's face took on an even more un-healthy shade. “The Gray Monks?”

“Yes. Our fleet—Drake, Lord Howard, ev-ery-one—was con-sumed in St. Antony's fire. There was noth-ing left to pre-vent the Duke of Par-ma's forces from land-ing in Eng-land, and noth-ing in Eng-land could stop them.” The Queen mo-tioned Wals-ing-ham and Winslow for-ward. “My Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary per-suad-ed me that my du-ty to my peo-ple re-quired me to es-cape from Eng-land aboard cap-tain Winslow's ship. We came here be-cause my ad-vi-sor Dr. Dee be-lieves the Gray Monks are in search of some-thing among these is-lands—some-thing that may hold the key to their pow-er.”

“The Gray Monks,” Tav-ern-er re-peat-ed in tones of hor-ror. “Sor-cery. Yes. That would ex-plain what hap-pened here.”

“But what did hap-pen here?” de-mand-ed White. “Where are the oth-ers?”

“Yes,” Dee urged. “You must tell us ev-ery-thing.”

Tav-ern-er took a deep breath. “When you did not re-turn, Mas-ter White, we di-vid-ed. Most of the men went in-land, led by those of the As-sis-tants who didn't have wives and chil-dren de-pen-dent on them, to try to find the Chesa-peake Bay where we were meant to set-tle. God alone knows if they still live, and where they are if they do.”

“The 'As-sis-tants'?” Dee queried.

“Men ap-point-ed by Sir Wal-ter to as-sist me in gov-ern-ing the colony,” White ex-plain-ed im-pa-tient-ly. “Go on, Dick.”

“But on-ly able-bod-ied sin-gle men went with them. It was de-cid-ed that mar-ried cou-ples and their chil-dren should go to Croa-toan, where thanks to Man-teo we could hope to find friends, among whom we could seek shel-ter.”

“My daugh-ter Eleanor,” White said ea-ger-ly. “And her hus-band, and her in-fant daugh-ter Vir-ginia Dare.”

“Aye. And the oth-ers with chil-dren: eleven chil-dren and sev-en-teen wom-en in all. Al-so twen-ty-one of the men, hus-bands and cer-tain oth-ers—in-clud-ing me, for I had laid open my leg and it had grown in-flamed. As you see, it's nev-er healed. So I had to be car-ried in a lit-ter by some of Man-teo's men. We were march-ing in-land, to-ward this vil-lage, when we reached a clear-ing. No, not a clear-ing, re-al-ly—just an area of sec-ond-growth woods, much younger than what grew around it, as though it had been some-how cleared many years ago . . . but not by fire, for the out-lines of it were too reg-ular.

“All at once, my lit-ter bear-ers stopped. Man-teo said it was be-cause his peo-ple al-ways avoid that area—they say it's bad luck. While he ar-gued with them, the En-glish peo-ple kept on go-ing and . . . and . . .”

“Yes?” Wals-ing-ham prompt-ed. “Con-tin-ue.”

“You'll think me a liar, your lord-ship. Or mad.”

“Tell them, Richard,” said Man-teo. “I will vouch for you.”

Tav-ern-er swal-lowed. “As the peo-ple walked in-to that strange area, they be-gan to . . . to fade out. But on-ly for an in-stant, so short I would have missed it if I hadn't been watch-ing them. Then they were gone, with-out a trace!” Tav-ern-er looked from face to face with a plead-ing look. “As I am a Chris-tian, Your Majesty, I swear it's true.”

"It is true," said Man-teo solemnly. "And I too am a Christian. When I was a boy, old men claimed their grand-fathers had told them that something like a tremendous thunder-clap cleared out that area and then roared on south-west-ward. And ever since then, there have been stories of people disappearing there. But this is the first time that anyone has seen it happening."

"This must be it!" Dee's voice trembled with excitement. "Anything so monstrous can only be the work of the Gray Monks!"

"No doubt," said Walsingham with his usual calm thoughtfulness. "Or . . . could it be that this event of which the Indians' fore-fathers spoke was nothing less than the entry of the Gray Monks into the world? Remember, Florida is south-west-ward of here."

Dee stared at him, for not even his imagination had reached so far.

"But where did they enter from?" Winslow breathed. "Hell?" No one answered him.

"Well," said the Queen, shattering the silence, "I would see this uncanny place." And before anyone could react, she was sweeping out of the long-house. The others could only scramble after her.

"Your Majesty," Winslow called out to her back, "I can't allow you to endanger yourself this way!"

"Allow me?" she stopped and whirled around to face him with an abruptness that almost made him fall over backwards. Rage blazed in her eyes. "You may have authority over every one on your ship, Captain, but now we are ashore. You do not command here."

"But Your Majesty," wheezed Walsingham, catching up, "your life is too precious to—"

"By the blood of almighty God, am I the only one here who isn't an old woman?" The Queen turned from them contemptuously. "Lieu-tenant Fenton, you and your men will accompany me. Lord Man-teo, lead the way. The rest of you," she added witheringly, "may remain here if you choose." And she was off again.

Repressing an oath, Winslow gestured to his sailors. They fell in behind Fenton's soldiers, forming up around Walsingham, Dee and White. Shake-speare formed up with them, game-ly enough; someone had found him a boarding pike. Hopefully he knew the difference between stage fighting and the real thing. Winslow took his place in front with the Queen, Fenton and Man-teo as they left the village and plunged into the forest.

The area was as Taverner had described it, and Winslow felt his neck hairs prick-ly at the indefinable wrong-ness of it. Even the Queen was visibly taken aback for a moment. Then, shoulders back, she strode forward. The others could only follow.

Man-teo was the only one to hold back. His Christianity was too new to have wholly banished the older beliefs from his mind—all the more so inasmuch as he had seen confirmation of those beliefs with his own eyes less than a year ago. So he hesitated . . . and saw the English begin to fade from sight rapidly.

"Weroan-za Eliz-abeth!" he screamed, and in defiance of all the generations of his ancestors he gathered himself to spring forward.

But then the too-sharply defined space in the forest was empty. And Man-teo, all vestiges of Christianity vanished, fell to his knees and howled desolately.

Seven

Oddly enough, it never occurred to Winslow to think he was going mad.

Afterwards, when he had time to reflect, he decided that was because he knew this was something not even the maddest of human minds could have dredged up from its reservoir of fears and fantasies. Monsters and devils, perhaps. Perhaps even the sight of the world being consumed by fire or flood. But not the world fading away, losing its color and becoming blurred and color-less—except for his companions, who remained as before, in sharp contrast to the unnatural twilight world around them. Sounds were fading too, for Man-teo's cry seemed to come from a vast distance and then go out altogether.

Besides, it only lasted for less than a minute. Man-teo going to his knees was the last thing

Winslow saw. Then the world van-ished al-to-geth-er and there was . . . noth-ing.

Just that. Noth-ing. Not even black-ness. He was afloat in an in-de-scrib-able void which held on-ly the oth-ers who had ac-com-pa-nied him. And even they could not be seen. There was no word for the way in which he was con-scious of them, for it had noth-ing to do with the or-di-nary sens-es. Nor could he tell how close they were, for there was no such thing as dis-tance. Nev-er-the-less, in some way his lan-guage held no words for, he knew they were re-ced-ing from him, pass-ing be-yond his ken.

He screamed. He could not even hear him-self scream.

But then, he could not see him-self ei-ther. His con-scious-ness, his soul, was dis-em-bod-ied and adrift, all alone in noth-ing-ness.

He had nev-er thought Hell would be like this.

But then, in the same fash-ion as be-fore, he sensed that the oth-ers were reen-ter-ing his frame of ref-er-ence. Which, in turn, meant he had a frame of ref-er-ence again. The in-fi-nite empti-ness was ac-quir-ing a kind of tex-ture.

As abrupt-ly as it had van-ished, re-al-ity reap-peared, and his com-pan-ions were there in the same sharp con-tract of col-or and so-lid-ity against the dim gray world around them.

On-ly . . . it wasn't the same world.

Winslow could see that at once. This rolling land-scape was noth-ing like what had sur-round-ed them on Croa-toan Is-land be-fore it had fad-ed away. That was ob-vi-ous even be-fore re-al-ity firmed up and re-gained light and col-or and sound.

They stood on a hill-side in what looked like late-af-ter-noon sum-mer sun, over-look-ing a wide val-ley that stretched off to the hazy lim-its of vi-sion, a coun-try-side of many streams and lakes, with a scat-ter-ing of low pale-tint-ed struc-tures among fo-liage that more than half con-cealed them. Even at a dis-tance, there was some-thing pe-cu-liar about the trees. Winslow spied a flock of birds. They didn't look quite right ei-ther.

They all stood stock-still, star-ing about them and then star-ing at each oth-er in si-lence. No one screamed. What had hap-pened to them had been too quick, and too for-eign from all nor-mal ex-pe-ri-ence, for or-di-nary ter-ror or pan-ic. In a cor-ner of his mind where he could still be amused, Winslow not-ed that for once Shake-speare had noth-ing to say.

It came as no sur-prise to him that the Queen was the first to break the hush.

"Have we died, Doc-tor Dee?" she in-quired in a rock-steady voice.

The bru-tal-ly di-rect ques-tion brought the ma-gus out of shock. "I think not, Your Majesty. I see no choirs of an-gels, as one would ex-pect in Heav-en. And this land bears even less re-sem-blance to . . . the oth-er al-ter-na-tive."

"Then where are we?" the Queen de-mand-ed.

"And how were we trans-port-ed to this place?" added Wals-ing-ham, whose re-cov-ery of his men-tal equi-lib-ri-um was as un-sur-pris-ing to Winslow as the Queen's.

"The faërie lords have spir-it-ed us away by mag-ic!" came the qua-ver-ing Welsh-ac-cent-ed voice of one of Lieu-tenant Fen-ton's sol-diers. "We're un-der time-less Elf Hill!"

"Enough of that talk, Owain!" rasped Fen-ton.

"I fear, Lieu-tenant, that it holds as much or as lit-tle like-li-hood as any-thing else," said Shake-speare with a small, tremu-lous smile.

Winslow voiced a thought that had en-tered his mind from he knew not where. "Can this be where the Gray Monks came from? Per-haps we've en-tered their world in the same un-can-ny way they en-tered ours."

They all stared at him.

"It would ex-plain much . . ." Dee mut-tered to him-self.

"I see none of them about," ob-served Wals-ing-ham, ev-er the voice of re-al-ism.

"Well," said the Queen briskly, "lest they ar-rive, we should seek shel-ter. I be-lieve I see build-ings in yon-der val-ley. Per-haps we can even find the colonists who de-part-ed from Croa-toan as we did, or at least word of them."

“A mo-ment, Your Majesty.” Some-thing in Winslow's voice made even the Queen pause. He stood for a mo-ment, look-ing around him, com-mit-ting to mem-ory what this ridge-line and that copse of trees looked like from where he stood. He had gone on raids deep in-to Span-ish ter-ri-to-ry, and had learned to fix lo-ca-tions in his mind. Af-ter a few sec-onds he blinked, and turned to meet the Queen's quizzi-cal look.

“I know not by what mir-acle or sor-cery we came here, Your Majesty. But I beg you to re-call that it has hap-pened more than once on Croa-toan Is-land—at the same place. I won-der if this place where we have ap-peared holds the same di-vine or mag-ical po-ten-cy. If so, we may wish to re-turn to it.”

“In or-der to re-turn to Croa-toan, you mean,” Wals-ing-ham stat-ed rather than asked.

“I think it may well be so, Mr. Sec-re-tary. And, should it be-come nec-es-sary, I am con-fi-dent that I will know when I am here at—” he gave the Welsh sol-dier Owain a wink “—Elf Hill.”

The Queen smiled. “As good a name for it as any, Cap-tain. And now, let us pro-ceed.”

As they walked down in-to the val-ley, Winslow saw that he had not been mis-tak-en about the strangeness of the trees. None of them was like any he had ev-er seen in any land to which he had voy-aged. The leaves were a va-ri-ety of odd shapes, and their char-ac-ter-is-tic yel-low-ish-green col-or lent an au-tum-nal look to what felt like sum-mer. Many of them were hung with un-fa-mil-iar fruits which no one felt the urge to sam-ple.

As they de-scend-ed in-to the val-ley, they came among the build-ings. But there were no peo-ple as they had hoped. These struc-tures, built to the tenets of a strange, curv-ing ar-chi-tec-ture out of ma-te-ri-als Winslow could not iden-ti-fy, were long aban-doned and most-ly col-lapsed. In many cas-es, they had clear-ly been seared and smashed by ti-tan-ic forces of some kind. That had been a very long time ago, for the for-est had tak-en over the ru-ins. But this was a dif-fer-ent kind of for-est: trees of var-ious col-ors and shapes, blaz-ing flow-ers, feath-ery shrubs, an over-all look of di-verse ex-oti-cism.

It re-mind-ed Winslow of a gar-den left un-tend-ed for too long, al-owed to run ri-ot. And that, he de-cid-ed, was pre-cise-ly what it was. This had been a city un-like any he had ev-er known, with no dif-fer-en-ti-ation be-tween city and park-land. And af-ter the city had been dev-as-tat-ed, the ubiq-ui-tous gar-dens had over-spread their bounds, in-vad-ing the crum-bling build-ings.

“One thing at least I am now cer-tain of,” John Dee mur-mured, peer-ing at a huge vi-olet-and-virid-ian flow-er.

“Yes?” Winslow queried in the same hushed tone.

“I had thought we might have been spir-it-ed to some re-mote and un-known part of our own world, per-haps even be-yond Cathay. But this—” he made a vague ges-ture in-di-cat-ing the run-away veg-eta-tion “—is no part of cre-ation as we know it.”

They pro-ceed-ed in si-lence along the old thor-ough-fares, now cracked and weed-choked but still dis-cernible. The sol-diers and sailors, de-ployed around the Queen and the oth-er non-com-bat-ants, were tense-ly watch-ful. But the on-ly mo-tion they glimpsed was that of oc-ca-sion-al small, un-fa-mil-iar an-imals scur-ry-ing through the un-der-brush and dart-ing in-to cracks in walls.

It took a mo-ment be-fore Winslow re-al-ized that he was hear-ing a sound that was nei-ther the chit-ter-ing of the an-imals nor the cries of birds. It failed to reg-is-ter at first, for it was a kind of sound nei-ther he nor any of the oth-ers had ev-er heard—a low, buzzing hum like noth-ing in na-ture, and like noth-ing pro-duced by man. It took an-oth-er mo-ment be-fore he spot-ted the source of the sound, as the sun-light flashed on a dis-tant metal-lic craft that was sail-ing through the sky.

At first he could on-ly stare. One by one, the oth-ers fol-lowed his stare and, like him, were struck dumb by the man-ifest im-pos-si-bil-ity their eyes re-port-ed.

But then he saw that the fly-ing met-al boat had changed course and was head-ed in their

di-rec-tion.

“Run!” he cried, shak-ing off his paral-ysis.

“Take shel-ter in here!” urged Lieu-tenant Fen-ton, in-di-cat-ing a large burned-out build-ing across the way, its roof large-ly fall-en in. Winslow wasn't sure how much good that would do . . . but, on re-flec-tion, it was far from clear that run-ning would do any good ei-ther. He joined with Fen-ton in herd-ing ev-ery-one through the great build-ing's wide en-try-way and the gaps where its walls had crum-bled.

The sor-cer-ous fly-ing boat swooped in on them with soul-shak-ing ra-pid-ity, com-ing to a halt above the street and hov-er-ing by the same mag-ic that al-lowed it to fly (for it had no masts or sails). Then, its hum-ming sound ris-ing to a whine, it set-tled to the street in a cloud of dis-turbed dust. Its size now be-came ev-ident: per-haps six-ty feet long and twen-ty wide. It was in the form of an open-topped raft, so its oc-cu-pants al-so be-came vis-ible . . . and all at once the ter-ror aroused in Winslow and the oth-ers by the un-can-ny ves-sel it-self was as noth-ing.

“The Gray Monks!” gasped John Dee.

Winslow had nev-er met a mem-ber of the dread Or-der of St. Antony, but he had heard enough sto-ries to rec-og-nize the diminu-tive hair-less be-ings with the huge dark eyes. Yet these were not wear-ing the gray habits that had giv-en them their name. In-stead, they wore close-fit-ting gar-ments of some un-fa-mil-iar sil-very ma-te-ri-al, seem-ing-ly all one piece, from neck to toe. If they have toes, thought Winslow in a flash of supreme ir-rel-evance. As the raft set-tled to a halt and the whin-ing sound di-min-ish-ed and fell silent, sev-er-al of them hopped down on-to the street. The tubu-lar im-ple-ments they car-ried looked like no guns of Winslow's ex-pe-ri-ence, but they held them like guns as they de-ployed in a cres-cent fac-ing the ru-ined build-ing. Be-hind them, a larg-er ver-sion of those im-ple-ments was low-ered over the raft's gun-wale and set up on a three-legged base un-der the su-per-vi-sion of one of the odd-ly dressed Gray Monks. But the drably brown-clad pair who did the work, and who be-haved in the un-mis-tak-able man-ner of slaves, were . . . some-thing else.

They were no taller than the Gray Monks, stand-ing no more than four and a half feet, but size was their on-ly point of re-sem-blance. At first glance, they looked like minia-ture men, wiri-ly built, with long hair in shades of red-dish brown. But their arms and legs were longer than those of men—not ab-so-lute-ly, but in pro-por-tion to their bod-ies. And their beard-less faces—whose col-or was a lighter re-flec-tion of their hair's, as though the lat-ter's pig-ments had seeped in-to it—were of a strange cast: nar-row jaws, tilt-ed cheek-bones and eye-brows, and large point-ed ears.

The word elfin en-tered Winslow's mind even as he heard Owain stam-mer, “See, I told you!”

“Stand fast!” Fen-ton com-mand-ed his men. They formed a line in-side the barn-door-wide en-try-way and hur-ried-ly mea-sured prim-ing pow-der in-to the pans of their ar-que-bus-es. Then they clamped the slow-burn-ing match-es in-to the ser-pen-tines. The sailors flank-ing them gripped their as-sort-ment of weapons. Winslow—slow-ly, so as not to pre-cip-itate any-thing with an abrupt mo-tion—drew his blade. In keep-ing with his so-cial pre-ten-sions as a ship own-er, it was a gen-tle-man's backword: straight, bas-ket-hilt-ed, sin-gle-edged to give the blade enough weight and strength to chop bone.

One of the Gray Monks, with gold in-signia of some kind on the chest of his sil-very gar-ment, stood at the rail of what Winslow thought of as the craft's quar-ter-deck. He had al-ways heard that they spoke in a thin, whis-per-ing hiss that did not car-ry well. This one spoke in-to an im-ple-ment like a squat horn, which am-pli-fied his words. It didn't make them un-der-stand-able, how-ev-er, for they were in a lan-guage like none Winslow had ev-er heard in even the most cos-mopoli-tan sea-ports. But he knew a de-mand for sur-ren-der when he heard it.

“I won-der why they don't speak to us in Latin?” Dee sound-ed puz-zled.

“We'll try an-swer-ing them in that tongue,” said Wals-ing-ham, who pro-ceed-ed to do so.

The on-ly re-sult was that the Gray Monk in the or-na-ment-ed gar-ment, with an un-mis-tak-able ges-ture of ex-as-per-ation, gave an or-der to his sub-or-di-nates in an-oth-er,

even stranger-sounding language. They began a purposeful advance on the ruined building.

Winslow wasn't sure exactly what happened, for Fenton gave no order. Maybe a soldier's nerves snapped, or maybe a stray spark caused an accidental discharge. But an arquebus crashed out, and the rest of the soldiers, their nerves already stretched to the snapping point, fired a deafening volley. Heavy lead balls smashed into several of the approaching Gray Monks, who staggered backwards. But, even through the rotten egg-smelling cloud of smoke, it was clear that there had been no other effect. The strange silvery suits had a magical quality of invulnerability.

Then the Gray Monks began to return fire. But it was not gunfire as the Englishmen knew it. Winslow saw a line of crackling light from one of the strange weapons spear a soldier's chest, which emitted a burst of pink steam through the hole that had been burned in his armor, as though the blood and water of his body had been instantaneously superheated beyond the boiling point.

There was no time for thought. With a wild cry, Winslow sprang forward, and the sailors followed him. So did the soldiers, dropping their useless firearms and drawing their short swords. The Gray Monks' fire wavered, as though the sudden charge had caught them off balance. Winslow struck the weapon of one of them aside, recovered from the swing, and brought his backsword around in a slash across the Gray Monk's torso. The blade sliced through the silvery material, and a fluid that did not look like normal Christian blood spurted. As the Gray Monk collapsed, squalling, Winslow spent some very tiny fraction of a second wondering how his sword had done what arquebus balls had not. Was the potency of the suit's magic somehow related to the speed of that which struck it?

There was no time for further speculation as he charged into the melee. The Gray Monks were recovering from their surprise and bringing their magic weapons to bear. But at knifepoint they had little time to aim them. And the English were mad with sudden release. They had found themselves powerless in the grip of a situation they could not comprehend, with no useful way of striking back. Here, at last, was something they could understand.

Winslow saw Fenton leap past him and thrust his sword through a Gray Monk where the heart would have been on a man. There was none of the gush of blood that such a thrust should have occasioned, but it seemed to serve well enough as the Gray Monk sank to the ground. Their eyes met for an instant and Fenton flashed Winslow a grin as he sprang forward again . . .

And then they were face to face with the large weapon on the three-legged stand. And the Gray Monks had plenty of time to aim it.

Winslow saw it swinging toward Shakespeare, who was emerging from the fray with a bloody boarding pike.

With a cry, Fenton sprang forward, interposing himself, seeking that weapon's crew with his sword.

There was a dazzling flash, and Fenton's head and chest cavity simply exploded into a grayish-pink shower that sprayed Winslow's eyes.

But he could still see, blurry, as the weapon swung around and one of Heron's sailors ceased to be. And then another . . .

He stumbled to his knees under another shower of gore, and squeezed his eyes shut. This is the end, his innermost soul cried from the pits of despair. We cannot prevail. We were foolish to try. England is gone . . .

Then, penetrating to the depths to which his soul had sunk, came the sound of wild cries.

He opened his eyes. Warriors were leaping up behind the line of Gray Monks, attacking it from the rear with mad abandon. Warriors of two kinds. Some were of the elfin sort he had previously seen as slaves . . . but these were obviously anything but slaves. A few of them were armed with the same weapons as the Gray Monks, whose magic silvery garments evidently provided no protection against them. The rest carried a kind of two-handed slashing sword with which Winslow was unfamiliar, but which they wielded with obvious

skill. They cleared the Gray Monks away from the heavy weapon and wrestled the slaves of their own sort down, tying them with no more force than was necessary to overcome their strangely listless struggles.

But the other attackers were human—human and to all appearances Englishmen, even though they wore the same sort of odd tunic-and-trousers outfit as their allies, in the same range of earth tones, and were armed with the same combination of weapons, although their edged blades seemed designed to exploit human reach and strength.

But what Winslow mostly noticed about the new human rivals was that their leader was a woman.

She leapt into the Gray Monks' midst with a two-handed curved blade calculated to maximize the effect of its wielder's upper body strength. And she leapt with a twisting midair motion and a series of slashes he could not follow. Then she landed on her feet . . . and a Gray Monk to her right was clutching the blood-spurting stump of his right arm, while another Gray Monk to her left was sinking to his knees trying to hold in his spilling inhuman guts.

With the barest pause, she was in motion again with the same blinding speed, bringing her blade around in a wide, flashing figure-eight . . . and the two Gray Monks' heads were sliding down from their severed necks and falling to the dust before their lifeless bodies slumped down to join them.

For a moment Winslow simply stared, with a non-verbal thought that could only have been rendered as, What a woman!

But then he remembered that a battle was still in progress. He sprang to his feet and led a final charge. The Gray Monks still aboard the flying raft started to take it aloft. But the elflike beings aimed the heavy weapon they had captured at its underside, toward the stern. The sizzling tunnel of light that marked the weapon's passage stabbed forth, and with an internal explosion the vessel lost control and crashed into the foliage of the ruined city.

Winslow found himself face to face with the female leader of his new-found allies. She looked to be about nineteen or twenty, with a body that was fully female but whose liveness could only be the product of years of strenuous campaigning. Her hair was a very dark chestnut, pulled back into a thick braid lest it blind her eyes in combat. Her features, while regular, were too strongly marked for conventional prettiness, and her skin was unfashionably tanned. Her eyes, green with only the slightest flecks of hazel, met his boldly.

Unable to think of anything else to do, he smiled.

She smiled back . . . and, with the same incredible speed she had shown before, whipped out a throwing knife from her belt and hurled it at his head.

He didn't have time to blink, much less to duck. But as soon as he was aware it was happening, the knife had flashed past him, and the woman, still smiling, was indicating with a jerk of her chin that he should look behind him.

He turned around. A Gray Monk, who had been pointing a weapon at his back, was sagging to the ground. The knife hilt protruded from his left eye.

He turned back to the extraordinary young woman and spoke with no expectation of being understood. "It would seem you've saved my life."

"So it would seem," she answered dryly, with a nod.

His jaw dropped. "You speak English!"

"I am English! So are we all, who found ourselves here after coming through the wound the Grel-la ripped in creation at Croa-toan."

Out of the corner of his eye, Winslow saw John White stiffen.

"Then, my child," came the Queen's voice as she approached from the ruined building, "perhaps you know who I am."

Winslow fell to one knee, followed by others around him. The young woman stared with huge eyes. "The Queen? No, it can't be!" But she fell to her knees. "It must be true. You are as the elders described you. I was brought up on tales of England. Only . . . shouldn't you be older?"

And how can it be that you are here?"

"I am here seek-ing refuge. It's a long sto-ry."

"Then I fear it must wait. We can-not re-main here. We bare-ly have time to do what must be done." She in-di-cat-ed her fol-low-ers, who were me-thod-ical-ly splash-ing each of the dead Gray Monks with some flu-id and set-ting them afire, as though it was nec-es-sary that they be con-sumed and not mere-ly killed.

One of the small, wiry be-ings ran up to the young wom-an, and they con-versed for a mo-ment in what Winslow rec-og-nized as the lan-guage the Gray Monk had first used to hail them. Then she turned back to the Queen. "We have less time than I thought. The Grel-la are re-turn-ing."

"You used that word be-fore," Winslow said. "Do you mean . . . ?" He in-di-cat-ed the sil-ver-clad bod-ies around them, and she nod-ded.

"We know them as the Gray Monks," said Wals-ing-ham.

"So the el-ders have told us. But what-ev-er you call them, they're com-ing in greater force. And this time they won't land. They'll stay aloft and sear the area with fire, and drop burst-ing shells that turn the air to poi-son. We must take shel-ter with the Eilon-wë." She gave the Queen a be-seech-ing look. "Your Majesty, we must hur-ry."

"She is right," the Queen nod-ded. "Lead on, girl!"

They fol-lowed their new non-hu-man al-lies—the Eilon-wë, as they were ev-ident-ly called—through the over-grown ru-ins. The sun was low in the sky when they came to a low half-col-lapsed struc-ture so cov-ered with veg-eta-tion as to be al-most in-dis-tin-guish-able from a hill. A vine-shroud-ed en-try-way opened on-to a ramp that slant-ed un-der-ground. Two of the Eilon-wë pro-duced small torch-es that pro-duced light with-out fire—Winslow was rapid-ly grow-ing in-ured to mag-ic—and led the way down-ward.

Present-ly they came to an open space whose bound-aries were lost in the shad-ows. "We should be out of dan-ger now, and can pause for a rest," said the young fe-male war-rior, who didn't seem to need it—she wasn't even breath-ing hard.

"Then ex-plain some-thing to me, be-fore we ac-com-pa-ny you any fur-ther," said John White, step-ping in front of her. "You claim to be one of the En-glish set-tlers who went to Croa-toan. But I knew all of them. I know what ev-ery young wom-an in the colony looked like. And I don't rec-og-nize you. I don't rec-og-nize any of your com-pan-ions. Who are you?"

"First, an-swer this," said Dee in a voice that coun-te-nanced no de-nial. "You spoke of 'the el-ders.' What did you mean by that?"

"Why, our par-ents. The gen-er-ation who brought us, their chil-dren, in-to this world where we have fought the Grel-la for nine-teen years."

Sure-ly, thought Winslow, she must have meant some-thing else. I couldn't have heard that cor-rect-ly.

But Dee must have heard the same thing, for he was star-ing at her. "Nine-teen years? What lu-na-cy is this? The colonists dis-ap-peared from Croa-toan less than a sin-gle year ago!"

A stray mem-ory awoke in Winslow. "And didn't you say some-thing about how the Queen ought to look old-er? What did you mean by that?"

She nod-ded slow-ly. "So it's true af-ter all. The Eilon-wë must be right about the na-ture of time. We've had trou-ble be-liev-ing it, for seems like mad-ness. But it must be true. I my-self am liv-ing proof of it, for I was car-ried in-to this world as a babe in arms."

"Who are you?" White asked again, bare-ly above a whis-per, speak-ing like a man who must ask a ques-tion even though he fears the an-swer.

"Who am I? Why, sir, the Eilon-wë call me Alan-thru rael'Kho-ranie. But my En-glish name is Vir-ginia Dare."

Eight

"Why do you stare at me, sir?" Vir-ginia Dare fi-nal-ly asked, shat-ter-ing the si-lence.

John White fell to his knees, and a con-vul-sive shud-der ran through him. "Be-cause I last saw

Vir-ginia Dare on the twen-ty-sev-enth of Au-gust, 1587—on-ly a lit-tle over a year ago. She was nine days old. Her moth-er, Eleanor Dare, was stand-ing in the surf at Roanoke Is-land, wav-ing farewell to me as I de-part-ed for Eng-land, for she was my daugh-ter. She held my grand-daugh-ter up, giv-ing me a last glimpse to store in my mem-ory. And now you tell me you are she!” He buried his face in his hands. “God, God!” he moaned.

Vir-ginia Dare went to her knees fac-ing him, and took his hands in hers. “You are John White, my grand-fa-ther? All her life, Moth-er told me of you.”

White winced as though from a pain that was not un-ex-pect-ed but nonethe-less cru-el. “? 'All her life'? You mean . . . ?”

“Yes, she is dead,” said Vir-ginia Dare in the voice of one to whom death was a com-mon-place. It was a voice that ac-cord-ed ill with her youth. “So is my fa-ther Ana-nias Dare. They were killed by the Grel-la, al-though their bod-ies were nev-er found. Most of the el-ders are dead by now. We've had a hard life here, hunt-ed like an-imals. It's on-ly thanks to the Eilon-wë that any of us still live.” Her ex-pres-sion soft-ened, and a sad smile trem-bled in-to life. “If Moth-er was alive now, she'd be al-most as old as you!”

“But how can this be?” splut-tered Dee. “In-san-ity!”

“I tell you, we're un-der Elf Hill, where time stands still!” Owain's voice qua-vered.

“To the con-trary,” said Wals-ing-ham, who could no more stop his brain from ap-ply-ing log-ic than he could stop his lungs from breath-ing. “It would seem that time moves faster here, if Mis-tress Dare has lived nine-teen years, grow-ing in-to a young wom-an, while less than one year has passed for us.”

Owain looked be-wil-dered, and more than a lit-tle crest-fall-en.

“So,” Winslow ven-tured, “per-haps on-ly min-utes have passed in our world while we've been here.”

“Very good, Thomas,” Wals-ing-ham mur-mured ap-prov-ing-ly.

“But this is ab-surd!” stormed Dee. “Not even the Greeks ev-er in-dulged in such in-cred-ible spec-ula-tions! Nowhere in the writ-ings of the an-cients is there any-thing to sug-gest that—”

“Per-haps I can clar-ify mat-ters.”

The new voice si-lenced them all. Its En-glish held none of the re-pel-lant, ser-pent-like hiss that the Grel-la im-part-ed to hu-man lan-guages. In-deed, it had a not-un-pleas-ant mu-si-cal qual-ity. But it was not a hu-man voice.

More of the mag-ical fire-less torch-es were emerg-ing from the shad-ows, re-veal-ing a new group of Eilon-wë. At their head was one who, un-like all the oth-ers they had seen, was un-mis-tak-ably old. His hair was snow-white, and his brown face bore a net-work of fine wrin-kles which made it look even more alien. And his move-ments lacked the more-than-hu-man flu-id-ity of the oth-er Eilon-wë.

Vir-ginia Dare stood up and went to him, speak-ing ur-gent-ly in the Eilon-wë tongue. He gave a sil-very laugh. “Out of cour-tesy to our new ar-rivals of your na-tion, let us speak in En-glish, Alan-thru . . . I mean, Vir-ginia. And please in-tro-duce me.”

She turned, and spoke with a for-mal-ity be-yond her years. “Your Majesty, this is Ri-ahn tr'Aliel, the lead-er of the Eilon-wë of this re-gion. Al-most alone among his race, he has learned En-glish.”

“I have al-ways been fas-ci-nat-ed by lan-guages,” the el-der-ly Eilon-wë ex-plain-ed in his flu-ent but in-de-scrib-ably ac-cent-ed En-glish. “And your tongue posed a unique chal-lenge, be-ing to-tal-ly un-re-lat-ed to any I had ev-er en-coun-tered.”

Winslow sensed a stir-ring of in-ter-est—and fel-low-feel-ing—in Wals-ing-ham and Dee, each of whom could plau-si-bly claim to be Eng-land's fore-most liv-ing lin-guist. And in any com-pa-ny but theirs the Queen would have been con-sid-ered ex-tra-or-di-nar-ily mul-ti-lin-gual. Winslow him-self could bar-barous-ly mis-pro-nounce a num-ber of French phras-es, but the on-ly for-eign lan-guage in which he was re-al-ly con-ver-sant was Span-ish. It had its us-es in his line of work. Aca-dem-ic lan-guage mas-ters would have blanched at those us-es.

“But Vir-ginia,” Ri-ahn con-tin-ued, “did I un-der-stand you to say Your Majesty? Or did my lim-it-ed ex-pe-ri-ence of your lan-guage mis-lead me?”

“No, it did not,” said Wals-ing-ham be-fore Vir-ginia Dare could an-swer. His of-lice of Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary set-tled over him like an in-vis-ible cloak. “You are in the pres-ence of Eliz-abeth, by grace of God Queen of Eng-land, Wales, Ire-land and France, and De-fend-er of the Faith.”

“As lit-tle as I may look it at the mo-ment,” said the Queen with the ir-re-sistibly charm-ing smile she could bring to bear when she chose. “And I re-joice to greet a fel-low sovereign.”

“Oh, no, Your Majesty,” Ri-ahn de-murred. “I am no hered-itary monarch, such as Vir-ginia's par-ents and the oth-ers of the gen-er-ation that knew Eng-land de-scribed to me. I am . . . But it's all rather com-pli-cat-ed, and it's the least of the things I need to ex-plain to you. So let us hur-ry to a place where I can ex-plain them at leisure. It is night out-side, and this tun-nel emerges a good-ly dis-tance from the scene of your ear-li-er fight, where the Grel-la have con-verged.”

“And,” Winslow re-marked, know-ing he was pre-sum-ing be-yond his sta-tion, “we can't stay in here for-ev-er.”

The Queen's eyes met those of her Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary. Wals-ing-ham, af-ter the barest hes-ita-tion, nod-ded. The Queen turned back to Ri-ahn. “Very well, Sir Ri-ahn. You may lead the way.”

They con-tin-ued along the tun-nel for some dis-tance be-fore emerg-ing in-to a cloud-less night, un-der the stars and a three-quar-ter moon whose sil-very light made the over-grown ru-ins seem even more haunt-ed. The Eilon-wë led the way, flit-ting through the night with silent grace, with Ri-ahn at the head, for all his ev-ident years. It was as though they fled through Ar-ca-di-an groves in the com-pa-ny of elves.

Shake-speare must have felt it. As they ran, Winslow heard him mur-mur-ing with more than his usu-al in-ten-si-ty. “Over hill, over dale, through bush, through bri-ar, over park, over pale, through flood, through fire, I do wan-der ev-ery-where swifter than the moon's sphere.” He gave a more than usu-al-ly em-phat-ic and self-sat-is-fied nod.

Abrupt-ly, they ar-rived at the foot of a curv-ing, grace-ful sweep of what had been an im-pres-sive stair-way of cracked al-abaster-like white stone, lead-ing up to the moss-hung façade of what must have been a tru-ly mon-umen-tal ex-am-ple of the ar-chi-tec-tural style they had seen be-fore: el-lip-ti-cal roofs sup-port-ed on shal-low arch-es. All was crum-bling in-to ru-in now, but the moon-light and the en-croach-ing veg-eta-tion had worked a kind of mag-ic, trans-form-ing a derelict struc-ture in-to an en-charm-ed place of shad-ow and starlight.

Ap-pear-ances were de-ceiv-ing. Once they en-tered, it be-came ap-par-ent that the build-ing had been con-vert-ed to covert use, with drably func-tion-al par-ti-tions di-vid-ing its cav-ernous in-te-ri-or in-to rooms and cor-ri-dors, trans-formed in-to a kind of day by the Eilon-wë's fire-less light. Some of the sailors and sol-diers mut-tered un-easi-ly, but Vir-ginia Dare ob-vi-ous-ly took it in stride and they couldn't show fear be-fore a girl who had none.

The en-slaved Eilon-wë, still mov-ing with a strange lack of ei-ther co-op-er-ation or re-al re-sis-tance, were led away. The rest of them pro-ceed-ed to a large cen-tral cham-ber fur-nished with low ta-bles and couch-es, where peo-ple, Eilon-wë and hu-man alike, greet-ed Ri-ahn. John White stepped for-ward as though in a dream and con-front-ed a man who looked to be in his fifties.

“Am-brose Vic-cars? Is it tru-ly you?”

“Mas-ter White!” Vic-cars smiled in his gray beard, deep-en-ing the wrin-kles at the cor-ners of his eyes. “Yes, it's me. I'm one of the last of the el-ders left. Word was sent ahead that you had come here, and that Her Majesty is with you.” White con-firmed it, and Vic-cars went to one knee, while Winslow won-dered just how word had been “sent ahead.”

Vic-cars in-tro-duced a few oth-ers whom White knew . . . or had known, nine-teen of their years be-fore. “My own dear Eliz-abeth is long dead,” he said with the fa-tal-ism they'd pre-vi-ous-ly ob-served in Vir-ginia Dare. “She and our son Am-brose Ju-nior—you re-mem-ber

him, don't you?—were killed by the Grel-la.”

“I'm sor-ry,” said White, grasp-ing him by the shoul-der.

“We'd had two oth-er chil-dren since com-ing here. The old-er, a boy, is a fight-er now.”

“Aye,” Vir-ginia Dare in-ter-ject-ed. “He's avenged his moth-er and his old-er broth-er many times over, as I can tes-ti-fy.”

John Dee cleared his throat loud-ly. “Yes. Well, un-less my mem-ory is at fault, Ri-ahn, you promised an ex-pla-na-tion of cer-tain mat-ters. Like the fact that Mas-ter Vic-cars, and Mis-tress Dare, and all the oth-er En-glish among you have lived nine-teen years in a sin-gle year.”

It was as though Dee had bro-ken a dam. They had all been hold-ing their ques-tions in-side, for there were sim-ply too many ques-tions to deal with. But now they all came flood-ing out, and af-ter-wards Winslow could nev-er re-mem-ber who had asked which one.

“How did the colonists come to be here?”

“How did we come to be here?”

“How did the Gray Monks come in-to our world?”

“What are the Gray Monks?”

“What are you?”

“What is this place?”

“What . . . ?”

“How . . . ?”

“Why . . . ?”

Ri-ahn raised a si-lenc-ing hand. “I know this is all very dif-fi-cult for you. And it is dif-fi-cult for me to ex-plain in your lan-guage. First, let me ask you some-thing. How did your . . . jour-ney here seem?”

They all turned to Dee, who de-scribed the fad-ing-out of the land-scape of Croa-toan, the in-fi-nite void, the reap-pear-ance of the world—or, at any rate, of a world. By the time he was done, Vic-cars and the oth-er for-mer colonists were nod-ding.

“Yes,” said Ri-ahn with a nod of his own. “It con-firms our con-clu-sions about your race.” He took a deep breath. “You must un-der-stand that there are many worlds. I'm not speak-ing of the oth-er plan-ets of space—”

“The oth-er plan-ets?” Dee queried. “So you are say-ing that Coper-ni-cus is right af-ter all? That the Sun, not the Earth, is the cen-ter of the uni-verse, and the Earth is but one plan-et re-volv-ing around it?”

“Ah . . . that is a mat-ter which we must take up at an-oth-er time. I am speak-ing of worlds which do not lie else-where in space but which ex-ist par-al-lel to each oth-er, in more di-men-sions than the four we know—”

“Four? But Eu-clid clear-ly states that there are three.”

“Please! You must let me fin-ish with-out in-ter-rup-tions.”

“Pos-sess your soul in pa-tience, Dr. Dee,” com-mand-ed the Queen. “I would hear this out.”

“These par-al-lel re-al-ities, as we must call them,” Ri-ahn re-sumed, “are sim-ilar in many ways—es-pe-cial-ly in as-tro-nom-ical mat-ters. For ex-am-ple, you doubt-less no-ticed the moon tonight. It is the same size to which you are ac-cus-tomed, and takes as long to com-plete a rev-olu-tion around the Earth. You will find that the year is al-so the same. You may al-so have no-ticed that the con-stel-la-tions are fa-mil-iar. And you have sure-ly no-ticed that you weigh the same as ev-er.”

“Well of course—!” Dee be-gan be-fore re-mem-ber-ing the Queen's ban of si-lence.

“There are dif-fer-ences, how-ev-er. Ge-og-ra-phy, for ex-am-ple. You will see what I mean when I show you a map of this Earth. Like-wise, liv-ing things dif-fer—as, for ex-am-ple, the dif-fer-ences be-tween you and us, or be-tween both of us and the Grel-la. But the sin-gle most im-por-tant dif-fer-ence is that time pass-es at dif-fer-ent rates in dif-fer-ent re-al-ities. Of this, you have seen the proof.” Ri-ahn ges-tured at Vir-ginia Dare. “And,” he added hasti-ly as the Queen be-gan to open her mouth, “please do not ask me the why of any of this. We un-der-stand that no

more than you do. Perhaps the Grel-la un-der-stand it, for they have learned how to pass from one re-al-ity to an-oth-er.

“At cer-tain lo-ca-tions, the fab-ric of re-al-ity is in some man-ner weak. Long ago, the Grel-la, on what-ev-er world to which they are na-tive, dis-cov-ered that by a bru-tal-ly pow-er-ful ap-pli-ca-tion of en-er-gy at one of these points it is pos-si-ble to . . . burst through in-to an-oth-er re-al-ity.”

“We En-glish have good rea-son to know of their pow-ers of sor-cery,” the Queen nod-ded grim-ly.

“If I un-der-stand you cor-rect-ly, then you are wrong. This is not, uh, sor-cery, but rather an ap-pli-ca-tion of the . . . well, the me-chan-ic arts, in which the Grel-la are far more ad-vanced than we—which, if I may say so with-out giv-ing of-fense, means they are very far in ad-vance of you. As far as we know, they are the on-ly race ev-er to dis-cov-er how to . . . tear the fab-ric be-tween re-al-ities. Since mak-ing that dis-cov-ery, they have been spread-ing like a plague from one world to the next. Af-ter sub-ju-gat-ing a world, they use their arts to search it for an-oth-er of the 'weak points' of which I have spo-ken. Then they move on to dev-as-tate yet an-oth-er world.”

“As they have dev-as-tat-ed yours,” said Winslow qui-et-ly, re-call-ing what he had seen.

“In-deed.” Ri-ahn's equa-nim-ity was al-most chill-ing. “For thou-sands of years, we have lived as you see: fugi-tives lurk-ing among the crum-bling ru-ins of our own an-cient civ-iliza-tion, able at best to strike back oc-ca-sion-al-ly. But dur-ing that time, we have grad-ual-ly gained some of the knowl-edge of the Grel-la—such as what I am telling you now. One of the things we have learned is that al-most two thou-sand years ago, short-ly af-ter com-plet-ing their con-quest of our world, a Grel-la ex-plo-ration craft was lost—pre-sum-ably as a re-sult of find-ing one of the 'weak points,' forc-ing its way through it and, for some rea-son, be-ing un-able to re-turn. The Grel-la here in our world have nev-er found that point again.

“Then, nine-teen years ago, the En-glish in-ex-pli-ca-bly ap-peared here. They told us that your world has be-come af-flict-ed by the be-ings you call the 'Gray Monks.'?”

“The Grel-la!” Dee ex-claimed. “So that's it! This craft of theirs—a fly-ing craft like the one we have seen—emerged in-to our world at Croa-toan Is-land and suf-fered an ac-ci-dent, reach-ing the Span-ish lands to the south be-fore crash-ing. On-ly . . . you said this hap-pened two thou-sand years ago.”

“Two thou-sand years ago here,” Wals-ing-ham said sud-den-ly. He closed his eyes, and the turn-ing gears of his brain were al-most au-di-ble. “That would be about a cen-tu-ry ago in our world. In oth-er words, about a quar-ter-cen-tu-ry be-fore Ponce de León land-ed in Flori-da.”

“But what were they do-ing in Flori-da dur-ing that quar-ter-cen-tu-ry?” Winslow won-dered.

“Quite prob-ably they were dead,” Ri-ahn stat-ed mat-ter-of-fact-ly, then con-tin-ued in-to the stunned, un-com-pre-hend-ing si-lence. “They have . . . ma-chines that can con-trol the liv-ing body on a very ba-sic lev-el—a lev-el you do not yet sus-pect ex-ists, for it lies in the realm of the in-vis-ible. Among oth-er things, it en-ables them to take con-trol of the mind. The Spaniards must have some-how come un-der the con-trol of these ma-chines, then fol-lowed com-mands to re-store the Grel-la to a kind of life. That, too, can be done.” He stopped, sud-den-ly notic-ing the looks on his lis-ten-ers' faces.

“Now I know why their bod-ies had to be burned,” Winslow heard him-self say.

“No,” said Walsingham in a stran-gled voice. “Res-ur-rec-tion from the dead? Them? No!”

“But does it not ex-plain a great deal?” Ri-ahn asked gen-tly. “We have been giv-en to un-der-stand that the Grel-la have ex-tend-ed their in-flu-ence over your world by tak-ing con-trol of a pow-er-ful re-li-gious or-ga-ni-za-tion—”

“The church of Rome!” Wals-ing-ham spat. “What could be more nat-ural? It is the em-bod-iment of all that is cor-rupt—the Whore of Baby-lon! The Gray Monks found their nat-ural home there, in the cesspit of the Vat-ican!”

“I per-ceive that you are of a dif-fer-ent per-sua-sion,” said Ri-ahn ur-bane-ly. “And I would not pre-sume to dis-pute your as-sess-ment of that Church's pre-dis-po-si-tions, of which you are

in a bet-ter po-si-tion to know than I. But even so, the mind con-trol of which I speak must have ex-pe-dit-ed mat-ters. Al-so, we have heard tales that the Grel-la's Span-ish dis-cov-er-er thought he had dis-cov-ered the se-cret of re-newed youth . . . but in the end wished he hadn't."

"Ponce de León," Winslow breathed. They'd all heard the sto-ries.

"Af-ter en-slav-ing his mind, it would have been typ-ical of their sense of hu-mor to give him such a 're-ward.' For, as I have said, this re-newed life is not true life. It lacks a cer-tain in-de-fin-able essence—"

"The soul?" Dee's query sent a chill up the spines of all the hu-mans.

"We have learned that term from your com-pa-tri-ots. It will do as well as any oth-er. The same is even more true of the restora-tion of life to the al-ready-dead Grel-la in your world. In-deed, it is our be-lief that this has been per-formed, not once but many times, on all the Grel-la now ex-tant, leav-ing them the emp-ty abom-ina-tions they now are. They must have ceased to have off-spring ages ago."

"This mind-con-trol evil of which you speak," Winslow be-gan hes-itant-ly. "We saw slaves of your peo-ple serv-ing the Grel-la. Are they . . . ?"

"Yes. Their lot is worse than slav-ery as you un-der-stand the word, for they can-not even wish to rebel or dis-obey. And af-ter a time it cul-mi-nates in a par-tic-ular-ly ug-ly form of mad-ness. We have . . . heal-ing tech-niques to re-lease them from their men-tal bondage. Some-times it works and some-times it doesn't," Ri-ahn fin-ished fa-tal-is-ti-cal-ly.

"There's one thing you haven't ex-plained," said Dee stub-born-ly. "If the Grel-la must use their dev-il-ish arts to force their way through the bar-ri-er be-tween one 'al-ter-nate re-al-ity' and an-oth-er, how is it that we En-glish—first the colonists, and now us—sim-ply blun-dered through it?"

Ri-ahn opened his mouth to speak, but could not seem to find the words. Then, af-ter an-oth-er false start, he turned to one of the low ta-bles and took a sheet of pa-per and a kind of sty-lus. "I do not know if I can ex-plain this in your lan-guage. It is dif-fi-cult enough in my lan-guage. But let me try." He drew two cir-cles. "Imag-ine that these rep-re-sent your re-al-ity and ours, even though as I said be-fore we are deal-ing with many di-men-sions, while the sur-face of this pa-per has on-ly two." Dee nod-ded at the last part, as though Ri-ahn had fi-nal-ly said some-thing he could ful-ly un-der-stand and agree with. Ri-ahn, ig-nor-ing him, drew con-cen-tric dashed cir-cles around each of the sol-id ones. "The area be-tween the cir-cles is the ex-tradi-men-sion-al void through which the gap be-tween re-al-ities can be bridged. As I have ex-plained, this can on-ly be done at cer-tain points." He drew an X-mark on the perime-ter of each of the sol-id cir-cles. "At these points, the Grel-la can tear the fab-ric of re-al-ity and force their way through." He drew a bru-tal-ly sol-id line from one X-mark to the oth-er. "In so do-ing, they weak-en the 'fab-ric' at those points even more. Once they do so, you hu-mans—for rea-sons we can-not pre-tend to un-der-stand, for they in-volve some unique qual-ity of your race—can pass through as you have done, sim-ply by en-ter-ing the af-fect-ed area. First you en-ter a realm we call the 'Near Void.' " He in-di-cat-ed the zone im-me-di-ate-ly sur-round-ing the sol-id cir-cles, with-in the dashed cir-cles. "Here, judg-ing from your de-scrip-tions of your ex-pe-ri-ence, you can ob-serve the ma-te-ri-al world in a blurred, col-or-less way while be-ing your-selves in-vis-ible to its denizens. But then you pass on in-to the 'Deep Void,' where time and space are mean-ing-less."

"The in-fi-nite empti-ness in which we found our-selves adrift," Dee breathed.

"Pre-cise-ly. You are then drawn in-to the oth-er re-al-ity's Near Void, and fi-nal-ly in-to that re-al-ity it-self. This, as I say, seems to be a unique qual-ity of you hu-mans. At least the Grel-la seem to know noth-ing of it. Their 'brute force' ap-proach ev-ident-ly bursts di-rect-ly in-to the Deep Void. We have no ex-pla-na-tion for this dif-fer-ence."

"If they lack souls . . ." Dee looked up from a rever-ie and met Ri-ahn's eyes. "Can your peo-ple do this?"

"I can-not say, for we have nev-er had the op-por-tu-ni-ty to try."

"Why not? You could try at the same place where the En-glish first ap-peared."

“Ah, but we don't know where that is.”

Am-brose Vic-cars spoke up. “When we ar-rived here, we were dizzy with shock. It didn't help that it was night here at the time. Many of us thought we had died. Oth-ers thought we had en-tered a world of mad-ness. A cou-ple re-al-ly did go mad, and nev-er re-cov-ered. None of us were in any con-di-tion to think straight. So we sim-ply set out, try-ing to find Man-teo and his peo-ple, who, we thought, must some-how still be near-by. We blun-dered on and on be-fore en-coun-ter-ing the Eilon-wë. Af-ter that, of course, we had even more to get used to! And when we found out that the Gray Monks, as we knew the Grel-la, ruled this world . . . Well, what with one thing and an-oth-er, we lost sight of where the spot was. And we've nev-er had the leisure to try and find it.”

“I can find it,” Winslow stat-ed pos-itive-ly.

They all stared at him, with a great va-ri-ety of ex-pres-sions on their faces. In some cas-es, one ex-pres-sion fol-lowed an-oth-er across the same face.

“You mean,” Vic-cars fi-nal-ly man-aged, “that we can go home?”

“No.”

That voice stopped them all in the midst of their chaot-ic thoughts, for the Queen had lis-tened in in-tent si-lence for a long time. “No,” she re-peat-ed. “I doubt not your words, Sir Ri-ahn, nor do I doubt that you can do what you say, Cap-tain Winslow. But there is no home for us to re-turn to. I promised Mis-tress Dare the tale of why I am here. It is a heavy tale. The Ar-ma-da that was ru-mored when you left Eng-land, Mas-ter Vic-cars, fi-nal-ly sailed. The Gray Monks—the Grel-la, I should say—gave it a vic-to-ry it should nev-er have won. Eng-land is fall-en. Lon-don is ash-es. I fled to the New World be-cause Dr. Dee be-lieved that the se-cret of the Gray Monks' pow-ers was to be found there. Well, he was right. But I see no way for us to use that se-cret against them. Does any-one?” She stood up and looked around at each face in turn, fi-nal-ly turn-ing to Wals-ing-ham. “Well, my Moor?”

Wals-ing-ham shook his head slow-ly, then bowed it. Winslow had nev-er thought to see him look-ing so ut-ter-ly de-feat-ed. “We could go back to Croa-toan, Your Majesty, and stay with Man-teo's peo-ple. But it would on-ly be to await the ar-rival of the Spaniards and their Grel-la mas-ters, for they are com-ing in search of the way back to this world, from whence they can bring more of their fel-low to com-plete the sub-ju-gation of our world to their soul-less reign.”

No one else spoke, for the air of the cham-ber was too choked with word-less de-spair to hold sound.

Nine

Some-thing that was not re-al-ly a but-ter-fly flew past Winslow's field of vi-sion as he lay on the hill-side at the edge of the woods and gazed across the val-ley of the an-cient Eilon-wë city to-ward Elf Hill.

He still thought of it as that, and since he had start-ed us-ing the term all the hu-mans had come to adopt it. But this was the first time he had looked on it since their ini-tial emer-gence in-to this world. For a while af-ter that emer-gence, the Grel-la had been thick as fleas on a dog in the area where one of their pa-trols had been wiped out. Lat-er, there had been no time as they had adapt-ed to the fugi-tive ex-is-tence the Eilon-wë and their hu-man al-lies led among the tun-nels and the ru-ins. There had been too much to learn.

One of the things they had learned was that the Eilon-wë were di-vid-ed in-to a mul-ti-tude of sheuaths. (Na-tions? Tribes? Clans? Some-thing else?) They were unit-ed in their ha-tred of the Grel-la, but in noth-ing else. Ri-ahn led the sheuath in whose ter-ri-to-ry the por-tal to Croa-toan lay, though by what right he led them was not clear—it was not hered-itary monar-chy, cer-tain-ly. His sheuath had al-ways ad-vo-cat-ed ac-tive re-sis-tance to the Grel-la—a ten-den-cy that had be-come more pro-nounced since the En-glish had joined it—but it act-ed alone. Cer-tain oth-ers felt the path to sur-vival lay in pas-sive con-ceal-ment, avoid-ing the no-tice of the alien mas-ters as much as pos-si-ble, and even those fa-vor-ing ac-tive re-sis-tance had their own ideas as to how to

go about it. Such was the way of the Eilon-wë, and Winslow couldn't help think-ing it was a way that might have smoothed the Grel-la path-way to con-quest.

They had al-so learned that what had seemed to them the mag-ic of the Eilon-wë—flame-less torch-es, de-vices for send-ing voic-es wing-ing across great dis-tances to car-ry mes-sages in-stant-ly, and all the rest—did not re-al-ly in-volve the black arts. It was sim-ply what the Eilon-wë had man-aged to re-tain of the me-chan-ic arts their an-ces-tors had pos-sessed be-fore the com-ing of the Grel-la, and could now pro-duce in their small hid-den work-shops.

Ri-ahn had put it to them in the form of a rhetor-ical ques-tion: “Is an ar-que-bus or a com-pass mag-ical?”

“Of course not!” Dee had huffed.

“Ah, but your own fore-fa-thers would once have thought it so.”

Dee had looked blank, as had ev-ery-one else. Tech-no-log-ical change was an idea that had on-ly just be-gun to en-ter in-to their world. It was still so new that it had not yet had time to be-come a part of their men-tal uni-verse. Tools had al-ways changed so slow-ly that one didn't think of them as chang-ing at all. It seemed per-fect-ly nat-ural for artists to de-pict Alexan-der the Great wear-ing mod-ern ar-mor and us-ing ar-tillery. In the end, though, Dee had been the first to ac-cept the con-cept, and Winslow had come to ac-cept it too. But he had not yet tak-en the next log-ical step, for he could still not ap-ply the same rea-son-ing to the arts of the Grel-la. That, sure-ly, must be-long to the realm of the su-per-nat-ural!

The tools of the Eilon-wë, how-ev-er, could at least be thought of as tools, and he now held one of them in his hands. The two cylin-ders, each about six inch-es long, were con-nect-ed by a frame-work which al-lowed the dis-tance be-tween them to be ad-just-ed to fit the spac-ing of hu-man eyes. On his first try at look-ing through them, he had seen on-ly a blur. Then, as in-struct-ed, he had turned a tiny wheel be-tween the cylin-ders. All at once the world had come in-to fo-cus—far clos-er to him than it ought to have been, bring-ing a star-tled oath to his lips. He'd been as-sured that it was on-ly an ap-pli-ca-tion of the kind of mag-ni-fy-ing glass lens-es used in or-di-nary spec-ta-cles. Dee had coined the term “bi-oc-ulars” in lieu of the de-vice's un-pro-nounce-able Eilon-wë name.

Now Winslow raised it to his eyes and gazed across at the slope where he had first set eyes on this world. There was noth-ing out of the or-di-nary to be seen. But there wouldn't be, would there? he re-flect-ed. There had seemed noth-ing out of the or-di-nary on Croa-toan Is-land ei-ther.

“So it's there?” he heard from be-hind and to his right. It was the first thing he heard, as Vir-ginia Dare slith-ered sound-less-ly up be-side him in the tall grass just be-yond the tree-line.

“Yes. I can tell the gen-er-al lo-ca-tion from glimpses I had as we moved away from it. If I could ac-tu-al-ly get over there to that ridge, I could start look-ing for . . . well, the shape one ridge-line looks like when viewed at a cer-tain an-gle, with an-oth-er be-hind it. A pity that ridge is so open, with noth-ing in the way of con-ceal-ment.”

“But what good would it do us?” she asked in a voice that held the hurt of hav-ing had the ful-fill-ment of a child-hood hope held up be-fore her, on-ly to be in-stant-ly snatch-ed away. “If all we can do is go from one Grel-la-ruled world to an-oth-er—”

“They don't rule ours yet!” said Winslow, more harsh-ly than he'd in-tend-ed. “Eng-land may have fall-en, but it won't be con-quer-ed as long as En-glish-men are En-glish-men, and know the right-ful Queen es-caped and may still live. I'm not yet ready to be-lieve that there's noth-ing we can do. And if there is some-thing . . . well, we may yet have rea-son to be glad to have our abil-ity to pass through this por-tal opened by the Grel-la.”

“I won-der about that, Mis-tress Dare.” A rustling sound came from be-hind them as Shake-speare joined them. Winslow couldn't for the life of him re-mem-ber how the young ac-tor had pre-vailed up-on them to let him come along on this out-ing. He wasn't mov-ing through the un-der-growth with Vir-ginia Dare's noise-less-ness—Winslow feared he him-self prob-ably wasn't ei-ther—but he was mak-ing a sur-pris-ing-ly cred-it-able ef-fort. “Do the Grel-la re-al-ly have to tear their way through the veil be-tween the worlds be-fore we hu-mans can step through? Or is the

por-tal open to us any-way?”

“What?” She looked puz-zled that the ques-tion had even been asked. Ac-tu-al-ly, she had nev-er quite known what to make of Shake-speare. Winslow could sym-pa-thize. “So Ri-ahn has al-ways told us. And what dif-fer-ence does it make? The Grel-la have forced this world's por-tals open. So why do you ask?”

“Oh . . . I was just won-der-ing. I re-mem-ber what Ri-ahn said about the Near Void where we hu-mans linger for a short time be-fore pass-ing in-to the Deep Void. I can't help won-der-ing . . .” Shake-speare's eyes took on the far-away look Winslow had come to know. “Sup-pose that there are oth-er por-tals in our world, and that peo-ple can un-know-ing-ly walk through them, find-ing them-selves wan-der-ing in our world's Near Void, strand-ed there . . . doomed for a cer-tain time to walk the night.” He gave his quick fil-ing-away nod. “Might it not go far to-ward ex-plain-ing the sto-ries one hears of ghosts?”

Winslow and Vir-ginia Dare both stared at him for a mo-ment.

“But,” she fi-nal-ly broke the si-lence, “ac-cord-ing to Ri-ahn, peo-ple in the Near Void can-not be seen, as ghosts some-times can.”

“That does pose a prob-lem,” Shake-speare ad-mit-ted.

“I can see why you have as-pi-ra-tions to be a play-wright, Will,” Winslow ob-served dry-ly. “You have an ac-tive imag-ina-tion.”

“So I've some-times been told,” Shake-speare ac-knowl-edged with a sigh. “Not least by my wife.”

“But,” Winslow con-tin-ued, turn-ing to Vir-ginia Dare, “this rais-es a cou-ple of ques-tions about which I my-self have won-dered, Mis-tress Dare.”

“? 'Vir-ginia.' Un-less,” she added with what he thought to per-ceive as a twin-kle, “you'd pre-fer 'Alan-thru.'?”

“? 'Vir-ginia,' by all means. I'm En-GLISH, not Eilon-wë. And the name suits you.” He paused a mo-ment, watch-ing for a re-ac-tion—of which there was none, save for a brief eye con-tact—be-fore get-ting down to busi-ness. “You said, 'the Grel-la have forced this world's por-tals open.' When I think of it, it must be 'por-tals,' for they must have en-tered this world from some-where.”

“You're right. Thou-sands of years ago, they ap-peared at a place to the west of here, on-ly about thir-ty miles as we En-GLISH mea-sure dis-tance.” She wore the look of some-one con-sid-er-ing ques-tions that had nev-er oc-curred to her be-fore. “I don't know if there's any rea-son why the two por-tals should be so close to-gether. Ri-ahn has nev-er said any-thing about it. I'm sure he doesn't know. Maybe it's just an ac-ci-dent. Or maybe some-thing about these weak points in cre-ation caus-es them to come in-to ex-is-tence in the same area.”

“If so,” Winslow re-flect-ed, “then it must nar-row the area the Grel-la have to search, af-ter they en-ter a world, for the way in-to the next one. I can't un-der-stand why, in al-most two thou-sand years, the ones here have nev-er found the way to Cro-toan, which their fel-lows once found.”

“Ri-ahn says they have to be prac-ti-cal-ly on top of one of these points in space be-fore they can per-ceive it with their me-chan-ical de-vices. The ones who dis-cov-ered the way in-to our world prob-ably didn't want to share the se-cret with the oth-ers un-til they had forced the por-tal open and gone through. Per-haps this way they es-tab-lish own-er-ship of a world by right of dis-cov-ery.”

“A com-mon enough way of do-ing things,” Winslow nod-ded, re-call-ing the Spaniards' prac-tices in the In-dies. He al-so not-ed, with-out com-ment, her ref-er-ence to this world as our world. “The ones still here must have missed the ship, but they prob-ably as-sumed it had come to grief some-how.”

“As, in-deed, it had,” Shake-speare in-ter-ject-ed.

“But I don't un-der-stand. How can the Grel-la run an em-pire across many worlds, when time moves dif-fer-ent-ly in each?” Winslow strug-gled to ex-press his mean-ing. “How would it be if a

sol-dier was sent from Eng-land to the gar-risons in Ire-land, stayed a year, and came back to find that in Eng-land twen-ty years had passed in his ab-sence? His par-ents would be dead, his friends old, his chil-dren grown, his wife mar-ried to some-body else, and God knows what would have be-come of his prop-er-ty! Ev-ery-thing he had known would be gone. And what if it were two hun-dred years? His en-tire world would be gone!”

“The Grel-la don't think like us. Re-mem-ber what Ri-ahn said about them? He has ex-plain-ed it to us many times. They no longer have chil-dren; in-deed they've giv-en up the very abil-ity to do so, and are all the same sex—or lack of sex. All of them are walk-ing shells, re-an-imat-ed over and over by their arts. They work to-geth-er for mu-tu-al ad-van-tage, but they have no re-al at-tach-ments, no tra-di-tions, no fam-ilies, no friends, no God. Maybe they did in the past, but if so they no longer even re-mem-ber what it was like. All they have in com-mon is their con-tempt for the rest of cre-ation. Each of them is alone in the uni-verse.”

Both men stared at her, try-ing un-suc-cess-ful-ly to imag-ine such a hol-low, mean-ing-less ex-is-tence.

“Like-wise,” she con-tin-ued, “their me-chan-ical arts reached fi-nal-ity ages ago, and no longer change. They are no more able to cre-ate than they are able to love.”

“Per-haps the first abil-ity can-not ex-ist with-out the sec-ond,” Shake-speare mused.

Winslow shook him-self free of the chill that had touched his soul. “Well, be that as it may, there's some-thing else—some-thing Will's ques-tion start-ed me won-der-ing about.”

“What? But I ex-plain-ed that the on-ly two por-tals we know ex-ist in this world had al-ready been opened by the Grel-la.”

“Yes. And we know that hu-mans can pass through them. But once we do, and find our-selves in the Near Void, can we stay there?”

“But our par-ents, and now you, were on-ly there a few mo-ments be-fore pass-ing on in-to the Deep Void, to re-emerge—”

“Yes, yes. But they and we were caught by sur-prise, over-whelmed by strangeness. We could on-ly . . . let the cur-rent car-ry us. But how would it be if we walked through that place pur-pose-ly, know-ing what we were in for, and tried to linger in the Near Void? Could we do it? Could we will our-selves not to pass on?”

“I have no way of know-ing,” Vir-ginia Dare an-swered sim-ply.

“Of course you don't.” Winslow gazed hun-gri-ly across at the op-po-site hill-side. “I have to try it.” He turned to the oth-er two, and thought to see in their faces the same cu-ri-os-ity he felt, tem-pered by alarm or at least pru-dence. “Are you with me?”

“But you said it your-self,” Vir-ginia Dare re-mind-ed him. “There's no con-ceal-ment, ex-cept among the ru-ins. Once we emerged on-to the slope, we'd be ex-posed to the view of any Grel-la fly-er that hap-pened along.”

“Per-haps if we wait-ed un-til night-fall . . .” Shake-speare sug-gest-ed.

“I don't think I'd be able to find the ex-act lo-ca-tion in the dark. Be-sides, how of-ten do they fly over this area, now that the ex-cite-ment over our lit-tle en-counter with them has died down?”

“More of-ten than you might think,” Vir-ginia Dare cau-tioned. “Re-mem-ber, this is on-ly thir-ty miles from the por-tal that ad-mit-ted them to this world. They have a great fortress there, as you would ex-pect. The area around it hums with ac-tiv-ity.”

“But that's thir-ty miles away.” Winslow got up on-to one knee be-fore any-one could ar-gue fur-ther. “Come on!”

Vir-ginia Dare's eyes flashed with what Winslow in-ter-pret-ed as re-sent-ment at hav-ing her usu-al lead-er-ship role usurped. But Shake-speare, ac-cus-tomed to re-gard-ing Winslow as his cap-tain, fol-lowed. Rather than be left be-hind, she fol-lowed too. They slipped qui-et-ly along the edge of the woods, run-ning in a half-crouch just un-der the cov-er-ing fo-liage, then quick-ly de-scend-ed in-to the val-ley of the an-cient city.

At least, Winslow told him-self, they were dressed in-con-spic-uously. He and Shake-speare had donned the Eilon-wë-style but hu-man-pro-por-tioned gar-ments of the ex-colonists, in col-ors

de-signed to blend with those of na-ture. They had not brought any ranged weapons, be-cause cap-tured Grel-la weapons were too valu-able to risk and guns were use-less against the sil-very suits which mag-ical-ly (as Winslow stub-born-ly con-tin-ued to think of it) stiff-ened to steel-like hard-ness where they were struck by any ob-ject mov-ing above a cer-tain speed. But blades—even blades wield-ed by Vir-ginia Dare—were slow-er than that speed, and she had brought the beau-ti-ful-ly de-signed curved sword that seemed an ex-ten-sion of her-self. Winslow had stuck to his back-sword; it might lack el-egance, but he knew he could use it ef-fec-tive-ly. Shake-speare's usu-al board-ing pike would have been too awk-ward to car-ry on this ex-pe-di-tion, so he had brought a dag-ger which, he stub-born-ly in-sist-ed, an ac-tor had to learn to con-vinc-ing-ly use. Winslow on-ly hoped the Grel-la would be con-vinced.

They scam-bled down the slope and en-tered the haunt-ed precincts of the dead city, flit-ting through the long-over-grown ru-ins like ghosts among the ghosts. The thought of ghosts re-mind-ed Winslow of his rea-son for in-sist-ing on com-ing here, and go-ing on to the ex-posed slope be-yond: a less than half-formed idea, a bare glimpse of a pos-si-bil-ity that might be used.

It was a mis-take to dwell on it, for it caused his at-ten-tion to wan-der just be-fore they emerged in-to the an-cient court-yard, bare-ly dis-cernible as an un-nat-ural-ly reg-ular clear-ing in the for-est, and came face to face with a Grel-la pa-trol.

Fix-at-ed on the threat of the Grel-la fly-ers, they had for-got-ten that the aliens might be step-ping out of char-ac-ter and pa-trolling the re-gion of the re-cent un-pleas-ant-ness on foot. So Winslow was caught flat-foot-ed when he saw the small aliens in the sil-very one-piece gar-ments, car-ry-ing the tubu-lar weapons he re-mem-bered. The one clos-est to him—very close in-deed—be-gan to raise that weapon be-fore he could re-act.

Vir-ginia Dare sprang past him, bring-ing her curved sword around and down in the kind of blind-ing move-ment he re-called. He blinked, and there-fore missed most of it. But then she had re-cov-ered and was again in fight-ing stance . . . and at ap-pre-cia-bly the same in-stant, what-ev-er the Grel-la used for blood shot out in a gush-ing jet from a slashed-open tor-so.

But that in-stant had been enough for the oth-er Grel-la, fur-ther back, to raise their own weapons and fire them. Winslow bare-ly had time to know him-self a dead man.

But he wasn't. That might have been bet-ter.

Thomas Winslow was as fa-mil-iar with pain, in its var-ious forms, as any oth-er sea dog. He knew what bone-jar-ring blows and slash-ing cuts felt like, and had long since tak-en their mea-sure. But the var-ious ways the flesh could be bruised or bro-ken were nat-ural. This was some-thing else. It hurt in a way for which En-glish held no word. He did not be-lieve any oth-er lan-guage of his world did ei-ther.

Where the weapon's faint beam of light touched him, it was a blis-ter-ing burn. That, at least, he had felt be-fore. But then his mus-cles knot-ted and his lungs and his heart seized up night-mar-ish-ly, ceas-ing to do their du-ty of pump-ing air and blood.

In the midst of his agony, what Ri-ahn had told them flashed through his mind. The hand weapons of the Grel-la used mere light, but some-how di-rect-ed it all in one di-rec-tion, rather than spread-ing out to fill a space as the light from a can-dle or a lamp or a torch nor-mal-ly did. It had made no sense what-ev-er to Winslow, but he had to ac-cept the ev-idence of his eyes, and he had seen men's chests pierced and burst open by a pale line of light, and their bod-ies ex-plod-ed in-to pink mist by larg-er weapons of the same kind.

But Ri-ahn had al-so told them that those weapons could be set in a dif-fer-ent way, so that a weak-er beam of one-way light—too weak to kill or even in-flict more than a small blis-ter—car-ried with it a charge of . . . Ri-ahn's En-glish vo-cab-ulary had failed him. But what-ev-er it was, it was what caused light-ning to flash, and al-so caused what-ev-er car-ried the com-mands of the hu-man brain to the mus-cles of the body to turn traitor, and shock that body in-to un-con-scious-ness.

All this ran through Winslow's mind in less than a sec-ond. Be-fore he mer-ci-ful-ly lost con-scious-ness, he had time for one fi-nal thought. The Grel-la had set their weapons to stun their

vic-tims rather than kill them. They want-ed him and his com-pan-ions alive. They would live . . . for the time be-ing.

Ten

Winslow was fa-mil-iar with the way his arm felt af-ter he had banged his el-bow against a hard sur-face at ex-act-ly the wrong an-gle.

His whole body felt that way as he strug-gled un-en-thu-si-as-ti-cal-ly back in-to con-scious-ness. His lungs and his heart were func-tion-ing again, but the vol-un-tary mus-cles of his limbs were still un-der-go-ing fee-ble spasms.

But he didn't even no-tice any of that. What he no-ticed, be-fore open-ing his eyes, was that he was sus-pend-ed, hang-ing in some kind of bonds that held his limbs im-mo-bi-lized, and that a stiff wind was blow-ing.

Then he opened his eyes . . . and cried out in a kind of pan-ic he had nev-er felt be-fore.

The val-ley floor was at least hun-dreds of feet be-low him, and noth-ing was keep-ing him from falling all that dis-tance but a line from the bot-tom of a Grel-la fly-er. That fly-er must have been full, for the Grel-la had trussed up him and Shake-speare and Vir-ginia Dare like bun-dles and hung them from the gun-wales of that mag-ical boat. And now he was fly-ing. Fly-ing!

He must not have been un-con-scious for very long, for the val-ley was still be-low them. He looked around at his com-pan-ions. Shake-speare was still dead to the world, but Vir-ginia Dare, hang-ing be-side him, was al-ready con-scious. She looked alarmed, but not pan-ic-strick-en; pre-sum-ably the idea of fly-ing was not nov-el to her, even if she'd nev-er ac-tu-al-ly done it. The im-pos-si-bil-ity of show-ing fear be-fore a wom-an stead-ied Winslow, and he looked down-ward with on-ly a slight queasi-ness.

They were fly-ing in-to the late-af-ter-noon sun, and be-neath them the an-cient ru-ins fell be-hind. Af-ter a while Shake-speare re-gained con-scious-ness, and stared be-low with a won-der that over-pow-ered fear and even nau-sea. Present-ly the fly-er turned to star-board to fol-low a bend in the val-ley. Ahead, Winslow glimpsed what had to be the Grel-la fortress.

He knew he had no right to be sur-prised at what the Grel-la could do—not now, af-ter what had hap-pened to Eng-land and af-ter all he had seen here. But know-ing that was one thing. What loomed up ahead was some-thing else.

The first thing he saw was a met-al arch that, at this dis-tance, seemed to be of cob-web fragili-ty—al-though an in-stant's thought told him that in re-al-ity it must be of in-cred-ible ton-nage, giv-en the man-ifest-ly im-pos-si-ble di-am-eter it en-closed. As they ap-proached more close-ly, that mas-sive-ness be-came more ap-par-ent—as did the fact that it wasn't re-al-ly an arch, but rather a three-quar-ter cir-cle with its base in the ground. The thought came to him that it must be the por-tal through which the Grel-la had en-tered this world, out-lined in this way for rea-sons of their own . . . to make it eas-ier to find, per-haps, or to make it more read-ily use-able in some oth-er way about which he could not even spec-ulate.

Then his eyes be-gan to take in what lay around the base of that in-cred-ible arch—the fortress, as Vir-ginia Dare had called it, al-though it was more like a city. The clos-er they got, the more its scale was forced on his in-cred-ulous mind. So was the fact that its build-ings were all of seam-less met-al, or what ap-peared to be seam-less met-al, like im-pos-si-bly large cast-ings. On-ly they were too smooth even for that. Had it not been to-tal-ly in-sane, Winslow would have thought the fan-tas-tic struc-tures he was see-ing had been grown in met-al.

And in the midst of all the mind-numb-ing, awe-in-spir-ing strangeness, dwarf-ing all the rest, there rose a dark-ly gleam-ing dome, linked to a ring of out-build-ings by soar-ing arch-es not un-like the fly-ing but-tress-es of a Goth-ic cathe-dral. Their fly-er pro-ceed-ed on, past an out-er ring of what Winslow could rec-og-nize as gun em-place-ments even though the guns were of a sort be-yond his ken. As they drew clos-er, that sin-is-ter dome grew and grew, its size and com-plex-ity be-com-ing ev-er more ap-par-ent, and the sense of time-less evil that suf-fused it be-com-ing ev-er more hor-ri-fy-ing.

A feel-ing Winslow had nev-er ex-pe-ri-enced be-gan to close over him. So this is what de-spair feels like, jibed a tiny voice with-in him.

The base of the dome was ter-raced, with ma-chines of unguess-able func-tion al-ter-nat-ing with wide open-ings flanked by ob-vi-ous weapons. The fly-er float-ed through one of those open-ings, and Winslow in-vol-un-tar-ily closed his eyes, cer-tain he was go-ing to smash in-to the low-er frame. But the three dan-gling hu-man fig-ures bare-ly cleared it as they swept on through in-to the dome. They gazed about.

They were in an in-te-ri-or too vast for a word like cav-ernous. It was too vast to be in-doors, and the mind-numb-ing com-plex-ity of what lay be-low them con-tribut-ed to the im-pres-sion that this was an en-closed city with-in a city rather than a build-ing. The fly-er swooped down to-ward that labyrinthine maze, with a speed that caused Winslow's eyes to squeeze shut again. But then it slowed to a halt and hov-ered. At some au-to-mat-ic sig-nal, the ca-bles hold-ing them were re-leased, and they were un-cer-emo-ni-ous-ly dumped in-to a kind of cul-de-sac, en-closed by fea-ture-less met-al walls on three sides and open to the un-nat-ural light pan-els that glowed from the dome's in-te-ri-or sur-face far above.

The fly-er de-part-ed, its high-pitched hum ris-ing to a whine, and they were left alone, groan-ing with the pain of their fall to the hard floor. At least, Winslow sat-is-fied him-self, noth-ing was bro-ken. The same seemed true of his com-pan-ions, for they seemed able to move nor-mal-ly.

Vir-ginia Dare's dis-po-si-tion was an-oth-er mat-ter. She glared at him bale-ful-ly. "You just had to try to reach that ridge in broad day-light, didn't you?"

"No-body forced you to come!" Winslow re-tort-ed. His as-per-ity was par-tial-ly born of his guilty knowl-edge that she had a point. But even worse was the sheer op-pres-sive-ness of this un-nat-ural place, cre-at-ed en-tire-ly by the Grel-la and ut-ter-ly alien to any-thing wrought by God or man. He looked around at the three walled-in sides of their en-clo-sure, which were too high and smooth to even con-sid-er climb-ing. Then he con-sid-ered the wide-open fourth side.

Shake-speare read his thoughts. "Ah . . . Cap-tain, even if they mean to leave us free to sim-ply walk from here, I doubt if even your skill at nav-iga-tion could find our way out of this place."

"Still, any-thing would be bet-ter than squat-ting here and await-ing their plea-sure!" Winslow strode for-ward.

"No! Don't!" Vir-ginia Dare cried ur-gent-ly. Winslow ig-nored her and con-tin-ued his ad-vance.

It wasn't as bad as the weapon that had stunned them, for he didn't lose con-scious-ness. But he cried out from the same burn-ing pain, and his mus-cles con-tract-ed and his heart skipped a beat as be-fore. Sparks flew un-til he fell to the floor, twitch-ing, and lost con-tact with that in-vis-ible wall.

With a sigh whose the-atri-cal-ity Shake-speare must have en-vied, Vir-ginia Dare rolled her eyes heav-en-ward as though ask-ing God to give her strength. Winslow slow-ly got to his feet, care-ful-ly avoid-ing her look. He glared up at the vast con-vex roof that shut out the sky, and the light pan-els that served in place of the sun. A fly-er passed over-head, in-sult-ing-ly in-dif-fer-ent to them. The on-ly sound was a dis-tant mur-mur of un-fa-mil-iar ma-chine nois-es. "Why have they left us here, ig-nor-ing us?" he de-mand-ed of no one in par-tic-ular. "They must be try-ing to break our spir-it."

"Not with-out suc-cess, at least in my case," Shake-speare mut-tered. He slumped down and sat in si-lence with his back to a wall. Af-ter a mo-ment, Winslow fol-lowed suit, see-ing noth-ing bet-ter to do and not wish-ing to voice the chill-ing thought that had sud-den-ly en-tered his mind: the mem-ory of those Eilon-wë slaves, mind-shack-led be-yond any or-di-nary con-cep-tion of slav-ery. He won-dered if the oth-er two were think-ing that was what lay in their own fu-ture, and if that was why no one spoke.

Time be-gan to lose its mean-ing as they sat un-der those un-chang-ing ar-ti-fi-cial lights, tor-ment-ed by dis-com-fort and anx-iety . . . and, in-creas-ing-ly, by hunger and thirst. Fi-nal-ly,

Winslow got stiffly to his feet and swallowed to lubricate his dry throat. “Hal-lo!” he cried out hoarsely. “Is anybody here?”

“For God’s sake, be quiet!” hissed Virginia Dare. “Haven’t you done enough already?”

“What the Devil have we got to lose?” Winslow took a deep breath and let out a bel-low that could have been heard above a sea storm. “Bring us food and water, damn you!”

There was no response. Winslow, in a mood of sheer stubbornness, remained standing, hands on hips.

He was close to giving up and sinking back to the floor when three Grel-la finally appeared. While two of them stood with leveled weapons, the third did something with a small object in his hand. Then he spoke a few obviously inexperienced syllables in the Eilon-wë tongue, and beckoned to them to come.

“Is he crazy?” Winslow growled. “Or does he think we are?”

“He’s caused the barrier to vanish,” said Virginia Dare listlessly. She stood up and walked from the cul-de-sac unharmed. After a moment, Winslow and Shakespeare followed, the former with a hesitancy born of remembered pain.

They were conducted through oddly angled walkways and courts to a large central structure. The interior held the typically Grel-la lack of anything humans could recognize as ornamentation, but there was an unmistakable richness to the surfaces, and a spaciousness out of proportion to the building’s diminutive masters. All of this was especially evident in the octagonal chamber to which their guards led them. Behind a long, low, gleaming-topped table, half a dozen Grel-la shared a couch rather than sitting on the individual chairs humans would have favored. They wore the usual silvery garments, but with complex gold chest insignia. The one with the most elaborate such insignia spoke. “I am Sett 44, Rank Orbassin 27.” An instant passed before Winslow realized that the loathsome, sibilant voice had spoken in English. Virginia Dare wore a look of stark astonishment.

“We learned your language from individuals of your species whom we captured,” came the hissing answer to their unspoken question. No mention was made of how the knowledge had been extracted, and Winslow decided he didn’t really want to know. “I took the trouble to learn it because your species has recently become of more than usual interest.” He paused, as though inviting comment. Virginia Dare merely glared in silence, and Shakespeare managed to restrain his usual loquacity. Winslow followed suit, and as he waited he had a moment to wonder why he continued to think of this sexless thing as he. Perhaps it was the fact that he had known them as monks in his own world. And there was certainly nothing suggestive of the feminine about them. Actually, there was nothing masculine about them either. But he found it impossible to think of something that talked as it.

“It is obvious,” Sett 44 resumed, “that you human animals are not native to this world. That has been clear enough ever since you first appeared nineteen years ago. And you were first observed in the same general area where very old records indicate that a research vessel disappeared two thousand years ago. This led certain of my colleagues to theorize a connection between the two. I was a skeptic at the time. But since then, rigorous interrogation of the same captives from whom we learned your language has provided confirmation. They spoke in disjointed, meaningless terms of a transition from a different world, where your species lives in an appropriate primitive state. Furthermore, in that world they knew from hearsay of beings who resembled us, and who evidently were in the process of using their superior intelligence to secure control through the local tribal cult.”

Winslow felt himself flush at hearing Christians—even papists—so referred to. But he held himself in check.

“Naturally, the animals in question died under interrogation,” Sett 44 continued unfeelingly. “We brought them back to life . . . in fact we did so several times. But the rejuvenation process has odd effects on your species’ rudimentary brains.” A chill went through Winslow as he recalled the stories about old Juan Ponce de León. “Those effects

proved to be cu-mu-la-tive, with re-peat-ed re-ju-ve-na-tions. In the end, the cap-tives were use-less and we dis-card-ed their mind-less husks, which went to sup-ple-ment the or-gan-ic mat-ter from which our ar-ti-fi-cial food is gen-er-at-ed. By then they could do lit-tle but re-peat their names: Ana-nias and Eleanor Dare.”

It took some very small frac-tion of a sec-ond for the names to reg-is-ter on Winslow. At the in-stant they did, he turned to Vir-ginia Dare, know-ing what was go-ing to hap-pen and know-ing that he had to pre-vent it.

He was too late. With a scream that raised his neck hairs, she sprang for-ward be-fore he could grab her, and be-fore the Grel-la guards could re-act. She was halfway over the ta-ble be-fore a guard at the ta-ble's end raised his weapon. Too quick-ly for sight, she grasped the weapon by its muz-zle and jerked it to-ward her, pulling it from the guard's grasp and throw-ing him off bal-ance. Then she re-vers-ed the mo-tion and punched the butt stock in-to his face with a crunch of what-ev-er passed among the Grel-la for bone and car-ti-lage. Then, with-out a pause, she threw away the weapon, grasp-ing with her usu-al quick-ness that its ef-fec-tive-ness at such short range was too lim-it-ed to jus-ti-fy the pause it would have tak-en her to bring it in-to ac-tion. In-stead, she cleared the ta-ble with a leap and grasped the throat of a Grell who tried to in-ter-pose him-self be-tween her and Sett 44.

But by then the guards had re-cov-ered. Two of them lev-eled their weapons at Winslow and Shake-speare while the oth-ers' beams struck Vir-ginia Dare. At least the weapons were still set to shock. Her back arched con-vul-sive-ly and she cried out once be-fore col-laps-ing. Even in un-con-scious-ness, her hands had to be pried from the throat of the Grell, whose wheez-ing, gag-ging, rat-ting sounds were like the peal-ing of church bells to Winslow's soul. That Grell was led away, as was the guard with the smashed face. Oth-er guards car-ried Vir-ginia Dare off in re-sponse to a se-ries of in-com-pre-hen-si-ble or-ders from Sett 44, who then turned his huge, emp-ty, dark eyes back to the two men.

“The fault is mine. The fe-male breed-er who is the war lead-er of the hu-man an-imals is no-to-ri-ous. I should have rec-og-nized her, and an-tic-ipat-ed this sort of be-hav-ior.” At the word breed-er, the usu-al Grel-la emo-tion-less-ness seemed to wa-ver, and Winslow could sense Sett 44's dis-gust-ed con-tempt. “Cap-tur-ing her is a great coup. She should yield valu-able in-for-ma-tion on the fer-al Eilon-wë and their hu-man al-lies be-fore her mind is de-stroyed and she goes in-to the or-gan-ic-mat-ter vats. But at the mo-ment, I am more in-ter-est-ed in the re-cent loss of one of our pa-trols in the an-cient city, un-der cir-cum-stances which seem to sug-gest the ar-rival of still more hu-mans. This sug-gests a . . . per-me-abil-ity in the bar-ri-er be-tween the hu-man world and this one, of a sort for which there is no prece-dent. If you vol-un-tar-ily give me use-ful in-for-ma-tion, you will mere-ly be en-slaved. I of-fer you this op-tion be-cause, as you have per-haps gath-ered, the more dras-tic forms of in-ter-ro-ga-tion might ren-der you use-less pre-ma-ture-ly.”

Winslow forced his bat-tered mind to con-cen-trate on the im-pli-ca-tions of what he had just heard. The Grel-la—or, at least, Sett 44—had more knowl-edge, and more in-fer-ences from that knowl-edge, than any-one had cred-it-ed them with. But there were still a great many things they didn't know. In par-tic-ular, they were com-plete-ly in the dark about the way in which hu-mans—prim-itive an-imals in their eyes—tra-vers-ed the bar-ri-er be-tween the uni-vers-es. In fact, Sett 44's choice of En-glish words sug-gest-ed that they didn't re-al-ly un-der-stand it at all; they thought of it as a bar-ri-er, to be smashed through by ex-trav-agant ap-plic-a-tion of phys-ical en-er-gies at cer-tain weak points. Noth-ing he had heard sug-gest-ed that they were aware of the na-ture of the “Near Void” and the “Deep Void” as Ri-ahn had ex-plain-ed it. At some point, ages in the past, they had by ac-ci-dent dis-cov-ered their brute force way of burst-ing in-to the Deep Void and au-to-mat-ical-ly burst-ing out of it at the near-est weak point in the near-est uni-verse. And in all the mil-len-nia since then, in ac-cor-dance with what Ri-ahn had said about their lack of cre-ativ-ity, they had con-tin-ued to make use of that lucky ac-ci-dent with-out even con-sid-er-ing the pos-si-bil-ity of rea-son-ing from it and de-duc-ing what made it work.

For the first time, Winslow began to truly appreciate what the Grel-la had lost.

Which didn't happen to help him at the moment.

But perhaps it can. Perhaps it gives me something I can use. God knows I've used the Dons' blind arrogance against them often enough. Maybe I can do the same here.

"Yes, Lord!" he blurted. He saw Shake-speare's shocked look out of the corner of his eye, and in the guise of waving his arms gave the young actor a surreptitious jab in the ribs. "Yes, we can be useful! You are, of course, correct: we humans, for reasons beyond our powers of understanding, can somehow pass between the worlds. But it can only be done at those 'weak points' in the universal fabric where the Grel-la have applied their mighty powers, born of their superior wisdom." Winslow wondered if he might be laying it on too thick. But he saw no flicker of suspicion in Sett 44's bottomless eyes. The Grel-la were impervious to irony.

Sett 44 leaned forward greedily. "Can you show us where this place is?"

"Perhaps, Lord, the two of us together can. But," he added firmly, "only with the help of the woman . . . that is, the female breeder. She has indispensable knowledge. She must be kept alive at all costs."

"Very well. Water, and fodder suitable for your species, will be supplied. She should be fully recovered by morning. We will put your claims to the test then." Sett 44 gestured to the guards, and they were led back to their pen, as Winslow now thought of it. A large pail of water was there, as was another pail containing a tasteless gruel that Winslow and Shake-speare were too hungry to reject. Virginia Dare was also there, slowly returning to consciousness.

Winslow took her by the shoulders and shook her awake. For a blessed instant, her face wore a look of innocent blankness—before the recollection of what she now knew crashed visibly down. Winslow couldn't let it send her into either despair or berserk rage. He spoke quickly.

"Virginia, listen carefully," he whispered, lest the Grel-la have devices that could listen to their conversations from afar—although he doubted that they would be using such devices if they did have them, any more than humans would have used them to listen to the lowing of cattle. "Listen carefully, and don't reveal any reaction. I've told the Grel-la that I can find the portal."

Her disoriented eyes cleared, and their emptiness was instantly filled—with fury. "You what?" she gasped. "You damned traitor—!" And she reached for his throat.

Winslow had known exactly what to expect. So, in spite of her remarkable quickness, his hands were there a small fraction of a second before hers, gripping her wrists and twisting her body around so that he was grappling her from behind. It took all his strength to contain her twisting, writhing struggles. But he got one arm free for long enough to wrap it around her throat and apply a pressure just short of choking.

"Listen, damn you!" he rasped into her ear. "Can't you see that I'm tricking them?" She abruptly went motionless, although her muscles remained stiff. "Now," he continued, in a lower whisper, "I just want to know one thing. If you have to, can you pilot a Grel-la flyer?"

Eleven

The dome's artificial lighting dimmed, darkened, and awoke again in harmony with the natural rhythms of the sun. This made sleep possible. But they had nothing to sleep on except the hard floor, and they were abominably stiff and sore the following morning. And there were no sanitary provisions of any kind. Winslow and Shake-speare averted their eyes as Virginia Dare performed her necessities in a corner of their enclosure, and she did the same for them. The Grel-la, Winslow reflected queasily, had not thought of this subject, any more than humans would have thought of it in connection with live-stock.

At least they were provided with more of the tasteless mush, and water to wash it down. Shortly thereafter, a procession of Grel-la arrived, with Sett 44 in the lead.

“We will put your boasts to the test,” said Sett 44 to Winslow with-out in-quiries in-to their wel-fare or any oth-er pre-lim-inar-ies. He in-di-cat-ed a Grell whose gold chest in-signia was less elab-orate than his own. “Mes-suin 76, Rank Or-basssin 92, will take you aloft in a fly-er. He speaks and un-der-stands the Eilon-wë lan-guage. You will com-mu-ni-cate with him through the breed-er, who is flu-ent in that lan-guage . . . and for whose be-hav-ior you will be held re-spon-si-ble. Do not at-tempt any sur-rep-ti-tious com-mu-ni-ca-tions among your-selves in your own lan-guage. I will be mon-itor-ing ev-ery-thing Mes-suin 76 hears.” Winslow had no idea what he was talk-ing about, but Vir-ginia Dare seemed to un-der-stand, and take it se-ri-ous-ly. And, he re-flect-ed, it made sense that any-one with the abil-ity to cast voic-es across a great dis-tance could lis-ten across equal dis-tances. And he not-ed the im-plic-it con-fir-ma-tion of his sup-po-si-tion that Sett 44 was the on-ly Grell who un-der-stood En-glish.

“You will give Mes-suin 76 di-rec-tions to the lo-ca-tion you claim to know,” Sett 77 con-tin-ued. “A sec-ond fly-er, armed, will es-cort you close-ly. If there is any hint of treach-ery on your part, you will die. If you fail to de-liv-er on your promis-es, you will die. If there is any fur-ther vi-olent be-hav-ior on the breed-er's part, you will die. Do you com-pre-hend this se-quence of events?”

“Per-fect-ly, Lord,” Winslow grov-eled.

“Good. One more thing: when you reach the por-tal and land, you will be kept sep-a-rate from your com-pan-ions. If you your-self should some-how es-cape by pass-ing through the por-tal to your own world, as you hu-mans can ev-ident-ly do, your com-pan-ions will die. The breed-er, in par-tic-ular, will die very slow-ly. Fi-nal-ly, as an added pre-cau-tion . . .” Sett 44 mo-tioned for-ward a pair of Grell-la who pro-ceed-ed to af-fix to the hu-mans' wrists metal-lic bracelets con-nect-ed by flex-ible foot-long ca-bles of the same met-al—thin but, Winslow was cer-tain, un-break-able.

They were con-duct-ed through the maze of met-al and less fa-mil-iar ma-te-ri-als to a land-ing stage just in-side one of the wide open-ings in the base of the dome. A num-ber of the open-topped fly-ers rest-ed there. They were prod-ded aboard one of them, in the wake of Mes-suin 76, who took up a po-si-tion over-see-ing the open cock-pit where the pi-lot sat. Winslow felt no sur-prise that a po-ten-tial-ly risky as-sign-ment had been del-egat-ed to a flunky. He was even less sur-prised that two guards fol-lowed them aboard with weapons lev-eled at their backs. That was all there was room for, be-sides the pi-lot. As soon as they all set-tled in, the fly-er rose up and swooped away.

It was Winslow's first ex-pe-ri-ence of flight, aside from be-ing towed, dan-gling be-neath one of these ves-sels. It was cer-tain-ly less un-set-tling than that had been—at least he had a deck un-der his feet. Nev-er-the-less, his stom-ach lurched as the great dome and the oth-er Grell-la struc-tures fell away be-hind them and dropped be-low.

“Tell him to pro-ceed back to where we were cap-tured,” he said to Vir-ginia Dare, who trans-lat-ed in-to Eilon-wë. The fly-er and its es-cort banked and fol-lowed the val-ley east-ward.

Soon the an-cient ru-ins be-gan to be vis-ible among the veg-eta-tion be-low. Mes-suin 76 hissed some-thing to Vir-ginia Dare, his testi-ness au-di-ble across the chasm of races and lan-guages. She glanced at Winslow.

“Tell him to bear two points to star-board,” he said with-out think-ing. She gave him an ex-as-per-at-ed look “Uh . . . north-north-east,” he amend-ed, and point-ed to fur-ther clar-ify mat-ters. Vir-ginia Dare met his eyes for an in-stant. In ac-cor-dance with their whis-pered col-lo-quy the night be-fore, he was di-rect-ing the Grell-la away from the por-tal, to-ward the op-po-site side of the val-ley. She trans-lat-ed, and the fly-er changed course. Their es-cort kept for-ma-tion—rather slop-pi-ly, Winslow thought with a men-tal sniff—off the star-board beam.

Winslow then glanced at Shake-speare. He had no doubts about Vir-ginia Dare's abil-ity to cope with what was about to hap-pen, but he couldn't be quite so cer-tain of his oth-er com-pan-ion. Those large, lu-mi-nous hazel eyes didn't hold the same kind of to-tal-ly nerve-less hair-trig-ger readi-ness he had seen in the wom-an war-rior's green ones, nor would he have

ex-pect-ed them to. But he did see a steadi-ness that, in its own way, was al-most equal-ly re-as-sur-ing—a steadi-ness which, like so much else about the young ac-tor, drew on depths he doubt-ed his own ca-pac-ity to ev-er ful-ly un-der-stand.

He wait-ed un-til he was cer-tain they were at the most ad-van-ta-geous point. In fact, he wait-ed long enough to draw a quick glance of con-cerned im-pa-tience from Vir-ginia Dare. But he held him-self in check for a sec-ond or two af-ter that, be-fore bel-low-ing abrupt-ly, “No! Hard a-star-board, you lub-bers!” Vir-ginia Dare, need-ing no trans-la-tion this time, trans-mit-ted the com-mand to Mes-suin 76 with a show of hys-ter-ical ur-gen-cy.

The vol-ume and sud-den-ness of Winslow's shout had star-tled the Grel-la, and Vir-ginia Dare's tone left them no leisure to won-der how se-ri-ous the sit-ua-tion could re-al-ly be. Mes-suin 76 emit-ted a kind of hiss-ing rat-tle in the loath-some Grel-la speech. The pi-lot, con-di-tioned to un-think-ing obe-di-ence, wrenched the fly-er vi-olent-ly to the right. The es-cort-ing pi-lot, caught by sur-prise, tried to swerve out of the way. He al-most suc-ceed-ed. The two fly-ers struck each oth-er glanc-ing-ly, send-ing the es-cort skid-ding away across the sky, its pi-lot des-per-ate-ly try-ing to re-gain con-trol.

The im-pact caused the two armed guards to lose their bal-ance. Be-fore they could re-act, Winslow whipped the length of flex-ible met-al con-fin-ing his wrists around Mes-suin 76's skin-ny throat. Lift-ing the Grel's feet off the deck, he swung him around be-tween him-self and the stunned guards.

At the same time, Vir-ginia Dare brought her wrists to-gether, gath-ered the met-al ca-ble to-gether in a bunch and, lung-ing past Winslow in-to the cock-pit, with all her strength brought her weight-ed dou-ble fist down on the pi-lot's right tem-ple. Even above the whistling of the wind, Winslow could hear the sick-en-ing crunch. She shoved the limp Grel out of his seat and grasped the con-trol levers, stretch-ing her hands as far apart as pos-si-ble, and jerked them to the left.

The guards, still try-ing to right them-selves af-ter the hard right turn, were thrown com-plete-ly off bal-ance. One of them flailed his arms for an in-stant and, with a qua-ver-ing high-pitched hiss that Winslow de-cid-ed must be a Grel-la scream, top-pled over the gun-wale and fell to-ward the ru-ins-strewn for-est be-low. Winslow, who had been ready for the sud-den turn, thrust Mes-suin 76's fee-bly strug-gling form be-fore him like a shield—the Grel weighed no more than a ten-year-old child—and thrust it against the re-main-ing guard. At the same time, Shake-speare moved in from the left and grasped the weapon the guard had hes-itat-ed to use, wrench-ing it free. With a fi-nal shove, Winslow sent the guard over the side. Then, with a con-vul-sive back-wards jerk, he broke Mes-suin 76's neck.

It had all tak-en on-ly a few sec-onds. The es-cort fly-er was vis-ible in the dis-tance, mov-ing er-rat-ical-ly; its pi-lot was ev-ident-ly strug-gling to keep his dam-aged craft aloft. Winslow dropped the limp Grel-la corpse away and flung him-self for-ward, where Vir-ginia Dare was awk-ward-ly fum-bling at the con-trols with her con-fined hands. The fly-er plunged sick-en-ing-ly.

“Bring her up!” he yelled. “We're head-ed for the ground!”

“I'm try-ing!” she shout-ed back. She touched some-thing gin-ger-ly, and the fly-er lurched and turned its nose up-ward. Winslow hung on, ig-nor-ing Shake-speare's wail from aft.

“Let me take those con-trols if you don't know what you're do-ing!” he told Vir-ginia Dare.

“I told you I've nev-er pi-lot-ed one of these things. All I know is what I've learned from watch-ing the Eilon-wë ex-per-iment with cap-tured ones—which is a damned lot more than you know!”

But it soon be-came ap-par-ent that she could on-ly con-trol what-ev-er mag-ical rud-der made the fly-er turn to port or star-board. As for what-ev-er unimag-in-able force kept the craft aloft, her ef-forts were as like-ly as not to achieve the op-po-site of what she in-tend-ed. She gin-ger-ly touched a tog-gle. The fly-er went in-to a se-ries of skid-ding jerks, as if it were fight-ing it-self, and from aft came a grind-ing sound cul-mi-nat-ing in a muf-fled ex-plo-sion. The fly-er shud-dered, and be-gan an-gling steeply down-ward.

Winslow forced him-self to think calm-ly. The fly-er ob-vi-ous-ly wasn't de-signed to glide like

a bird; once the lift-ing force was gone, it wouldn't stay up long on the stub-by down-turned wings that ex-tend-ed from its flanks. He looked be-low at the ap-proach-ing ground, and tried to ori-ent him-self.

“Turn to port and bring her down as far as pos-si-ble over there,” he shout-ed in-to Vir-ginia Dare's ear over the wind.

“Why?” she de-mand-ed.

For an-swer, he point-ed to the north. The es-cort fly-er was far in the dis-tance, wob-bling to-ward the ground, ap-par-ent-ly crip-pled by dam-age from the col-li-sion.

“They'll prob-ably land gen-tly enough to live,” he ex-plained. “And even if they don't they'll have al-ready sum-moned oth-ers from the fortress. They'll be all over this area, to cut us off. We have to lead them away from the Eilon-wë refuge.”

She turned and met his eyes for the bare sec-ond she could spare, and for the first time he thought he saw some-thing like re-spect in her face. Then her at-ten-tion was riv-et-ed on the con-trol con-sole as she fol-lowed his in-struc-tions.

“They won't even have to call,” she said ab-sent-ly as she changed course while en-deav-or-ing to slow their loss of al-ti-tude. “Re-mem-ber, Sett 44 was mon-itor-ing us—he knows some-thing hap-pened, and you can be sure more fly-ers are al-ready on the way . . . We're go-ing down. I'm go-ing to try to land us in the woods, away from the ru-ins. Brace your-selves!”

The two men obeyed as best they could, as the ground rushed up to meet them. Winslow had a con-fused im-pres-sion of tree-tops and crum-bling build-ings, just be-fore the fly-er smashed in-to the for-est with a snap-ping of tree trunks and a grind-ing of crum-pled met-al. Winslow was thrown free and land-ed in the un-der-brush just in time to see the fly-er plough in-to the ground and come to a shud-der-ing halt, held up at a crazy an-gle by the splin-tered trees.

He got to his feet in the sud-den si-lence, bruised and shak-en but with noth-ing bro-ken. Vir-ginia Dare and Shake-speare were low-er-ing them-selves over the gun-wale and drop-ping to the ground be-low. Shake-speare looked worse than Winslow felt, but he was still grasp-ing the Grel-la weapon like a dog with a bone in its jaws.

“We've got to get away from here,” said Winslow with-out pre-lim-inar-ies. “They'll find this wreck.”

“One thing first,” Vi-ri-gian Dare de-murred. “Give me that weapon,” she told Shake-speare. She took hold of the thing, clum-si-ly be-cause of her con-fined wrists and be-cause it was de-signed for the short-er arms and four-dig-it-ed hands of the Grel-la. “Hold out your arms,” she told Winslow, “with the wrists spread as far apart as pos-si-ble.” He obeyed, and she held the muz-zle of the thing to the short met-al ca-ble and touched the trig-ger. The met-al seemed to burn in the weapon's beam, and heat scorched his arms, but the ca-ble part-ed. She then did the same for Shake-speare, and then in-struct-ed Winslow in free-ing her own hands.

“Now let's move,” he said. They struck out through the for-est, short-ly emerg-ing atop a knoll which af-ford-ed a wide view. Ahead of them, be-yond a short stretch of wood-land, was the slope where they had first en-tered this world.

“Look!” cried Vir-ginia Dare, point-ing to the west.

Winslow swung around and squint-ed. Far in the dis-tance, in the sky above the val-ley floor, the sun glint-ed off three ap-proach-ing fly-ers.

“They'll land sol-diers,” Vir-gina Dare said in tones of grim fa-tal-ism, “and start comb-ing the area. At the same time, the fly-ers will go back aloft and search for us from above.”

“We'll nev-er es-cape such a cor-don,” Winslow mut-tered. “We'd have to van-ish in-to thin air.”

Shake-speare dif-fi-dent-ly cleared his throat. “Ah . . . per-haps, Cap-tain, that is pre-cise-ly what we should do.”

They both stared at him.

“I rec-og-nize that ridge ahead,” the young ac-tor con-tin-ued. “The one we've been call-ing 'Elf Hill.' You've told us you can find the por-tal. And I re-call what you were say-ing be-fore: that

perhaps we humans can, by an effort of will, remain suspended in the Near Void instead of passing on as we have before.”

“But I was just thinking aloud!” Winslow blurted. “We have no way of knowing.”

“Perhaps it's time to find out,” said Virginia Dare. “It seems to be the only hiding place we have.”

“And,” said Shakespeare, warming to his argument, “at worst, we pass on into the Deep Void and on to Croa-toan—”

“—Where only a minute passes for every nine-teen or twenty minutes here,” Winslow finished for him. “So God knows what we'd emerge into when we came back here.” He sighed. “You're mad, Will. But you're also right. I fear we're in a land where madness is wisdom.” He took another breath, and put the tone of command into his voice. “Now let's move! We have to reach the portal and pass through it before they're close enough to have us in sight. If they watch us vanish, they'll know exactly where the portal is, and all will be lost for England and England's world.”

They ran through the woods with reckless speed, accumulating scratches from lashing tree branches, and emerged onto open ground. “Stay close,” Winslow admonished, “so we'll all pass through together. And hurry!” Looking over his shoulder, he saw that the three approaching flyers were visibly larger, shapes and not just points of reflected sun.

They sprinted up the slope. Shakespeare was gasping, but he kept up. Winslow looked around at the landscape, and summoned up the contours he had memorized. “This way!” he shouted, turning a little to the left.

“What will we have to do to remain in the Near Void?” Virginia Dare demanded.

“How the Devil should I know? I don't even know if we can do it at all.”

“Perhaps,” gasped Shakespeare, breathing heavily as he ran uphill, “if there's something in the human soul that allows us to pass through, then we're not just helplessly borne on the winds of the Void. Our souls are our own, and only God can command them! And surely, unworthy though we are, we do God's work here, seeking the liberation of our own world from the Grel-la. If we wish ourselves to remain here strongly enough—”

And as he spoke, it was as Winslow remembered. The sunlit late morning began to fade into a blurred, colorless, unnatural twilight against which his companions stood out in vivid contrast.

Twelve

This time, Winslow was expecting it. And he knew he had less than a minute before falling into the bottomless nothingness of the Deep Void.

He remembered what Shakespeare had said. Of course, the actor had no real knowledge to go on. But no one did, where these things were concerned. His guesses were as good as anyone else's. So Winslow tried emptying his mind of everything except his need to stay here in this strange world where the fate of his own world might be decided.

That need, he found to his dawning astonishment, was inseparable from thoughts of Virginia Dare.

He looked at her and at Shakespeare, standing out so weirdly in all their vivid, colorful solidity against the nacreous world around them. He noted that they cast no shadows.

“Can you hear me?” he called out to them.

“There's no need to shout,” said Virginia Dare archly. Her voice—and his own, come to that—had an odd quality. It seemed to be coming from a great distance, but held a deep resonance and reverberation, as though the ordinary laws that governed the transmission of sound did not apply. But what was interesting was that he could hear their voices at all. In the Deep Void, he had not been able to hear his own scream, any more than he had been able to see his own body, or those of others.

It must, he decided, be as Ri-ahn had told them. This was a realm that somehow

co-ex-ist-ed with phys-ical re-al-ity. Or, he men-tal-ly amend-ed, re-mem-ber-ing Ri-ahn's sol-id cir-cles sur-round-ed by dashed ones, with each phys-ical re-al-ity, each like a bub-ble afloat in the in-com-pre-hen-si-ble empti-ness of the Deep Void.

The thought of the Deep Void re-mind-ed him that he had al-lowed his mind to wan-der. He wrenched his thoughts back to their pre-vi-ous state of con-cen-tra-tion. From the looks on their faces, his com-pan-ions were do-ing the same.

"I don't know how long we'll be able to keep this up," said Vir-ginia Dare. Winslow didn't ei-ther. It was, he re-flect-ed, some-thing he should have thought of be-fore.

"Cap-tain," Shake-speare said abrupt-ly, "it's here at the por-tal that we passed on in-to the Deep Void be-fore. So . . . how if we move away from it?"

"Move away from it?" Winslow re-peat-ed blankly. The pos-si-bil-ity of mov-ing while in this state of be-ing had nev-er crossed his mind. "How?"

"Why . . . by walk-ing, I imag-ine." The ac-tor suit-ed the ac-tion to the word, putting one foot for-ward, then the oth-er. He walked away from them at the same rate he would have in what had once been the on-ly world Winslow had ev-er imag-ined could ex-ist.

Winslow and Vir-ginia Dare looked at each oth-er, then walked to-ward Shake-speare. He not-ed that it wasn't re-al-ly like or-di-nary walk-ing. The pres-sure on the soles of the feet wasn't there. Come to think of it, the grass hadn't seemed to bend un-der Shake-speare's feet. He de-cid-ed he'd wor-ry about it lat-er.

Ten-ta-tive-ly, he stopped think-ing about the need to stay in the Near Void. Noth-ing hap-pened. He saw a re-lax-a-tion on the oth-ers' faces that sug-gest-ed they'd had the same thought.

"I think you were right, Will," he breathed. He took a mo-ment to look around. Now, for the first time, he could ob-serve the phe-nom-ena of the Near Void at leisure. He looked up in-to the sky. In these con-di-tions, it was al-most like look-ing up through clear wa-ter. The sun was a white disk that could be gazed at un-blink-ing. He looked in the di-rec-tion from which the Grel-la fly-ers had been ap-proach-ing. They had land-ed, and were pre-sum-ably in the pro-cess of of-fload-ing their sol-diers.

"All very well," said Vir-ginia Dare in tones of prim fe-male prac-ti-cal-ity. "But if we can on-ly get in-to this Near Void at the por-tal, then how do we get out of it and back in-to the sol-id world, now that we're away from the por-tal?"

"I nev-er thought of that," Shake-speare ad-mit-ted. "But . . . maybe we can on-ly en-ter the Near Void at a por-tal be-cause the Near Void is so un-nat-ural for us. Shouldn't it be eas-ier for us to re-tur-n to where we be-long—the good, sol-id cre-a-tion that gave us birth?"

"You mean you think we may not need a por-tal to re-tur-n to the world of na-ture?" Winslow won-dered. "But . . . how?"

"I don't know," Shake-speare ad-mit-ted with un-char-ac-ter-is-tic brevi-ty.

"We re-mained in this state by will-ing it strong-ly enough," Vir-ginia Dare re-mind-ed them. "We may as well try the same way again."

"You may be right," Winslow nod-ded. "But I alone will try it. Don't you two even let your-selves think of it. And don't move."

"Why?" she de-mand-ed.

"Be-cause I'm the on-ly one I know can find the por-tal again, once back in the re-al world."

"All right," she said grudg-ing-ly. "But what-ev-er you're go-ing to do, do it quick-ly. The Grel-la fly-ers aren't go-ing to sit on the ground for-ev-er. And re-mem-ber what you your-self said about let-ting them watch us van-ish-ing in-to the por-tal."

"Yes, yes," he said ab-sent-ly. Most of his at-ten-tion was on the prob-lem of how to do this thing, if in-deed it could be done. In-tense con-cen-tra-tion on his need to re-main in con-tact with the world of the Eilon-wë had suf-ficed to keep him from falling head-long in-to the abysses of the Deep Void, but that was all it had done. Some-thing more must be need-ed to ac-tu-al-ly re-tur-n to that world, pierc-ing the im-per-me-able wall that sep-arat-ed it from the Near Void that was in

some in-com-pre-hen-si-ble fash-ion su-per-im-posed on it.

Shake-speare had spo-ken of re-turn-ing to where they be-longed. Per-haps he should dis-miss all his ear-li-er ur-gent thoughts of the fate of worlds and con-cen-trate on the essence of that very be-long-ing-ness—small things rather than great ones. Mem-ories of the mead-ows through which he had run as a boy, in a spring-time that must sure-ly last for-ev-er; of the smell of the salt air that blew in off the sea marsh-es; of the feel of the sun-blessed chill of a win-ter morn-ing . . .

With an abrupt-ness for which none of the pre-vi-ous tran-si-tions had pre-pared him, the world was back in all its sharp-fo-cused pri-ma-ry col-ors and daz-zling sun-light.

He blinked away the daz-zle-ment of the sud-den bright-ness and fought off his dis-ori-en-ta-tion. He looked around him. Shake-speare and Vir-ginia Dare were nowhere to be seen. And in the dis-tance, the Grel-la fly-ers were ris-ing in-to the sky.

He forced calm-ness on him-self. The crews of those fly-ers sure-ly weren't ob-serv-ing this hill-side yet. He ran in the op-po-site of the di-rec-tion they'd walked in the strange way of the Near Void. He cast his eyes about him, watch-ing the con-tours of the land-scape. It all came back in-to its re-mem-bered con-fig-ura-tions . . .

And he was back in the twi-light world of the Near Void. Shake-speare and Vir-ginia Dare had obeyed his in-struc-tions; they were still stand-ing where he had left them.

“They didn't see you, did they?” Shake-speare asked ner-vous-ly.

“I'm sure they didn't.” Winslow looked in-to the murky dis-tance. The fly-ers were mov-ing slow-ly over the val-ley, con-duct-ing a me-thod-ical search. “If they had, they'd be speed-ing in this di-rec-tion.”

“I on-ly hope you're right,” said Vir-ginia Dare. Her tone wasn't as skep-ti-cal as her words. She took a deep breath. “So now we know we can move about in the Near Void, and need no por-tal to de-part from it. For now, though, we'd best re-main in it.”

“Yes. It's a per-fect hid-ing place. And we're go-ing to need one. In fact, I see no rea-son why we can't walk all the way back to the Eilon-wë refuge while still in it.”

“Will we be able to do what you just did, so far from the por-tal?” Shake-speare won-dered.

“There's one way to find out,” stat-ed Vir-ginia Dare, and she set out down the slope, strid-ing through the in-dis-tinct twi-light-that-was-not-twi-light. The two men could on-ly fol-low.

They reached the out-skirts of the an-cient city and be-gan pick-ing their way over crum-bled walls and fall-en, moss-over-grown pil-lars. As they pro-gressed, and no dan-gers ap-peared, Shake-speare's at-ten-tive-ness seemed to wan-der in the pres-ence of those mute ru-ins and the for-got-ten mem-ories they held.

“Leave not the man-sion so long ten-ant-less lest, grow-ing ru-inous, the build-ing fall and leave no mem-ory of what it was,” he said to him-self, and gave a sat-is-fied nod and closed his eyes as he put the words in-to the fil-ing sys-tem be-tween his ears.

“Care-ful, Will!” Winslow called out as they turned a cor-ner of a half-col-lapsed struc-ture and a tree ap-peared, grow-ing through the cracked re-mains of what had been a street.

But Shake-speare didn't come out of his rever-ie in time to no-tice. He con-tin-ued on . . . and walked through the tree.

For a while, they all sim-ply stood, un-able to re-act—es-pe-cial-ly Shake-speare, who looked back at the tree and down at his own body, for once at a loss for words.

Vir-ginia Dare fi-nal-ly found her voice. “Why can't we do that?” she asked Winslow.

“How do you know we can't?” he re-spond-ed, sur-prised at his own words. “We haven't tried. Ac-tu-al-ly, Will didn't try ei-ther. No-body would walk in-to a sol-id ob-sta-cle, un-less his mind was else-where as Will's was and he didn't no-tice it. We've been avoid-ing bump-ing in-to things just as we would if we were out for a walk in the nor-mal world. It's the nat-ural thing to do.” He took a breath, squared his shoul-ders, and strode un-flinch-ing-ly to-ward a still-stand-ing seg-ment of an an-cient wall—and through it.

There was a brief in-stant of dark-ness as he oc-cu-pied the same space as the wall, as though

a wing beat across the dim, pearly sun. But he felt noth-ing. And then he was on the far side of the wall.

“Well, well!” he said soft-ly.

“Ri-ahn is right,” Vir-ginia Dare nod-ded. “This is a . . . a state of be-ing that some-how over-laps the re-al world. Even he doesn't un-der-stand why we can—more or less—see the re-al world from it, while we can't be seen.”

“Or, it would seem, be heard,” said Shake-speare, and point-ed.

They all froze. A squad of armed Grel-la were ad-vanc-ing around a hillock that had once been a build-ing but was now a mound with on-ly a few pro-ject-ing cor-ners of an-gu-lar stones to sug-gest that it was any-thing oth-er than a nat-ural for-ma-tion.

They all froze in-stinc-tive-ly. But the Grel-la con-tin-ued their ad-vance, obliv-ious. Over-head, Winslow saw a fly-er slow-ly fol-low-ing its search pat-tern. But he couldn't hear it, any more than he had heard any-thing from their sur-round-ings ev-er since they had en-tered the Near Void. He re-mem-bered how Man-teo's fi-nal scream had fad-ed in-to in-audi-bil-ity.

A sud-den wild mood took him. He ad-vanced straight to-ward one of the Grel-la sol-diers. He heard a sharp in-take of breath from Vir-ginia Dare, but ig-nored it. He walked straight to-ward the Grel as he had to-ward the an-cient wall . . . and was be-yond him. The Grel-la pa-trol moved on, obliv-ious.

“We are in-deed like ghosts,” Winslow heard Shake-speare say. “Ex-cept that ghosts can some-times be glimpsed by mor-tals . . . or so we're told. In truth, I can't claim I've ev-er seen one.”

“Be-sides,” said Vir-ginia Dare with the mat-ter of fact-ness she could be count-ed on to bring to bear on Shake-speare's ob-ser-va-tions, “we aren't dead. Not that I know of, at least.”

“Well,” Winslow de-clared, “if I'd died, I like to think I would have no-ticed it. And I don't think my spir-it would feel as hun-gry as I do now. So I refuse to wor-ry about it. Let's go. We'll be lucky to reach the Eilon-wë refuge be-fore night-fall.”

As it turned out, they couldn't. Their pace in-creased marked-ly af-ter walk-ing through rather than around ob-sta-cles be-came sec-ond na-ture to them. Nev-er-the-less, the dim white sun sank to-ward the west, and be-gan to set.

But it turned out to make no dif-fer-ence. The in-dis-tinct gray-ness around them grew no dim-mer or dark-er than be-fore. What-ev-er it was they were see-ing the re-al world by, it ev-ident-ly wasn't or-di-nary light. Winslow sim-ply ac-cept-ed it as a fact, thank-ful-ly but with-out any at-tempt to un-der-stand it. He'd leave that to the likes of Ri-ahn and Dr. Dee. For now, he filed it away as an-oth-er mys-tery.

Shake-speare raised yet an-oth-er mys-tery as they walked. “Ah, Cap-tain, I can't help won-der-ing about some-thing.”

“You nev-er can,” Vir-ginia Dare mut-tered.

“The way we can pass through sol-id ob-jects,” Shake-speare con-tin-ued, ig-nor-ing her. “Well, Aris-to-tle ex-plained that things fall down be-cause it is their na-ture to fall. So why don't we fall down through the sol-id ground, and find our-selves be-neath the earth?”

“You're ask-ing me?” An in-cred-ulous laugh es-caped Winslow. “I un-der-stand none of this. But I have no-ticed some-thing.” He told them what he had ob-served be-fore, about the grass be-neath their feet.

“We must be walk-ing in some fash-ion be-yond or-di-nary hu-man ken,” Shake-speare opined.

“Well,” said Vir-ginia Dare im-pa-tient-ly, “how-ev-er we're walk-ing, let's do some more of it. I'm hun-gry too.”

“As am I,” Shake-speare agreed. “Though the chameleon love can feed on the air, I am one that am nour-ished by my vict-uals, and would fain have meat.” He gave a par-tic-ular-ly sat-is-fied blink and nod, but then took on a per-plexed look. “Any yet, af-ter all this walk-ing I feel strange-ly lit-tle weari-ness in my limbs.”

“Now that you mention it, so do I,” Winslow acknowledged, and promptly forgot about it. Another mystery.

They pressed on. Even in this strange realm of shadows, Virginia Dare had no trouble guiding them in-to and out of the labyrinth of ancient tunnels. Presently the great old ruined building appeared ahead in the dimness.

“All right, Tom, tell us how you returned to the world of sound and feeling.” It was, Winslow realized, the first time Virginia Dare had ever addressed him by his Christian name. He described to her and Shakespeare the thoughts and feelings he had allowed to take possession of his mind.

“But,” he concluded, “don’t try it yet. Let’s continue on inside.”

“Why?” Virginia Dare wanted to know. But Winslow hurried on up the curving old stair-case, and his companions followed.

Inside, the artificial illumination gave neither more nor less light than the sun or the starlight had. But they were used to that by now, as they were to the ease with which they passed through the warren of partitions and cubicles. Finally, they came to the central chamber. It was largely empty, this late at night, but at the far end Walsingham and Dee were hunched over a table in conclave with Riahn and a pair of other Eilonwë. Their conversation was inaudible, of course, but worry etched their faces.

“Now will you tell us why we’re still playing ghost?” demanded Virginia Dare, exasperated.

Winslow turned to her with a wide grin. “One thing I’ve never been able to do—in fact, I’m not sure anyone has ever been able to do it—is surprise Mr. Secretary Walsingham!”

The consternation that erupted when he appeared out of nowhere, a second or two before Shakespeare and Virginia Dare, was deeply satisfying.

Thirteen

Walsingham finally drove off the swarms of well-wishers, even putting his foot down with the Queen—and, what was rather more difficult, with John Dee and Riahn, both of whom were in a frenzy of curiosity. He insisted that the three returnees be allowed to sleep for what remained of the night.

Winslow was grateful; despite the odd lack of physical weariness they had noticed, they were mentally and emotionally exhausted. He knew, however, that as usual Mr. Secretary had an ulterior motive. He wanted them alert, refreshed, and able to respond to searching questions at a meeting the following morning.

That meeting turned out to be as small as Walsingham could arrange. It wasn’t that he was worried about what a later era would call security leaks. It was impossible to imagine any of the Eilonwë spying for the Grel-la, and while only the naïve would doubt that there were humans capable of selling out their own kind, the Grel-la’s arrogance rendered them incapable of exploiting that weakness. No, it was only that he wanted a gathering of manageable size.

Besides himself it consisted of the Queen (of course), Dee, Riahn, John White (limp with relief over the miraculous reappearance of his granddaughter), and Tyrallair, an elderly female Eilonwë specialist in the theory of the Void. She, it turned out, was the only member of her race other than Riahn to have mastered English, driven by her desire to extract every possible crumb of information from the colonists about their transition to this world. Now she fidgeted with fascination as Winslow and the others related their adventures.

“... And so we returned,” Winslow finished, rather anticlimactically. “Perhaps someone can answer a question Will raised: since we could pass through solid objects, why did we stay atop the ground instead of falling down through it?”

“First of all,” said Tyrallair, speaking as though most of her mind was elsewhere, “you were not so much ‘passing through’ objects as co-existing with them in the same volume of space but

in an-oth-er di-men-sion—an-oth-er phase of ex-is-tence, if you will, where-in you could not phys-ical-ly in-ter-act with the ma-te-ri-al world. This last of course, an-swers your ques-tion. Your bod-ies were not phys-ical ob-jects at all, and there-fore were not sub-ject to the force of . . .” Tyrallair sought un-suc-cess-ful-ly for an En-glish word, then tried again. “To the mu-tu-al at-trac-tion be-tween such ob-jects which caus-es the less-er to seem to fall to-ward the greater.”

“But Aris-to-tle has clear-ly ex-plained—” Dee be-gan, be-fore the Queen shushed him.

“In fact,” Tyrallair con-tin-ued, ig-nor-ing him, “it is my be-lief that you moved in this state by sheer force of will. Your bod-ies went through the mo-tions of walk-ing as a mat-ter of au-to-mat-ic, con-di-tioned re-flex, in re-sponse to com-mands from your minds to move from one place to an-oth-er. This would ac-count for the lack of ap-par-ent phys-ical ef-fort you no-ticed.”

Shake-speare clear-ly hadn't been lis-ten-ing to this last part. He looked thought-ful, and a bit queasy. “What if we had re-turned to the sol-id world while our bod-ies—or part of our bod-ies—had been 'co-ex-ist-ing in the same vol-ume of space' with, say, a wall . . . or a per-son?”

Winslow, to whom this rather grue-some thought had not oc-curred, now un-der-stood why the young ac-tor looked queasy.

“The con-se-quences would, of course, have been most re-gret-table,” said Tyrallair, still speak-ing in the same more-than-half-dis-tract-ed way. “But I con-sid-er the pos-si-bil-ity re-mote. The re-turn re-quires a men-tal ef-fort on your part, and I be-lieve your minds would shy away from mak-ing the ef-fort un-der such cir-cum-stances. Of course,” she added in a tone al-to-geth-er too de-tached for Winslow's taste, “it would be in-ter-est-ing to see if the men-tal bar-ri-er could be sur-mount-ed.”

“Well,” Winslow said hasti-ly, be-fore she could sug-gest mak-ing the ex-per-iment, “at any rate we're back. We thought that you, Dr. Dee, and you, Tyrallair, would be in-ter-est-ed in our ex-pe-ri-ences.”

“? 'In-ter-est-ed'!” blurt-ed Tyrallair. “I should say so! This opens up whol-ly new and un-sus-pect-ed ram-ifi-ca-tions of your hu-man abil-ity to pass through por-tals. Of course, the ques-tion of whether you can do so at por-tals which the Grel-la have not yet opened up—'la-tent' por-tals, one might call them—re-mains unan-swered.”

“Even if we can,” Wals-ing-ham ob-served, “the abil-ity would have no use-ful-ness. How could we know where such por-tals are?” He had ini-tial-ly been trans-fig-ured by the es-pi-onage pos-si-bil-ities, on-ly to come down to earth with a bump as he re-mem-bered that noth-ing worth spy-ing on was ac-ces-si-ble to Croa-toan Is-land. “On-ly by an in-cred-ibly un-like-ly chance would we stum-ble across one.”

“Prob-ably true,” Tyrallair ad-mit-ted. “Al-though, giv-en how dif-fi-cult it is for the Grel-la to lo-cate la-tent por-tals, they could be more com-mon than we have as-sumed. Quite com-mon, in fact.”

“Yes!” said Dee ea-ger-ly. “Such un-ex-pect-ed trans-po-si-tions in the dis-tant past could be the source of any num-ber of tales. And per-haps peo-ple who re-turned tried to mark the lo-ca-tions.” He took on a far-away look. “All those cir-cles of stand-ing stones . . .”

“A fas-ci-nat-ing pos-si-bil-ity,” said Ri-ahn dry-ly. “But an-oth-er ques-tion that re-mains unan-swered—and one with some-what more im-me-di-ate prac-ti-cal sig-nif-icance—is whether we Eilon-wë have the same abil-ity as you hu-mans to ef-fort-less-ly pass through por-tals that the Grel-la have opened.”

“And if so,” Tyrallair took his thought one step fur-ther, “can we al-so linger in the Near Void at will, and de-part from it any-where, as we now know hu-mans can do?” She turned to Winslow. “Now that we know you can lo-cate the por-tal re-li-ably, per-haps we can fi-nal-ly an-swer these ques-tions.”

“Er . . . per-haps, my la-dy.” He didn't know how else to ad-dress Tyrallair. “But I cau-tion you that there are haz-ards in-volved in reach-ing that hill-side. Re-call what hap-pened to us when I in-sist-ed on try-ing it!”

“And af-ter our es-cape,” Vir-ginia Dare added grim-ly, “the Grel-la will sure-ly be pa-trolling

the near-er fringes of the old city, al-though they still don't seem to sus-pect the hill slope it-self.”

“Yes,” Wals-ing-ham sighed. “A pity.” He had re-lin-quished his vi-sions of ex-ploit-ing the Near Void's pos-si-bil-ities for spy-ing—at least as far as Earth was con-cerned. Here, how-ev-er . . . “You say, Mis-tress Dare, that it's about thir-ty miles from the por-tal to the Grel-la fortress at the oth-er por-tal? Hmm . . . On-ly a two-day trek for the young and fit, es-pe-cial-ly con-sid-er-ing that it would be less weari-some than it would nor-mal-ly be, from what you've told us.”

“One mo-ment, my Moor!” The Queen leaned for-ward, read-ing his thoughts. “Are you schem-ing to send your agents through this Faërie-like realm of the 'Near Void' to the Grel-la fortress to spy it out?” Ri-ahn stared open-mouthed; it was clear-ly a nov-el thought.

“Well, Your Majesty, the thought nat-ural-ly crossed my mind. In-vis-ibil-ity . . . The abil-ity to pass through walls . . .” The spy-mas-ter took on a dreamy look.

“We couldn't hear sounds from the re-al world, sir,” Vir-ginia Dare re-mind-ed him, “any more than we our-selves could be heard.”

“The abil-ity would scarce-ly be missed, as no one can un-der-stand the Grel-la tongue any-way.” Wals-ing-ham looked for con-fir-ma-tion to Ri-ahn, who nod-ded. “Yes . . . the pos-si-bil-ities . . .”

“Mr. Sec-re-tary,” said Winslow, be-fore he had ful-ly worked out in his own mind what he was say-ing, “are you sure that's all you want to do?”

“Eh?” Wals-ing-ham blinked away his rever-ie. “What do you mean, Thomas?”

“You're for-get-ting that in ad-di-tion to pass-ing through the world in a ghost-like state, we can come out of that state wher-ev-er we wish.”

“But then you'd no longer be in-vis-ible and in-vul-ner-able. And you'd be un-able to re-sume that state, for you can on-ly en-ter the Near Void at the por-tal. You'd be dis-cov-ered.”

For just an in-stant, be-fore an-swer-ing, Winslow let him-self sa-avor the un-dreamed-of sen-sa-tion of be-ing a step ahead of Wals-ing-ham. “All very true, Mr. Sec-re-tary, and a great dis-ad-van-tage—if all you're in-ter-est-ed in is spy-ing. But ev-ery-one who's ev-er gone raid-ing has day-dreamed of be-ing able to ap-pear out of thin air in-side the en-emy's stronghold—just as we ap-peared here last night.” He grinned wolfish-ly. “Imag-ine if it had been armed en-emies who'd sud-den-ly been among you!”

“Sweet Je-su!” the Queen breathed. “You are a bold one, Cap-tain Winslow!” Even more grat-ify-ing was the look on Vir-ginia Dare's face he glimpsed out of the cor-ner of his eye.

Ri-ahn found his tongue. “So you would lead a raid-ing force through the Near Void to the Grel-la fortress, pass un-de-tect-ed in-to it, and emerge in their midst?” He shook his head. “Your Queen is right about you, Cap-tain. And with such an ad-van-tage of sur-prise, I'm sure you could wreak fear-ful slaugh-ter among the Grel-la. But there are too many of them, and their weapons are too dev-as-tat-ing. Be-sides, Mr. Sec-re-tary Wals-ing-ham was right: once you left the Near Void, you could not reen-ter it, thir-ty miles from the por-tal. You would be trapped in-side the fortress. The Grel-la would hunt you down like rats and kill you, and the sac-ri-fice would have been for noth-ing.”

“So it might well turn out, sir—and if we were fools enough to throw away an un-sup-port-ed raid-ing par-ty that way, we'd de-serve it. But it's some-thing else I have in mind. At the same pre-de-ter-mined time we at-tack them from with-in, you Eilon-wë at-tack them from with-out.”

For a mo-ment, Ri-ahn and Tyralair sim-ply stared, as though not un-der-stand-ing what he was talk-ing about. It came to Winslow that he had just blithe-ly con-tra-dict-ed thou-sands of years of bru-tal ex-pe-ri-ence.

“At-tack them?” Ri-ahn fi-nal-ly re-peat-ed. “You mean . . . at-tack them di-rect-ly? Open-ly?” His face was a study in au-to-mat-ic re-jec-tion of a self-ev-ident-ly sui-ci-dal sug-ges-tion. “But . . . but we can't!”

“I've seen you Eilon-wë fight them,” said Winslow.

“Oh, yes: furtive am-bush-es, pin-prick raids. But an all-out frontal at-tack?” Ri-ahn

shud-dered. "I think you still don't ful-ly com-pre-hend what their weapons can do. You should lis-ten to those of us who have been fight-ing them for ages and are, if not wis-er, at least more ex-pe-ri-enced than you."

"Hav-ing felt the heat of Saint Antony's Fire, I think we En-glish have rea-son to know about their weapons," said Winslow qui-et-ly. "And as for your ex-pe-ri-ence fight-ing them . . . you've nev-er had us rais-ing the Dev-il with them from with-in, dis-tract-ing and dis-or-der-ing them for you. No weapon is any bet-ter than the skill and cool-ness with which it is wield-ed. The Grel-la will find it hard to sum-mon up much of ei-ther in the midst of pan-ic and chaos."

Eliz-abeth Tu-dor leaned for-ward in a way that could on-ly be called preda-to-ry. "Yes, Sir Ri-ahn! This is an op-por-tu-ni-ty you've nev-er had be-fore. Will you Eilon-wë go on through all that re-mains of eter-ni-ty, nip-ping at their heels like oft-whipped dogs, when now at last you have a chance to leap at their throats?"

Once again, Ri-ahn's face was easy to read through its ali-en-ness. It was a bat-tle-ground where tan-ta-liz-ing temp-ta-tion warred with his blood's mem-ory of a thou-sand an-ces-tors who had lived long enough to beget chil-dren be-cause they had been too cau-tious to throw them-selves in-to the mouths of the Grel-la hell-weapons.

"But," he fi-nal-ly tem-po-rized, "my sheuath sim-ply doesn't have the num-bers to mount a mass at-tack. No sheuath does."

"Well, then," the Queen de-clared, "the an-swer would seem ob-vi-ous: form a league with the oth-er sheuaths and field an al-lied army."

Ri-ahn blinked sev-er-al times. "But it's un-heard of! The sheuaths have nev-er act-ed to-ge-th-er. You have no idea of the eons of tra-di-tion be-hind their in-de-pen-dence, nor of the jeal-ousies that ex-ist among the lead-ers. They would nev-er agree."

Wals-ing-ham wore the look of a man who at long last found him-self back in his own el-ement. "If you will call a con-clave of these lead-ers," he said smooth-ly, "I may per-haps be able to be of as-sis-tance in se-cur-ing their agree-ment. I have some small ex-pe-ri-ence in these mat-ters. Ah . . . what was that, Thomas?"

"Noth-ing, Mr. Sec-re-tary," Winslow wheezed. "On-ly a cough."

"One point, Cap-tain Winslow," said John White, speak-ing up for the first time. His voice held his usu-al dif-fi-dence, but un-der-ly-ing it was a de-ter-mi-na-tion none of them had heard be-fore. "If you do es-say this ven-ure, I wish to be in-clud-ed in it. In-deed, I will be in-clud-ed in it."

"No of-fense, Mas-ter White," Winslow said care-ful-ly, "but you're no fight-ing man. You're not one of the sea dogs in my crew, nor one of the En-glish who, like your grand-daugh-ter, have been hard-ened by twen-ty years' strug-gle against the Grel-la in this world."

"No. But I think I can tru-ly say that I have more rea-son than most to want vengeance against the Grel-la. They owe me a blood debt. You are now of-fer-ing me a chance to col-lect on it. You must let me come!"

Winslow ex-changed a brief eye con-tact with Vir-ginia Dare. Much passed be-tween them in that split sec-ond. They had, by un-spo-ken com-mon con-sent, not told her grand-fa-ther what they now knew about how Ana-nias Dare and Eleanor White Dare had met their end. Now, with-out the ne-ces-si-ty for words, they re-newed their re-solve that he need not know it. They like-wise word-less-ly re-solved that he did, in-deed, have the right to seek wergild from the Grel-la.

Some-thing else Winslow read in Vir-ginia Dare's eyes in that in-stant of silent com-mu-nion. He had nev-er felt the slight-est de-sire to be a Grel, but now the de-sire was even fur-ther from his mind than ev-er. In-deed, he thought with a shiv-er, he was very, very thank-ful that he was not one.

"Very well," he told John White with a kind of gen-tle gruff-ness. "If you think you can keep up, you can come."

"This is all very well," said Dee in his most por-ten-tous voice, "but aren't we for-get-ting what Cap-tain Winslow told us ear-li-er about the dan-ger of ap-proach-ing the por-tal? It is

dan-ger-ous even for an in-di-vid-ual of a small group. How can a large raid-ing force hope to march up that naked hill-side un-seen?"

"That prob-lem is even greater than you think," said Ri-ahn, "for rea-sons I'll ex-plain lat-er. Nev-er-the-less . . . I be-lieve we can pro-vide a de-vice that will en-able you to over-come it. This al-so I will elab-orate up-on in due course."

"You agree to the plan, then?" the Queen asked ea-ger-ly.

"I am at least will-ing to con-sid-er it. My agree-ment is con-di-tion-al. I will com-mit my sheuath to an at-tack on-ly if the oth-er sheuath lead-ers agree to do so—an even-tu-al-ity in which I do not share your con-fi-dence, Mr. Sec-re-tary."

"You are per-haps too pes-simistic," said Wals-ing-ham mild-ly. "But if I am to pro-vide help I will need for you to give me all avail-able in-for-ma-tion about the in-di-vid-uals with whom we will be deal-ing: their ages, per-son-al his-to-ries, be-liefs, at-ti-tudes, habits, re-la-tion-ships . . . and, not least im-por-tant, how they are re-gard-ed by their peers. I re-fer not just to the sheuath lead-ers, but to their key aides and ad-vi-sors as well. And, of course, I will re-quire the his-to-ry, cur-rent sta-tus, ca-pa-bil-ities and rep-uta-tions of the sheuaths which they lead, with an em-pha-sis on the po-si-tions they have tra-di-tion-al-ly tak-en on the over-rid-ing ques-tion of how best to deal with the Grel-la."

Ri-ahn looked slight-ly dazed. "Ah . . . this in-volves a large vol-ume of in-for-ma-tion."

"In-du-bitably. I sug-gest we con-fer on the mat-ter tonight, un-less you have oth-er press-ing busi-ness. For-tu-nate-ly, I have a good mem-ory . . . and at need I can large-ly dis-pense with sleep. Not as eas-ily as in my youth, of course. But," Wals-ing-ham con-clud-ed with his fa-vorite phrase, "knowl-edge is nev-er too dear."

The Eilon-wë, they dis-cov-ered, did not per-son-ify their sheuaths, as hu-mans did their na-tions, by giv-ing them names. That kind of group iden-ti-fi-ca-tion was for-eign to them. Their loy-al-ties were per-son-al, not to ab-strac-tions. The sheuath led by Ri-ahn was re-ferred to sim-ply as Ri-ahn's sheuath, for as long as he led it. And so it was with all the oth-er lead-ers.

By de-vi-ous routes, by night, through the labyrinths of an-cient tun-nels and ru-ins, those lead-ers came in re-sponse to Ri-ahn's call. Not all of them that he had in-vit-ed, of course. Some sim-ply re-ject-ed out of hand any-thing so un-prece-dent-ed. Oth-ers plead-ed in-abil-ity to make the jour-ney in safe-ty—per-haps truth-ful-ly. But enough ar-rived to fill the cen-tral cham-ber to ca-pac-ity, and to re-quire the re-moval of some of the sur-round-ing par-ti-tions to make room for the over-flow. Winslow didn't know the Eilon-wë well enough to form an opin-ion as to whether the sheer nov-el-ty of the sum-mons might have some-thing to do with a turnout that ex-ceed-ed Ri-ahn's dour ex-pec-ta-tions.

It soon be-came ob-vi-ous that there were no es-tab-lished pro-ce-dures to gov-ern a gath-er-ing like this, and cer-tain-ly no rules of prece-dence among lead-ers who ac-knowl-edged no uni-ty above the sheuath lev-el. This wasn't en-tire-ly a bad thing, for it meant there were no pro-ce-du-ral ob-jec-tions to al-low-ing hu-mans to sit in on the con-clave. Some of the Eilon-wë from oth-er sheuaths had met the colonists be-fore, and all knew of them. And by now, ev-ery-one had learned—with vary-ing de-grees of hap-pi-ness—that new hu-mans had ar-rived. So there were some stares of frank cu-ri-osity but no protests when Wals-ing-ham, Dee, Winslow and Vir-ginia Dare took their places among the group that fol-lowed Ri-ahn, as sim-ilar groups clus-tered be-hind the oth-er lead-ers, in no par-tic-ular or-der. ("Worse than Par-lia-ment," Wals-ing-ham was heard to mut-ter.) The Queen had not jeop-ar-dized the roy-al dig-ni-ty by ex-pos-ing her-self to the dis-or-der di-rect-ly, but rather let her Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary rep-re-sent her. He lis-tened with a look of in-tense con-cen-tra-tion as Vir-ginia Dare pro-vid-ed a run-ning trans-la-tion.

"From time im-memo-ri-al," de-clared Avaer-ahn, a sheuath lead-er from a re-gion to the south-east, "the path of wis-dom has been clear: avoid pro-vok-ing the Grel-la in-to ex-ert-ing the full ex-tent of their pow-ers against us. Some have in-dulged in pet-ty dis-plays of brava-do"—a

mean-ing-ful glance at Ri-ahn—"but in the main we have all fol-lowed this pru-dent pol-icy."

"And what has it got-ten us?" grum-bled the dour Imal-far, a near-er neigh-bor of Ri-ahn.

"Sur-vival! The Grel-la could ex-ter-mi-nate us if we an-noyed them enough to ex-haust their pa-tience. If driv-en to such an ex-treme, they could ren-der our world life-less!"

"Pre-pos-ter-ous!" scoffed Imal-far. "This world is too valu-able to them. What good would an un-in-hab-it-able ball of slag be?"

"How can we pre-dict what they would do if suf-fi-cient-ly an-gered?" Avaer-ahn shot back. "They don't think like us."

"That's true," in-toned Leeriv-en, a fe-male as the Eilon-wë lead-ers fre-quent-ly were, and a con-sis-tent voice of in-de-ci-sion mas-querad-ing as pru-dence. "It would be un-wise to re-ly on our abil-ity to pre-dict how aliens like the Grel-la would re-act to provo-ca-tion."

"But," protest-ed Ri-ahn, "have you not been lis-ten-ing? If this works, we'll no longer have to wor-ry about what they will do! If we cap-ture their fortress, sit-ting there prac-ti-cal-ly atop the por-tal to their oth-er worlds, with their weapons in our hands—"

"Yes: if, if, if!" grum-bled Avaer-ahn. "That's all we've heard from you, Ri-ahn. Glit-ter-ing schemes to free us from the grip of aliens, all of which re-quire us to put our trust in oth-er aliens." He gave the knot of hu-mans be-hind Ri-ahn a sour look.

Ri-ahn bris-tled. "The hu-mans have been among us for al-most twen-ty years, and they've earned my trust!" Wals-ing-ham leaned for-ward, touched his shoul-der, and whis-pered some-thing in his ear. The Eilon-wë nod-ded and re-sumed. "Fur-ther-more, they have very good rea-son to aid us to the ut-most. As long as the Grel-la rule our world, there is al-ways the pos-si-bil-ity that they will blun-der on-to the por-tal lead-ing to the hu-mans' world—as, in-deed, they did long ago—and en-slave it. But if we re-gain con-trol here, those Grel-la now in-fest-ing the hu-man world will be iso-lat-ed, with no pos-si-bil-ity of re-in-force-ment."

"Ri-ahn has a point, Avaer-ahn," said Leeriv-en, agree-ing as was her wont with the last speak-er.

"Yes, yes . . . But still, we sim-ply can't at-tack the Grel-la di-rect-ly. It's nev-er been done be-fore. It's with-out prece-dent. It's . . ."

Even-tu-al-ly the con-clave broke up, hav-ing ac-com-plished noth-ing as usu-al. Winslow got to his feet, stiff with wear-i-ness and dis-cour-age-ment. Out of the cor-ner of his eye, he saw Wals-ing-ham in close con-ver-sa-tion with Ri-ahn. He strolled over.

"You want me to set up a meet-ing for you with Avaer-ahn?" the Eilon-wë was say-ing in-cred-ulous-ly. "But he's the lead-er of the fac-tion most op-posed to the plan. Why not Imal-far, who is in-clined our way, or even Leeriv-en, who might be per-suad-ed?"

"I thought I might be able to make our po-si-tion, and the plan's ad-van-tages, clear-er to Avaer-ahn," said Wals-ing-ham smooth-ly. "In-ci-den-tal-ly, I think it would be best if Tyr-lair could be there to trans-late. Avaer-ahn might be more com-fort-able with an Eilon-wë in-ter-preter."

"He might very well," said Ri-ahn in a tone of stud-ied un-der-state-ment. "All right. I'll see what I can do."

"I think, Thomas," said Wals-ing-ham as Ri-ahn walked off, "that you might want to be present. You may find it in-ter-est-ing. But please don't act sur-prised at any-thing I say."

"And so," Wals-ing-ham con-clud-ed through the medi-um of Tyr-lair's trans-la-tion, "you can see why we hu-mans are very much in earnest in this mat-ter . . . and why your sheuath stands to ben-e-fit if the plan suc-ceeds."

"Yes, yes," said Avaer-ahn with the os-ten-ta-tious dis-in-ter-est of one who had agreed to the meet-ing on-ly as a cour-tesy to Ri-ahn. "Al-though I hope you don't mean to im-ply that I, or any lead-er of any sheuath, would be mo-ti-vat-ed by any de-sire for com-pet-itive ad-van-tage over his fel-lows."

"Of course not," Wals-ing-ham as-sured. "Such a thought nev-er crossed my mind—even

when I heard the rea-sons why Leeriv-en is about to de-clare in fa-vor of the plan.”

Mind-ful of Wals-ing-ham's in-struc-tions, Winslow kept his face im-pas-sive. Not so Avaer-ahn, who prac-ti-cal-ly sprang for-ward. “What?”

Walsin-gahm wore a flus-tered look that might have fooled some peo-ple. “Oh—you didn't know? Dear me! Per-haps I've said too much.”

Avaer-ahn wasn't lis-ten-ing. “Pre-pos-ter-ous! Ev-ery-one knows how cau-tious Leeriv-en is.”

“Of course she is. That's why she isn't let-ting it be-come gen-er-al knowl-edge yet.” Wals-ing-ham gave a head-shake of bo-gus self-re-proach for his care-less tongue.

“But . . . but . . . what are her rea-sons?” de-mand-ed Avaer-ahn.

“Pre-cise-ly the rea-sons I've been ex-plain-ing to you: to im-prove the rel-ative po-si-tion of her sheuath in the world that fol-lows the plan's suc-cess-ful con-clu-sion. Think of the ter-ri-to-ri-al con-ces-sions she could in-sist on—and, even more im-por-tant, the share of cap-tured Grel-la weapons. Where-as, on the oth-er hand . . . those sheuaths which do not par-tic-ipate . . .” Wals-ing-ham left the thought dan-gling.

If Winslow hadn't known that the Eilon-wë didn't go pale, he would have sworn that Avaer-ahn did so. “I can still hard-ly be-lieve that she would . . . This must be in-ves-ti-gat-ed!”

“Most cer-tain-ly,” Wals-ing-ham nod-ded. “Per-mit me to sug-gest a pos-si-ble av-enué of in-ves-ti-ga-tion. There is a cer-tain aide of Leeriv-en's. Here is his name.” He slid a slip of pa-per across the ta-ble that sep-arat-ed them. Avaer-ahn took it. “I have hap-pened to hear that he is, uh, friend-ly with one of your sub-or-di-nates.” An-oth-er silent trans-fer of pa-per took place. “You could have her sound him out, un-der cir-cum-stances where his tongue might be less guard-ed than it should.”

“Hmm . . . your sug-ges-tion may well have mer-it.” Avaer-ahn de-part-ed, look-ing very thought-ful. As soon as he was gone, Winslow turned to Wals-ing-ham.

“Is this true, Mr. Sec-re-tary? And if it is, will this aide of Leeriv-en's re-al-ly re-veal it to a paramour from an-oth-er sheuath?”

“To both, the an-swer is, of course, no. The aide is one who, with Ri-ahn's help, I iden-ti-fied ear-ly on as one of Leeriv-en's peo-ple who fa-vored a bold-er pol-icy against the Grel-la. I have been work-ing on him for some time, and have ex-plain-ed his role to him. He will, in an ap-par-ent heat of pas-sion, re-peat to Av-er-ahn's fe-male sub-or-di-nate the sto-ry I have just told Avaer-ahn. Short-ly, ev-ery-one ex-cept Leeriv-en her-self will know that she plans to de-clare in our fa-vor.” Wals-ing-ham stood up briskly. Winslow thought he hadn't looked so young in years. He was clear-ly en-joy-ing him-self more than a Pu-ri-tan ought. “And now, let us pro-ceed to our next meet-ing.”

“Our next meet-ing, Mr. Sec-re-tary?”

“Yes—with Leeriv-en. There I will let her know that Avaer-ahn plans to join with us, and make sure she un-der-stands the im-plic-a-tions of that for the fu-ture po-si-tion of her own sheuath.” Halfway out the door, Wals-ing-ham paused for an af-terthought. “Oh, by the way, Thomas: I sug-gest you pro-ceed to fi-nal-ize your plans for the raid on the Grel-la fortress. With Avaer-ahn and Leeriv-en vy-ing with each oth-er to join Ri-ahn and Imal-far, we'll have all four of the most im-por-tant fac-tions be-hind us and I an-tic-ipate no fur-ther trou-ble or-ga-niz-ing the Eilon-wë side of the op-er-ation.” Then he was out the door, and Winslow could on-ly fol-low in a daze.

It came to him, though, that he should feel no sur-prise. The Grel-la had made an en-emy of Mr. Sec-re-tary Wals-ing-ham, and they were about to join a se-lect com-pa-ny that in-clud-ed An-tho-ny Babing-ton and Mary Stu-art. On-ly this time he, Winslow, was go-ing to wield the heads-man's axe.

On re-flec-tion, though, he de-cid-ed he might well be per-suad-ed to share the task with Vir-ginia Dare.

Fourteen

Winslow stared incredulously at Ri-ahn. They were sitting in the elderly Eilon-wë's private retreat: a small room cluttered with papers, books, maps, and a miscellany of objects most of which lay beyond Winslow's understanding. In one corner was a globe of this world to which Winslow's eyes kept straying, for the sense of familiarity that underlay its strange continental outlines was fascinating and somehow disturbing. But now he could think only of the incredible statement Ri-ahn had just made.

"Are you saying the Grel-la have made moons?"

"Very small ones," Ri-ahn assured him. "One of them could fit into this room. And not many of them—a few artificial moons, a hundred or so miles up. Their presence is one of the reasons we Eilon-wë have to conceal ourselves and move about so stealthily. The Grel-la put them up there for the purpose of watching the world's surface. They circle the world every ninety minutes, traveling at eighteen thousand miles an hour." Seeing Winslow's incredulous look, Ri-ahn tried to explain. "It is the speed at which an object keeps falling around the world rather than falling down to the surface. They mount devices which can instantly send images of what is below them, greatly magnified, to Grel-la observers in the fortress."

"But . . . but . . ." Winslow struggled to understand. "I can see how the images could be magnified, using lenses like those of ordinary eye-glasses—"

"Well, yes, you might say that," Ri-ahn allowed.

"—but how can the Grel-la down here on the surface of the world see these images?"

"It is very difficult to explain. But you are, of course, aware of the way a magnet attracts iron. Dr. Dee has told me that the Queen's physician Dr. William Gilbert has performed experiments to see if that is somehow related to the way amber, when rubbed, attracts almost any very light matter. He has postulated a quality for which he has used the Greek word for amber: *electron*. In fact, the quality is not unique to amber. It is everywhere, and it can be used in innumerable ways. It is the basis for our devices for speaking across great distances. We had advanced that far before the Grel-la conquest. It can be used to send images as well as sound." Ri-ahn spread his hands in one of the human gestures he had picked up. "I'm afraid that is the best I can do in your language. You must take my word for it."

"So," said Winslow thoughtfully, "if one of these . . . things is overhead every ninety minutes, we must make our move during one of those ninety-minute intervals."

"Just so. Fortunately, we have been ordering our lives around that interval for a very long time. We will have no difficulty timing the movement of your force to the portal."

"Well and good. But that still leaves the ordinary dangers: Grel-la on foot and in flyers. They may not be as thick in the area as they were, considering how much time has passed since our return." Winslow bit back his frustration at the length of time it was taking the Eilon-wë alliance to get its forces into position. He knew the difficulties they labored under—it was more like an infiltration than a mobilization—but the waiting still gnawed at him. "Nevertheless, they're still patrolling."

"Yes—and you are contemplating moving a whole group of raiders up the open slope to the portal," Ri-ahn nodded. "It would seem that your chances of success would be best if you moved under cover of a moonless night."

"Shakespeare suggested that. I'll tell you the same thing I told him: I doubt my ability to locate the portal in the dark. And a large group blundering about in search of it would have trouble staying together. I know from experience the dangers of trying to coordinate a night attack."

"Yes, Mr. Secretary Walsingham has indicated to me the nature of some of your experiences," said Ri-ahn dryly. "Fortunately, I believe I can be of assistance." He rummaged in the clutter and emerged with what looked like a small pair of the binoculars with which Winslow was already familiar, except that they were set in a headband of a flexible material that reminded Winslow of the rubber that the Portuguese had discovered in Brazil. Then he touched a tiny lever-like object in a wall, and the lights went out. Winslow didn't hope to

un-der-stand, but now he won-dered if the flame-less lights might al-so be some-how re-lat-ed to Dr. Gilbert's ex-per-iments with am-ber. The room was now dark save for dim glows from a few in-stru-ments. "Put it on," said Ri-ahn.

Winslow obeyed, slip-ping the flex-ible head-band around his head and set-ting the lens-es over his eyes. All at once he could see the room in all its de-tail, al-beit in weird shades of green. A hor-rid oath es-caped his lips. Ri-ahn smiled.

"The de-vice gath-ers light," he ex-plain-ed. "Even the tiny amount of light present-ly in this room. That's the on-ly way I can ex-plain it. It can do the same with the starlight. See-ing in this way, do you think you could find the por-tal at night?"

"I'll want to try us-ing it out-side, to see how well it works for dis-tant ob-jects. But . . . yes, I think I might. Is this one of the won-ders from your great age, be-fore the Grel-la con-quest?"

"No. It was be-yond our ca-pa-bil-ities even then. We have copied it, with great dif-fi-cul-ty, from a cap-tured Grel-la de-vice. Thus we have on-ly a very lim-it-ed sup-ply of them, de-spite their great use-ful-ness to us in evad-ing the Grel-la. But we can sup-ply one for you, and per-haps two oth-ers for your lieu-tenants—one of whom, I gath-er is go-ing to be Alan-thru . . . I mean Vir-ginia."

"Good," said Winslow, not notic-ing the slip of the tongue. He took off the light-gath-er-er, and Ri-ahn re-stored the room's light in the same in-com-pre-hen-si-ble way he had ban-ish-ed it. "I sup-pose this means," Winslow con-tin-ued, "that we no longer need to wor-ry about avoid-ing the pas-sage of these . . . moons of the Grel-la. All we need do is pro-ceed by cov-er of night."

"Un-for-tu-nate-ly, this is not the case. The moons' de-vices al-so have means of see-ing in dark-ness. You wouldn't be as vis-ible to them as you would in day-light. But for safe-ty's sake we must still plan to avoid them."

"They can do this from . . . there?" Winslow point-ed up-ward. Ri-ahn nod-ded. Winslow said no more. He was rapid-ly ceas-ing to wor-ry about things he couldn't hope to un-der-stand. He un-der-stood that he could trust Ri-ahn. That was enough.

One moon-less night, Winslow made his lone, stealthy way to the por-tal. He need-ed to be cer-tain he could find it us-ing the light-gath-er-ers. He al-so need-ed to per-form an ex-per-iment, on whose re-sults the prac-ti-cal-ity of the whole plan rest-ed. He en-tered the Near Void, walked a short dis-tance away from the por-tal, lay down, and went to sleep.

His of-ten haz-ardous life had give him the abil-ity to cat nap at need. He did so now, and awoke to find him-self still in the in-dis-tinct gray world of the Near Void. Things looked the same there as they did in day-time, con-firm-ing Ri-ahn's sup-po-si-tion that what-ev-er he was see-ing the sol-id world by was not or-di-nary light. But more im-por-tant-ly, Winslow had con-firmed his own ear-li-er im-pres-sion that once one had made the con-scious de-ci-sion to stay in the Near Void, it took an equal-ly con-scious act of will to re-turn to the ma-te-ri-al world. The raiders would be able to pause and sleep on their way to the Grel-la fortress—which, he thought, was very for-tu-nate in-deed. A forced march of thir-ty miles at a stretch was not im-pos-si-ble for young, fit, light-ly laden peo-ple. But it would be for naught if they ar-rived too weary to fight a bat-tle. And John White would prob-ably be lucky to make two fif-teen-mile march-es with a sleep pe-ri-od be-tween. Re-lieved, Winslow made his way back.

That was the on-ly tran-sit of the por-tal they dared risk in the course of their prepa-ra-tions. Winslow would have liked to take his hand-picked raiders through for fa-mil-iar-iza-tion and train-ing pur-pos-es, but it was out of the ques-tion. If they were caught en-ter-ing or ex-it-ing the por-tal, thus re-veal-ing its lo-ca-tion to the Grel-la, all would be lost. So the ac-tu-al at-tack would be their first ex-pe-ri-ence of the Near Void—a fact with which Winslow was far from hap-py.

Ac-tu-al-ly, it was even worse than that. Winslow had no way of be-ing sure that all of them would be ca-pa-ble of the kind of men-tal ef-fort re-quired to re-main in the Near Void rather than pass-ing on in-to the Deep Void. All he could do was choose men—and a cou-ple of wom-en from among the colonists' chil-dren—who seemed to pos-sess both in-tel-li-gence and

de-ter-mi-na-tion, ex-plain to them care-ful-ly what was re-quired, and hope for the best.

He al-so chose Shake-speare. The ac-tor might seem some-what out of place among a group—eleven sailors and sol-diers from Heron and nine young En-glish of this world—cho-sen as hard-bit-ten fight-ers, but at least he had proven his abil-ity to ne-go-ti-ate the Near Void. He was al-so ea-ger. Winslow on-ly wished his ea-ger-ness had a lit-tle more war-like ex-pe-ri-ence stand-ing be-hind it.

Sim-ilar con-sid-er-ations caused Winslow to re-fuse to ac-cept any Eilon-wë for the raid-ing par-ty, de-spite the pas-sion-ate en-treaties of some of the young bloods in Ri-ahn's sheuath. In the ab-sence of op-por-tu-ni-ties for ex-per-imen-ta-tion, there was still no way to know for cer-tain if the Eilon-wë could pass through por-tals the way hu-mans could, much less will them-selves to re-main in the Near Void. He could af-ford no strag-glers on this raid.

Then there was the mat-ter of equip-ment. Mov-ing through the Near Void, a hu-man could take with him as much as he could have car-ried in nor-mal con-di-tions. Tyralair was of the opin-ion that this was a lim-ita-tion im-posed by the mind, much like the walk-ing mo-tion the body un-der-went. Be that as it might, they were stuck with it. So Winslow want-ed their weapons cho-sen with care.

Firearms, as they knew, were use-less. The Grel-la hand weapons of fo-cused light, and the small en-er-gy packs that pow-ered them, were be-yond the abil-ity of the Eilon-wë to re-pro-duce. They were there-fore lim-it-ed to the pre-cious, ir-re-place-able sup-ply of cap-tured ones, most of which must be used in the frontal as-sault if it were to have a prayer of suc-cess. But Eilon-wë work-shops could re-place han-dles, stocks and trig-gers with ones suit-ed to hu-man hands. Winslow had five of these con-vert-ed weapons, all of which he as-signed to the lo-cal En-glish, who were fa-mil-iar with them.

Vir-ginia Dare took one. She al-so had a new sword made, to the same de-sign as the one which was now in the hands of the Grel-la. She loud-ly be-moaned the in-fe-ri-or-ity of the re-place-ment. But Winslow, watch-ing her prac-tice with it, was re-mind-ed of tales he had heard from a Por-tuguese mariner who had been to the fab-ulous is-lands of Japan and seen war-riors in fan-tas-ti-cal lamel-lar ar-mor wield the slight-ly curved two-hand-ed swords he had sworn were the best in the world. He had al-so sworn that their an-ces-tral fight-ing tech-nique of kendo put a force be-hind those swords' su-per-nal-ly sharp edges that could cut a man in half—the long way—with a sin-gle stroke. Winslow had thought he was hear-ing typ-ical sea sto-ries. Now he wasn't so sure. Not a man, his mind still in-sist-ed. But a Grell . . . ?

Winslow's backsword was like-wise lost. He looked over the slash-ing blades the Eilon-wë had de-signed for hu-mans, chose a two-hand-ed one, and then asked the Eilon-wë to short-en the hilt and add a lead-weight-ed pom-mel for bal-ance. The re-sult was a one-hand-ed sword with au-thor-ity. He want-ed it one-hand-ed so he could si-mul-ta-ne-ous-ly wield a fa-vorite knife of his: an old-fash-ioned but still very ser-vice-able ex-am-ple of the bal-lock dag-ger, so called be-cause of the sug-ges-tive shape of the guard.

Each of those who did not have one of the mod-ified Grel-la weapons car-ried a small but heavy bomb of Eilon-wë make which could be set to ex-plode at a de-sired in-stant. Winslow was skep-ti-cal of their util-ity. It would, of course, be won-der-ful to leave a trail of such things be-hind them as they ad-vanced in-to the fortress. But they couldn't, un-less the peo-ple car-ry-ing them reen-tered the ma-te-ri-al world—which, of course, meant that they'd be strand-ed there, in full view of the Grel-la. Still, he had agreed to take the things. One nev-er knew what would prove use-ful.

Oth-er-wise, ev-ery-one car-ried his or her usu-al weapon—in-clud-ing, in Shake-speare's case, his board-ing pike. John White, about whose pres-ence Winslow still had mis-giv-ings, would take the light-est sword he could bor-row, and a stilet-to.

Mil-itary am-ateurs like Wals-ing-ham and Dee, falling in-to the com-mon fal-la-cy of equat-ing num-bers with strength, won-dered aloud why Winslow wasn't tak-ing ev-ery able-bod-ied hu-man fight-er avail-able. He did his best to ex-plain it to them. In an in-fil-tra-tion raid like this, num-bers

were secondary. He preferred to appear inside the Grel-la fortress with a few raiders he felt he could be sure of. The other humans could do more good by stiffening the spine of the Eilon-wë assault. He finally carried the point by citing the Biblical precedent of Gideon, who had overthrown the Midianites with three hundred reliable men winnowed from 32,000 volunteers. In the meantime, he put the enforced delay to good use by training his twenty-three people as thoroughly as circumstances permitted.

He also trained himself. He was exercising with his hybrid sword in his room beneath the great ruined building when he heard a sound at the door. Obeying battle-honed reflexes, he whirled in that direction, sword raised over and behind his head and dagger-armed left hand extending forward for balance. Then he saw who it was and relaxed, although it took a second before he recognized Virginia Dare. He had never seen her wavy dark-chestnut hair hanging free, unconfined by its usual thick braid.

"Interesting design for a hand-guard," she commented, indicating the two balls at the base of the dagger's blade.

"Uh, ahem, yes," he muttered, hastily putting the ballock dagger aside and lowering his sword. "Won't you come in?"

She entered but did not sit down. Instead she rested her back against the wall and stood with her hands behind her, in a posture Winslow had never seen her adopt. For a moment there was silence.

"Do you think this is going to work?" she asked without preamble.

"Of course!" He put heartiness in his voice. "Sett 44 and all his fellow vermin will be foul themselves, or whatever it is the Grel-la do, when we appear in their midst. And after thousands of years of bullying the Eilon-wë, they won't know how to deal with a concerted attack on their stronghold."

"And afterwards? . . . we'll be able to return to England?" She laughed unsteadily. "Will you listen to me? 'Return,' when I've never been there! But you know what I mean."

"Why, yes. We'll take a load of captured weapons back, whip the Dons out of England, and cleanse the world of the Gray Monks." He raised an eyebrow. "Why do you ask? Do you doubt it?"

"No, not really. I just wanted reassurance." Then, without the slightest change of tone or expression: "Do you have a wife or a sweetheart in England?"

"Wha—! Why, that is, no. I've never had the opportunity, you might say. And you? Among the young Englishmen here?"

"No." The negative was flat and emphatic. "We don't . . ." Her face reddened. "We don't . . . well, we only do things that . . . can't cause children to be conceived."

"But children—quite a few of them—have been born to the colonists in this world. I'm going to be leading several of them on the raid."

"Oh, yes. The elders continued to have children here. For them it was . . . habit, I suppose. They couldn't imagine not doing it. But their children—those born here and those of us who arrived here as babes—have not. Haven't you noticed the absence of small ones?"

Winslow hadn't, and now he wondered why he hadn't. In England, girls typically began child-bearing in their mid teens. Even if half the infants died, as was also typical, there ought to be a gaggle of children under five or so here. But there were none.

"Why?" he asked.

"What right had we to bring children into the world—this world, that offered them nothing except inescapable doom? Life has held nothing for us except an endless, hope-less twilight struggle against the Grel-la. We would not force innocent children to join us in that trap. At first the elders thought we were being sinful, violating God's command to be fruitful and multiply. But they finally came to understand, and even to agree."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Winslow after a lengthy silence.

"Because now things have changed." She advanced a step toward him. "We've been

of-fered a way out of the trap. You have of-fered it to us. You've opened up pos-si-bil-ities we nev-er dared dream of. The old rea-son-ing no longer com-pels me, and I want to re-ject it." She drew a deep, un-steady breath. "I want to have a child."

All at once, Winslow be-came un-com-fort-ably aware of how long it had been. And of how much he had want-ed Vir-ginia Dare since the mo-ment he had first seen her.

But some-thing with-in would not per-mit him to let this go any fur-ther with-out say-ing, "Our suc-cess isn't as-sured, you know."

She gave the same bold smile she had worn when their eyes had first met, and it was as if a bow-string twanged in his heart. "No, and I know well enough that think-ing so is the short-est road to de-feat. So let's give our-selves a rea-son why we must suc-ceed." She stepped clos-er. She wore none of the per-fumes of court-ly ladies in Eng-land. But he could smell wom-an.

And it came to him that she was right. By risk-ing a con-cep-tion that would vi-olate the tenets of her past life, she was throw-ing those tenets and that life to the winds and com-mit-ting her-self ab-so-lute-ly to the bold en-ter-prise on which they were em-barked.

But then she took an-oth-er step for-ward, and all such thoughts fled his mind. There was on-ly her. Their hands sought each oth-er as if by a will of their own. Then they were in each oth-er's arms.

"Do it!" she whis-pered harsh-ly in his ear. Then, with sud-den prac-ti-cal-ity: "And bear in mind that I'm a vir-gin."

He did so, with a gen-tle-ness he had nev-er used be-fore, and a depth of joy he had nev-er ex-pe-ri-enced.

There were scat-tered clouds, but enough stars were out for the light gath-er-ers to work their mag-ic as twen-ty-four fig-ures made their silent way through the predawn dark-ness, up the slope of Elf Hill.

The tor-tur-ous pro-cess of get-ting the Eilon-wë forces in-to po-si-tion un-de-tect-ed was fi-nal-ly com-plete. There they would wait for two days, giv-ing Winl-sow's par-ty time to march to the Grel-la fortress, en-ter it, and emerge fight-ing at the pre-de-ter-mined in-stant. Winslow would know when that in-stant had ar-rived be-cause he wore strapped to his wrist a mar-velous-ly tiny time-piece of Eilon-wë make. Nat-ural-ly its mark-ings bore no re-la-tion to hon-est En-glish hours, but Ri-ahn had shown him where the con-stant-ly mov-ing lit-tle point-er would be at the time the frontal as-sault would com-mence. He had sworn to be in po-si-tion by then, know-ing full well that if he wasn't the out-side at-tack-ers were doomed.

They con-tin-ued up-hill through the night, and Winslow looked around at the green-tint-ed world re-vealed by his light gath-er-er. Vir-ginia Dare and Shake-speare wore the oth-er two. A tight-ly grouped clump of sev-en fol-lowed close-ly be-hind each of the three of them, run-ning through the dark in re-liance on their guides.

"All right," Winslow called out in low tones, puff-ing for breath. "We're just about there. Re-mem-ber what you've been told." He led the way over the last few steps.

"Cap-tain!" yelled Shake-speare, shat-ter-ing their rule of si-lence, "it's a Grel-la fly-er!"

Winslow's head snapped around to fol-low the ac-tor's point-ing fin-ger. The fly-er was swoop-ing in, its run-ning lights glar-ing with un-nat-ural bright-ness in the light gath-er-ers. And of course, he thought with some-thing close to pan-ic, it would car-ry its own de-vices for see-ing in the dark.

"Stop!" he shout-ed, jar-ring to a halt. "Turn back! We can't let them see—"

It was too late. Even as he spoke, the green-ish world of the light gath-er-ers fad-ed in-to the even stranger gray-ish one of the Near Void.

He wrenched off the head-band. Now they could all see equal-ly well, and they all stood star-ing up at the fly-er that could no longer see them. It hov-ered over-head, cir-cling slow-ly, search-ing for the fig-ures that had van-ish-ed. Fi-nal-ly, it turned west and flew away up the val-ley, to-ward the fortress, where its crew would re-port that the long-sought por-tal had been found.

Winslow took a quick roll call. Two men—a sailor named Foote from Heron, and John Prat, who had sailed to Vir-ginia as a boy—were miss-ing. They must have proven un-able to re-main in the Near Void, and passed on in-to the Deep Void, which meant that by now they were on Croa-toan Is-land.

Winslow had giv-en ev-ery-one strict in-struc-tion for such an even-tu-al-ity: they were to re-main on Croa-toan, seek-ing out Man-teo's peo-ple and mak-ing no at-tempt to re-turn to the world of the Eilon-wë, where their emer-gence at the por-tal would re-veal its lo-ca-tion.

Not, he thought bit-ter-ly, that it made any dif-fer-ence now.

“What do we do now, Cap-tain?” asked John White.

“Do?” he snarled. “What do you think we're go-ing to do? We're go-ing to do what we planned to do. On-ly now it's not just a clever idea. It's some-thing that can-not be al-lowed to fail. Don't you see?” He looked around. Shake-speare wore an ex-pres-sion of somber un-der-stand-ing that was be-yond his years, but the oth-ers seemed be-wil-dered. Winslow forced calm-ness on him-self and ex-plain-ed. “The Grel-la aboard that fly-ing boat watched as we dis-ap-peared. They know where the por-tal is. So now we have to crush them in this world and seal it off against oth-ers of their kind. Oth-er-wise, they'll come pour-ing through in-to our world. Noth-ing there will be able to stand against them. The fate of Eng-land, and of all our God's cre-ation, rests with us.”

“With-out in-ten-tion, we showed them the way,” said Shake-speare qui-et-ly. “It is up to us to put things right.”

Winslow silent-ly locked eyes with Vir-ginia Dare. They had sought to com-mit them-selves to the suc-cess of this raid in the most ir-re-vo-ca-ble way of which mor-tals were ca-pa-ble. It turned out they might as well have saved them-selves the trou-ble.

Not, of course, that he re-gret-ted it.

“But Cap-tain,” some-one asked, “won't the Grel-la in the fortress be on the alert for us?”

“No. They al-ready know that we hu-mans can pass through por-tals, but they don't know about our abil-ity to linger in the Near Void at will. They'll think the fig-ures they saw van-ish-ing here tonight will have passed on in-to our world. That's our one ad-van-tage. Now let's use it!”

With-out an-oth-er word, and with-out look-ing back, he turned and strode west. He heard the oth-ers fol-low-ing be-hind him.

Fifteen

It might well be true, as Tyr-lair as-sert-ed, that move-ment in the Near Void was pure-ly ethe-re-al, in-volv-ing no ac-tu-al phys-ical ef-fort, and that the ap-par-ent mo-tion of walk-ing was a fig-ment of their minds. But weari-ness is, in the last anal-ysis, a func-tion of the mind, and it felt like they were march-ing.

Nev-er-the-less, Winslow kept them at it for al-most twen-ty miles, with on-ly a cou-ple of breaks for food and wa-ter, be-fore call-ing a halt. He want-ed to ar-rive at their des-ti-na-tion ear-ly, with plen-ty of time for scout-ing and po-si-tion-ing. They all kept up, even John White, about whom Winslow had been wor-ried. Per-haps it was sim-ply that no one want-ed to be left be-hind in this un-can-ny state. Af-ter-wards, they all fell in-to a re-lieved sleep even though in this realm night and day were the same. One good thing: there was no need to post watch-es, in this realm that was in some in-com-pre-hen-si-ble fash-ion out-side or be-side the re-al world.

A buzzing sound some-how made by the wrist time-piece awoke Winslow at a pre-de-ter-mined time, and they re-sumed their march up the val-ley, through the strange shad-ow-less lu-mi-nes-cence. This time they on-ly had to cov-er twelve or so miles be-fore the vast arch loomed up in the dis-tance against the pearl-col-ored wes-ter-ing sun. Near its base clus-tered the un-nat-ural struc-tures Winslow had seen be-fore, seem-ing like toy hous-es from here, dom-inat-ed by the grim dome off to one side. He had told all his peo-ple what to ex-pect, so there weren't too many mut-tered oaths.

All at once, vis-ible even at this dis-tance, the arch be-gan to flick-er with lights around its

edges, colorless white of course but as bright as anything ever looked as viewed from Near Void. That was all the warning they had before a Grel-la air-ship was suddenly present under the arch in all its massiveness, speeding in their direction and growing with impossible rapidity.

This time there were cries. Afterwards, Winslow wouldn't have sworn that his own wasn't among them. But then the air-ship slowed and swung off to port toward an open expanse that had to be a landing field. Winslow heard a collective whoosh of released breath behind him.

"Remember what Ri-ahn has always told us?" Virginia Dare whispered. "About how the Grel-la force their way directly through the Inner Void from one world to another, ripping open a portal with the forces they can command?"

"Yes," Winslow nodded, watching the air-ship settle down to a landing.

"Well, I wonder if the arch is a way of avoiding having to do that."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe, after opening a portal, they can build an arch like that and it provides the force. That way, a flying ship of theirs doesn't have to provide it."

"And therefore," Winslow took up the thought, "any ship of theirs can make the transit, not just specially outfitted ships like the one that burst through into our world a century ago as we measure time. Yes, that would pay for itself after a while, no matter how much the arch cost to build." He discovered that like all the others he had—involuntarily, absurdly—gone to his knees in the instant when that vessel had seemed to be shooting unerringly toward them. Slightly embarrassed, he rose to his feet. "Well, the point now is that they're going to be unloading a newly arrived vessel. Unless this place differs from all other ports I've ever seen, that's going to be engaging a lot of people's attention and causing a lot of confusion, which can only work to our benefit. Let's go. I want to see the inside of those gun emplacements."

They moved on, and soon they were among the outer structures. Winslow took the opportunity to lead them through walls, remembering how his own automatic rejection of such a manifest impossibility had needed to be overcome by experience. Even worse was the first time they saw the ghostly forms of Grel-la, and walked past and even through them. There was a general gasping and convulsive clutching of weapons before they all could accept the fact that they were invisible and impalpable.

They reached and entered one of the great weapon turrets that surrounded the dome. Winslow's plan was to leave a man inside each of those turrets facing the side from which the Eilonwë attack would come, to appear out of nowhere at the appointed time and slash the stunned Grel-la gun crew to pieces. But now . . .

"Where the Devil is the crew stationed?" he demanded of Virginia Dare as he looked around at a nearly solid mass of incomprehensible machinery.

"I don't think there is a crew," she said thoughtfully. "I think the weapon aims and fires itself in response to commands from afar. All the turrets are controlled from one central location, doubtless inside the dome."

"But—" Winslow clamped his jaw shut, reminding himself that the word impossible had a different meaning in this world, if indeed it had any meaning at all. He thought furiously. "We could leave one of our bombs here—"

"—but only if the man carrying it re-enters the material world," Shakespeare finished for him. And is stranded there, he didn't need to add.

The Welsh soldier Owain shouldered forward. "Captain, give me as many bombs as I can carry. I'll drop out of Dom-Daniel, leave one of them here, then move on to other turrets, leaving one in each."

"But Owain, you'll be unable to return to, uh, Dom-Daniel. You'll no longer be able to walk through the walls of the turrets. And the Grel-la will be able to see you."

"And kill or capture you," added Virginia Dare. "You're a brave man, Owain. But the instant

you're caught they'll raise the alarm and our ad-van-tage of sur-prise will be gone."

"They'll have to catch me first!" A grin wreathed dark fea-tures which held the blood's mem-ories of Ro-mans and Phoeni-cians and Celts and name-less peo-ples far old-er than the Celts, who had raised the stand-ing stones. "In my younger days, be-fore en-ter-ing Her Majesty's ser-vice, I had some small ex-pe-ri-ence at, shall we say, mov-ing about in-con-spic-u-ous-ly af-ter dark."

"Poach-ing," Winslow stat-ed short-ly.

Owain gave him a hurt look. "That's a mat-ter of def-ini-tion, Cap-tain. But be that as it may, if I could stay one step ahead of the damned En-glish—no of-fense, Cap-tain and mi-la-dy!—I'll wa-ger I can do the same with the Grel-la. Be-sides," he added with a wink, "there is one place here-about-s where I can duck out of the mun-dane world again." He smiled and sketched an arch with a fore-fin-ger.

"I nev-er thought of that," Shake-speare breathed. "But yes, there is an-oth-er por-tal here, isn't there?"

"One so ob-vi-ous that none of us thought of it," Winslow nod-ded.

"But," protest-ed Vir-ginia Dare, "the arch is on the far side of this city. You'll nev-er make it so far, Owain."

"It would hard-ly be eth-ical for me to place a bet on that," the Welsh-man grinned, "con-sid-er-ing that if I lose I'll nev-er have to wor-ry about pay-ing up!" Sober-ing, he turned to Winslow. "Let me try it, Cap-tain. I'll find a way—a nat-ural way—in-to the tur-rets, so I can plant the bombs. Then I'll work my way to-ward the arch. But I'll make it my first con-cern to stay out of their sight."

"Very well. Do it. But you'll on-ly be the sec-ond string to our bow. The rest of us will con-tin-ue on in-to the dome, try to find the place from which Vir-ginia says they con-trol their de-fens-es, and ap-pear there at the mo-ment of the at-tack as we orig-inal-ly planned." Winslow smiled grim-ly. "We'll use their own pow-ers against them. If they can com-mand ev-ery-thing from one place, then they're vul-ner-able at that place. And if their sub-or-di-nate of-fi-cers are used to be-ing able to re-port to their dis-tant lead-ers and get in-struc-tions back in the blink of an eye, they've prob-ably lost the abil-ity to act on their own ini-tia-tive. We'll par-alyze them!"

Owain took four men's bombs, which were all he could car-ry be-sides his own. Vir-ginia Dare, who knew the Eilon-wë sym-bols and had been in-struct-ed in the rel-ative-ly sim-ple pro-ce-dure, set the bombs' timers for the mo-ment the at-tack was to be-gin. Then she gave Owain a quick, hard hug. All the oth-ers mut-tered their farewells. He gave a last jaun-ty wave and as-sumed a look of con-cen-tra-tion.

All at once he was no longer sharply out-lined and ful-ly col-ored, but had tak-en his place in the in-dis-tinct gray-ness of the ma-te-ri-al world. They watched as he turned his back on the com-pan-ions he could no longer see or hear and set about find-ing a cru-cial-seem-ing place in the ma-chin-ery where a bomb could be hid-den and, hope-ful-ly, ex-plode with crip-pling ef-fect. Fin-ish-ing his task, he ex-it-ed the tur-ret through a hatch-way.

"All right," Winslow told the oth-ers, "let's get in-side the dome. We don't know how long it will take to lo-cate this con-trol cen-ter."

They set out through the walls and pas-sage-ways of the out-er city. Winslow had nev-er tra-versed this labyrinth, on-ly over-flown it. He could nev-er have found his way through the maze had it not been for the enor-mous, sin-is-ter dome that loomed over it, giv-ing them an ob-jec-tive. They came to the dome's ter-raced, weapon-bristling base and passed through it in their in-cor-po-re-al way. Once in-side, the raiders stopped, awestruck and gazed about them. A cou-ple of clan-des-tine Catholics from Heron's crew for-got them-selves and made the sign of the cross. Winslow, re-mem-ber-ing his own ini-tial re-ac-tion, couldn't blame them.

He de-cid-ed his orig-inal im-pres-sion of a city with-in a city had been ac-cu-rate. The Grel-la they en-coun-tered here moved about with an air of dis-ci-plined pur-pose ab-sent from those out-side the dome. This was the citadel.

“Re-mem-ber that large cen-tral build-ing we were tak-en to for ques-tion-ing?” he said to Vir-ginia Dare. “Sure-ly that’s where the con-trol cham-ber will be.”

“We don’t know that for cer-tain,” she cau-tioned.

“Still, it’s the way to bet.” He led the way, try-ing to re-mem-ber land-marks he had sight-ed be-fore.

The sun had set-tled be-hind a low-ly-ing wrack of clouds, and the sky was dark gray with on-com-ing dusk, when Owain emerged from the weapon tur-ret. He saw no Grel-la about, but fly-ers were drift-ing by over-head. He found a niche be-tween two near-by build-ings and set-tled in to await the fall of night.

As the stars came out, he dis-cov-ered it was hard-ly worth the wait. The mag-ic ar-ti-fi-cial lights—the Eilon-wë in-sist-ed that they weren’t mag-ic, but Owain wasn’t tak-en in by that for a mo-ment—be-gan to wink on, un-til the il-lu-mi-na-tion ex-ceed-ed that of a full moon. At least it wasn’t as bright here as it was on the out-skirts, where pow-er-ful beams of light turned the edges of the for-est in-to day.

It made sense, Owain re-flect-ed with a nod. The Grel-la gun-ners who, ac-cord-ing to Mis-tress Dare, were con-trol-ling the weapon tur-rets from afar in some sor-cer-ous way, would be able to clear-ly see any at-tack-ers who emerged from the woods . . . as the Eilon-wë would soon be do-ing.

The thought re-mind-ed him of the ur-gen-cy of his mis-sion. Heft-ing his load of bombs, he emerged cau-tious-ly from his bolt hole and looked around. Off to his right, he sight-ed an-oth-er of the tur-rets—they were tall, to give them a clear field of fire over the low build-ings, and re-flect-ed the un-nat-ural light. He be-gan mov-ing stealthi-ly in that di-rec-tion, keep-ing as much as pos-si-ble in the shad-ows cast by the build-ings.

Very few Grel-la seemed to be out. Owain was con-grat-ulat-ing him-self on his good for-tune in that re-gard when he turned a cor-ner and a fig-ure ap-peared ahead. He flat-tened him-self against a shad-owed wall and held his breath, but there was no com-mo-tion. Eas-ing him-self away from the wall with great cau-tion, he saw the fig-ure shuf-fling away, and as it passed un-der the lights he saw it for what it was: one of the soul-robbed Eilon-wë slaves. It con-tin-ued on in-to an area where low huts clus-tered among sparse-fo-liaged trees. The area was dim-ly lit, but Owain could make out oth-er fig-ures, all mov-ing in the same list-less way to-ward the huts. Ev-ident-ly this was their cur-few time—and their sub-ju-ga-tion was so com-plete that the Grel-la need not even herd them in-to the kind of pens Owain had imag-ined. A shud-der of loathing ran through him, for he now knew there were worse things than death—worse even than or-di-nary slav-ery.

He re-ject-ed his half-formed thought of seek-ing the slaves’ aid. These en-sor-celled crea-tures couldn’t even wish to help him free their race. But at least they wouldn’t be very alert. He hur-ried past, flit-ting from one shad-ow to an-oth-er, and made his way to the tur-ret.

Re-mem-ber-ing how he had got-ten out of the first one, he turned a wheel on the hatch-way and swung it open. Ap-par-ent-ly there was no need for locks here, where there was—or was sup-posed to be—no one but the Grel-la them-selves and their mind-less servi-tors. As ex-pect-ed, the in-te-ri-or was iden-ti-cal to the one he had seen pre-vi-ous-ly. He placed a bomb in the same crit-ical-seem-ing place, hop-ing as be-fore that he was right about its crit-ical-ity, and moved on.

He had placed an-oth-er bomb in an-oth-er tur-ret, not far from the arch, be-fore old habits caught up with him. His pre-vi-ous ex-pe-ri-ence with elu-sive-ness had taught him to keep a sharp eye in all di-rec-tions—ex-cept up-ward. So he had no warn-ing when a beam of daz-zling light from a Grel-la fly-er speared him from over-head.

An ul-ulat-ing wail from the fly-er brought him out of his mo-men-tary paral-ysis, and he saw Grel-la fig-ures ap-proach-ing at a run, their hand-held light pierc-ing the dark-ness. He sprint-ed in-to the shad-ows, drop-ping his bombs and let-ting them roll. It was too bad he couldn’t det-onate them, but at least they would pro-vide con-fus-ing dis-trac-tion when they roared to life

at the time Mis-tress Dare had set them for. And with-out their weight, he was able to dart among the build-ings. The fly-er was easy to evade, but he knew with cold cer-tain-ty that the foot pa-trol would find him.

His half-jok-ing boast was sud-den-ly no longer a joke. Dart-ing from shad-ow to shad-ow, he made his way to-ward the arch.

The raiders reached the cen-tral struc-ture and passed through its walls. Winslow rec-og-nized some of the cor-ri-dors through which he had been led as a pris-on-er.

“What is this con-trol cen-ter go-ing to look like?” he de-mand-ed of Vir-ginia Dare.

“How should I know? Al-though,” she amend-ed, “I’m sure it will have lots of the . . . desks with but-tons and lights where the Grel-la sit when they’re con-trol-ling things at a dis-tance. Oh, and it will prob-ably have screens of glass, or some-thing like glass, on which you can see dis-tant im-ages as though you were there.”

Some-thing else to do with Dr. Gilbert’s ex-per-iments with am-ber, Winslow thought, and left off any at-tempt to un-der-stand it be-yond that. In-stead, he led them from one room to an-oth-er with in-creas-ing haste and anx-iety, look-ing for what Vi-rig-ina Dare had de-scribed.

He was glad he had pushed them so hard on the pre-vi-ous march, so as to ar-rive here ahead of sched-ule. But his self-con-grat-ula-tion was tem-per-ed by his gnaw-ing fear that they still might not have al-lowed them-selves enough time to find what they sought, in this op-pres-sive labyrinth.

They found them-selves in a kind of foy-er, with dou-ble door-way to one side. All at once, the doors slid aside to re-veal what looked like an emp-ty clos-et—emp-ty save for two Grel-la, who emerged and walked away. The doors slid shut be-hind them. Winslow won-dered what they could pos-si-bly have been do-ing in-side that tiny, bare cham-ber.

Vir-ginia Dare grabbed him by the arm. “I have it! That lit-tle room—it goes up and down. The Eilon-wë had them in their great age, us-ing some kind of pul-leys. They’re for get-ting from one floor to an-oth-er with-out hav-ing to climb stairs. There must be lev-els be-low this. And that’s where the Grel-la will have their con-trol cen-ter. It would be the most se-cure place.”

“But how do we make this . . . mov-ing clos-et take us down?”

“We don’t have to. They must have stairs—or ramps, which the Grel-la pre-fer—in case the pow-er fails.”

Winslow looked around, and point-ed to a door off to the side. “Let’s try that.”

They de-scend-ed the ramp, past sev-er-al switch-backs. Fi-nal-ly there was no fur-ther to go. They emerged through a wide door-way in-to a vast cir-cu-lar cham-ber whose walls were lined with what Vir-ginia Dare had tried to de-scribe: large win-dows that looked out on scenes far away—on the out-skirts of the city, or so it seemed to Winslow, for the ar-ti-fi-cial-ly lit land-scape they re-vealed looked like the weapon tur-rets’ fields of fire. The floor was large-ly cov-ered by con-cen-tric, out-ward-fac-ing rings of the in-stru-ment-bear-ing desks, most of which seemed to have their own small-er ver-sions of the glasslike screens on the walls. Grel-la sat at most of these desks, but by no means all, and the scene held an un-mis-tak-able qual-ity of hum-drum rou-tine.

At the cen-ter of the cham-ber, like the hub of a wheel, was what looked un-mis-tak-ably like a citadel with-in the citadel: an oc-tag-onal space com-plete-ly en-closed by ar-mored walls that rose to the ceil-ing.

Winslow, ig-nor-ing the ner-vous mut-ter-ings of his fol-low-ers as they gazed at those sor-cer-ous-seem-ing win-dows, turned to Vir-ginia Dare and in-di-cat-ed the Grel-la in the cham-ber. “These must be the watch—the ones who’re now on du-ty.”

“Yes. They have no rea-son to sus-pect that this is any-thing but an or-di-nary day. When the alarm is sound-ed, they’ll bring in a full crew to man all these desks.” She gazed in-tent-ly at the cen-tral stronghold. “Un-less I miss my guess, the lead-ers di-rect things from in there, where they’ll be even safer and where they can see their un-der-lings with-out be-ing seen. They’ll en-ter it di-rect-ly from the up-per floors, by way of the mov-ing clos-ets.”

Winslow glanced at his time-piece—and bit back a star-tled oath. Find-ing this place had

tak-en them longer than he'd planned, and there was lit-tle time left be-fore the Eilon-wë would launch their as-sault. He thought fu-ri-ous-ly.

“Vir-ginia, set two of our re-main-ing bombs to ex-plode five min-utes af-ter the time for the at-tack.” She gave him a sharp look, but knew this was no time for ar-gu-ments or ques-tions. As she set to work, he turned to Shake-speare. “Will, I want you to take these two bombs, go back up the ramp we just came down, and wait at the first land-ing. When the at-tack be-gins, reen-ter the nor-mal world and leave the bombs on the land-ing, one to each side of the pas-sage-way. Then come back down here and re-join us.”

“Uh . . . how will I know when the set time is, Cap-tain?” Shake-speare in-di-cat-ed the time-piece which Winslow wore and he did not.

“Trust me: you'll hear a lot of noise down here. That will be your sig-nal.” Winslow grasped Shake-speare by the shoul-ders. “This is im-por-tant, Will. I'm en-trust-ing it to you be-cause I need a man I can re-ly on.” There was al-so the fact that the ac-tor was less like-ly than any-one else, with the pos-si-ble ex-cep-tion of John White, to be use-ful once the fight-ing broke out, but Winslow saw no press-ing need to men-tion that. Shake-speare swelled a bit with a young man's pride in be-ing giv-en a re-spon-si-ble charge, took the bombs, and scur-ried off.

“Now,” said Winslow, in-di-cat-ing the ar-mored com-mand cen-ter, “let's scout that out.”

The en-closed cham-ber held on-ly one Grell, wear-ing the chest in-signia of rank, al-though there were chairs and desks for sev-er-al oth-ers in an out-ward-fac-ing semi-cir-cle from which an ar-ray of glass screens showed var-ious views, in-clud-ing the large room out-side. In the very cen-ter of the cham-ber, on a kind of raised dais, was a cir-cu-lar desk over-look-ing ev-ery-thing. Di-rect-ly above it, set in-to the ceil-ing, was a dome of ob-scure pur-pose.

“So there's just one of-fi-cer of the watch,” Winslow stat-ed, not even need-ing con-fir-ma-tion from Vir-ginia Dare. As she had pre-dict-ed, there was one of the dou-ble doors of the lit-tle mov-ing rooms. An-oth-er, very se-cure-look-ing door gave egress to the main space be-yond.

Winslow reached a de-ci-sion, and turned to a sailor who was, if not pre-cise-ly bril-liant, ut-ter-ly re-li-able. “Grim-son, re-main in here. When we ap-pear in the out-er room and start killing, you'll see us in that . . . win-dow. At that mo-ment, re-turn to the re-al world in the way I've ex-plain-ed to you and kill this Grell. Then open the door to ad-mit the rest of us, and stand guard here, at this dou-ble door, and kill any Grell-la that come through.” He grinned. “While you're wait-ing for them, you can amuse your-self by smash-ing as many of these in-stru-ments as you can.”

“Aye, Cap-tain,” Grim-son ac-knowl-edged, knuck-ling his fore-lock.

The rest of them passed through the ar-mored walls—the last time they'd be able to do that, Winslow re-lect-ed—and spread out, draw-ing their weapons and tak-ing up what-ev-er po-si-tions suit-ed them. He him-self stood to the side of a desk be-hind which sat a Grell who couldn't yet see him. He had no com-punc-tions about killing a Grell from be-hind, any more than he would have in the case of any oth-er ver-min. But he want-ed this one to see him first. To his amuse-ment, he was able to care-ful-ly line up his stroke against the neck of the obliv-ious Grell. Even more amus-ing-ly, he brought the blade through the un-feel-ing neck be-fore re-sum-ing his stance.

He stole a glance at his time-piece. It was time.

Abrupt-ly, the in-stru-ment pan-els flashed in-to ac-tiv-ity. On the large glass screens around the out-er walls, cap-tured weapons in Eilon-wë hands be-gan to flash in the dark-ness. The Grell-la at the desks jerked to at-ten-tion and be-gan shout-ing sound-less-ly at each oth-er.

“NOW!” shout-ed Winslow.

He him-self was the first to re-sume phys-ical ac-tu-al-ity. The world around him snapped in-to so-lid-ity and col-or and noise, as-sault-ing his sens-es with a sud-den-ness that would have been start-ling if he hadn't been pre-pared for it.

The Grell in front of him cer-tain-ly wasn't pre-pared for his abrupt ap-pear-ance out of nowhere. The alien mouth opened, and was still open-ing when Winslow's sword flashed around in

a glit-ter-ing three-quar-ter cir-cle, and his head flew from his body in a spray of what-ev-er the Grel-la used for blood.

Then the oth-er En-glish be-gan to pop in-to ex-is-tence, and all Hell broke loose.

Sixteen

It was a slaugh-ter. None of the Grel-la was armed, here where no en-emy could pos-si-bly reach them. And even if they had car-ried weapons, they would have been too stunned to use them as the hu-mans in-ex-pli-ca-bly popped in-to ex-is-tence and be-gan slash-ing, stab-bing and hack-ing the life from them. The qua-ver-ing high-pitched hiss-ing sounds of Grel-la screams were lost in the shrill alarm that must be sum-mon-ing the rest of the com-mand cen-ter's crew.

That thought made Winslow pause in the killing and look to-ward the ramp. Where is Shake-speare? he won-dered anx-ious-ly. Much de-pend-ed on the place-ment of the two bombs in the pas-sage-way.

At that in-stant the young ac-tor sprint-ed through the en-try-way. "Cap-tain," he gasped, "they're close be-hind me!"

"Did you leave the bombs as I told you?" Winslow de-mand-ed. He didn't know how much time had passed

since the at-tack had be-gun, but he was sure it was less than it seemed, as was al-ways the case in bat-tle.

"Yes, but—"

The first of the Grel-la emerged . . . on-ly they weren't Grel-la. A wave of the Eilon-wë slaves came through first, ad-vanc-ing in their night-mar-ish mind-con-trolled way.

"Weapons on stun!" cried Vir-ginia Dare to those of her fel-low En-glish colonists who bore the mod-ified Grel-la weapons. The flick-er-ing beams shot out, and the slaves tum-bled in un-con-scious-ness. Noth-ing more could be done for them now. If this bat-tle was won, the Eilon-wë mind-doc-tors would go to work. If it was lost . . . but that didn't bear think-ing about.

Then the Grel-la them-selves ap-peared. Some of them were tech-ni-cians like those the En-glish had just fin-ished killing, but oth-ers were sol-diers, trained to re-act cool-ly in unan-tic-ipat-ed sit-ua-tions and armed with the light-weapons. Those weapons were not set to stun. With ev-ery bare-ly vis-ible beam, an En-glish-man died.

Then, with a con-cus-sion that caused the floor to jump be-neath Winslow's feet, Shake-speare's bombs went off. The blast, fun-neled through the en-try-way, blew the just-emerged Grel-la off their feet. Be-hind them, the roof of the ramp's pas-sage-way col-lapsed, as Winslow had rather hoped it would when he'd told Shake-speare to place his bombs on op-po-site sides of it. The com-mand cen-ter was now sealed off.

The Grel-la stum-bled to their feet on-ly to face a berserk charge by En-glish-men and En-glish-wom-en whose fury had been stroked to white heat by the sight of those soul-robbed slaves—the fate that await-ed them in the event of de-feat. They didn't even both-er with the blood-less light-weapons.

Winslow struck a Grell's weapon aside with his sword be-fore the alien could bring it to bear. With his left hand he plunged his dag-ger in, then with-drew it with a twist he hoped would be as dis-em-bow-el-ing as it would have been with a hu-man bel-ly. The re-sults did not dis-ap-point him. Off to one side he saw Vir-ginia Dare bring her two-hand-ed sword down in a di-ag-onal slash that sliced in-to a Grell's right shoul-der and ex-it-ed be-low the left armpit. The Grell fell to the floor with two dis-tinct thuds.

Maybe, Winslow re-flect-ed, awestruck, that Por-tuguese wasn't such a liar af-ter all.

"All right," he called out to the re-main-ing En-glish, now alone. "Let's take care of that cen-tral cham-ber!" He point-ed with his sword to-ward the door . . . which he now saw was still closed.

Be-fore he could say more, a pale death beam lashed out from a weapon set on the out-side of that ar-mored wall in a flex-ible mount just un-der the ceil-ing above the door. A Heron crew-man screamed as it im-paled him and his body flu-ids ex-plod-ed out-ward in a burst of steam.

“Take cov-er!” Winslow yelled. They all scram-bled be-hind the con-trol desks, which proved ca-pa-ble of stop-ping the beams—at least for now. He crouched be-hind one with Vir-ginia Dare, Shake-speare and John White as the beams tore at it.

“What hap-pened to Grim-son?” de-mand-ed Vir-ginia Dare.

“He must be dead,” Winslow grat-ed. “The Grel-la must have some kind of death trap in there.”

“In their own in-ner sanc-tum?” gasped John White.

“We’ve seen that their over-lords don’t even trust their own un-der-lings, and are pre-pared to kill them,” said Winslow as an-oth-er light beam at-tempt-ed to drill through the bar-ri-er that shel-tered them. “Who else would that weapon be aimed at?”

He looked around at the still-func-tion-ing vi-sion screens that lined the cham-ber’s walls. The bat-tle was rag-ing at the city’s perime-ter. As he watched, a for-ma-tion of Grel-la fly-ers swooped out, their weapons seek-ing the Eilon-wë in the for-est. But the beams of cap-tured and long-hoard-ed Grel-la heavy weapons stabbed out—blind-ing-ly, for these were the kind of weapons that had been used against the En-glish fleet, de-stroy-ing mat-ter by bring-ing it in-to con-tact with its in-tol-er-able nega-tion—and one by one the fly-ers ex-plod-ed in a blind-ing ef-ful-gence of light. An in-vol-un-tary cheer burst from Winslow’s throat as he watched St. Antony’s fire turned on its cre-at-ors.

But his cheer died in his throat, for some of the Grel-la weapon tur-rets were still in ac-tion, and they mount-ed far heav-ier ver-sions of the Hell weapons. They burned fiery trails through the dark-ened for-est, and Winslow’s stom-ach clenched at the thought of how many Eilon-wë must be dy-ing.

“Owain didn’t dis-able all the tur-rets,” he thought out loud. “And they can still con-trol them from in there.” He in-di-cat-ed the ar-mored cen-tral citadel.

“The Eilon-wë will nev-er be able to break through with those things in ac-tion,” said Vir-ginia Dare in a bleak voice. Winslow didn’t like that voice, for in it he could hear the long-term hope-less-ness that was her birthright creep-ing back.

“We’ve got to get in there!” he de-clared. He grabbed Vir-ginia Dare’s light-weapon and fired it. The beam bare-ly even scratched that door, as heav-ily ar-mored as the wall in which it was set.

Then he re-mem-bered the iron gun-pow-der-filled iron buck-ets that, when all else failed in an as-sault on a fortress, a pair of men would car-ry for-ward and hang from a nail driv-en in-to a gate. The French called it a petard.

He looked to his right and left, at the En-glish crouch-ing be-hind oth-er con-trol desks. “Mar-tin! Jonas!” he called out to two sailors who hadn’t giv-en up their bombs to Owain or Shake-speare. “Roll your bombs over here!”

They obeyed, and the dead-ly spher-ical ob-jects rolled across the floor, un-no-ticed by the Grel-la ob-servers. Winslow caught them. “Vir-ginia, set these things for two min-utes from now.”

“What?” Her eyes widened as un-der-stand-ing dawned. “You’re go-ing to try to . . . No! They’ll kill you be-fore you can get there.”

“Even if they don’t,” Shake-speare added, “there’s a say-ing about be-ing ‘hoist with your own petard.’” Char-ac-ter-is-ti-cal-ly, he had in-stan-tly grasped what was afoot.

“What else can we do?” Winslow de-mand-ed. “Squat here and watch them grind the Eilon-wë down?”

John White spoke up in a voice which, though mild, got their at-ten-tion, “At least, Cap-tain, don’t try to car-ry both bombs your-self. If you fall, then all is lost. Give me one. If we give them two tar-gets, the chances are dou-ble that one will get through.”

Vir-ginia Dare’s eyes grew even wider. “Grand-fa-ther, no! Don’t do this. You’re not a young man any-more!”

“All the more rea-son to do it. I have less life left to lose than the rest of you. And in any case, my life is com-plet-ed.” He smiled at her. “God has grant-ed me some-thing that has been giv-en to no oth-er man: to see my own grand-child turn from a babe in arms to an adult in a pair of years. I

missed your child-hood, and that I re-gret. But hav-ing known, if on-ly for a lit-tle while, the wom-an you've grown in-to is enough for any man." He turned back to Winslow and his eyes held his need.

"All right," said Winslow, not meet-ing Vir-ginia Dare's eyes. "But lis-ten care-ful-ly and obey or-ders! Here's what we're go-ing to do. We'll run for the door, well apart from each oth-er and tak-ing ad-van-tage of as much cov-er as we can. Once we get up against the door, we'll be safe; I've been watch-ing that weapon, and it can't swiv-el but so far. We'll leave the bombs against the base of the door. Then we'll get away fast—Mas-ter Shake-peare is right about what of-ten hap-pens to petardiers!—mov-ing along the base of the wall so we'll still be in-side the weapon's field of fire. Un-der-stand?"

White nod-ded jerk-ily.

"Set the bombs, Vir-ginia," Winslow said qui-et-ly.

Her eyes dart-ed from one man to the oth-er. Then she swal-lowed and set to work, deft-ly de-spite the tears that mist-ed her vi-sion.

"Mar-tin!" Winslow called out while she worked. "Pass the word to the men that when I say 'Now,' ev-ery-one is to cre-ate a ruckus. Throw things, shoot with the light-weapons, any-thing to draw their at-ten-tion."

"Aye, Cap-tain."

Vir-ginia Dare hand-ed her grand-fa-ther and him each one of the hefty bombs and per-formed one last ad-just-ment on them. "You now have two min-utes," she said lev-el-ly.

"Now!" shout-ed Winslow.

From around the con-cen-tric cir-cles of con-trol desks the En-glish yelled, waved their swords, took fu-tile pot shots with the light-weapons. Who-ev-er was re-mote-ly con-trol-ling the swiv-el weapon was clear-ly star-tled, for a rapid fusil-lade of crack-ling beams lashed out in var-ious di-rec-tions.

"Go!" Winslow snapped at John White. With-out wait-ing to see if he was be-ing obeyed, he sprang out from be-hind the right-hand end of their shel-ter and ran, zigzag-ging, to-ward the door.

A cru-cial pair of sec-onds passed be-fore the hid-den con-troller grasped what was hap-pen-ing. The weapon mount swiveled and a beam sought him, sear-ing the floor, just as he dived be-hind a con-trol desk, hit-ting the floor and rolling. It was the last shel-ter he would have. Be-tween him and the door was on-ly open space.

Then, to the left, he heard a com-mo-tion as John White lunged for-ward. With in-sect-like swift-ness, the weapon mount swung in that di-rec-tion, spit-ting beams. One of them caught him.

From a dis-tance, Winslow could hear Vir-ginia Dare's strick-en scream.

With-out paus-ing to think or feel, Winslow sprang to his feet and sprint-ed the last few yards. Not dar-ing to slow down enough to go in-to a roll, he crashed in-to the door and crouched against its base.

The weapon mount swiveled down-ward, seek-ing him with in-sen-sate fury. But it could on-ly burn siz-zling holes in the floor a few feet away from him. He was in-side its turn-ing ra-dius.

He paused for a look back-wards. John White was still alive, sprawled on the floor. Their eyes met. White ac-tu-al-ly man-aged to smile. Then, with a weak mo-tion, he sent his bomb rolling across the floor. Winslow reached out and caught it, risk-ing the beams. But the weapon had turned back to John White, fin-ish-ing its work.

Winslow con-tin-ued to de-ny him-self feel-ing or thought. In-stead, he placed both bombs against the door's base. Then, not know-ing how much time he had left, he scur-ried away along the wall, stay-ing out of the swiv-el weapon's reach and putting as much dis-tance as pos-si-ble be-tween him-self and the door. When he had got-ten to the op-po-site side of the stronghold, he went to the floor and crouched in-to some-thing like the po-si-tion he had as-sumed in his moth-er's womb.

Eter-nal sec-onds passed. He won-dered if some-thing had gone wrong.

When it came, it wasn't two sep-arate ex-plo-sions, be-cause Vir-ginia Dare had set the bombs

for the same in-stant. It was a sin-gle con-cus-sion that deaf-ened him and might well have snapped his spine if he had been stand-ing with his back to the wall. As it was, an in-stant passed be-fore he could stag-ger to his feet and run back along the wall in the di-rec-tion he had come.

The door hung askew, blast-ed from its frame. The swiv-el-mount-ed weapon above it drooped life-less-ly.

Out of the left cor-ner of his eye, he saw Shake-speare and Vir-ginia Dare run-ning to-ward the en-try that now lay open.

“At-tack!” he yelled at the room in gen-er-al. He drew his two blades, kicked the ru-ined door aside and plunged through chok-ing, reek-ing smoke in-to the in-ner-most Grel-la citadel, step-ping over a dead Grell.

As he emerged from the smoke he took in the en-tire scene with a glance.

Off to the side he saw Grim-son's charred body. In the screens, the weapon tur-rets had ob-vi-ous-ly fall-en silent in the ab-sence of com-mands. Around the con-trol desks, the sur-viv-ing Grel-la milled about in their cold na-tures' clos-est ap-prox-ima-tion of pan-ic. And be-hind the cir-cu-lar desk on the raised dais stood a Grell in whose fea-tures and chest in-signia Winslow recog-nized Sett 44.

But most-ly he saw the Grell di-rect-ly in front of him—the on-ly one in the room with a weapon, which he had just raised. Winslow looked di-rect-ly down the ori-fice of that weapon, and with cold cer-tain-ty he knew him-self to be a dead man.

Then Shake-speare, charg-ing in be-hind him, tripped over the dead Grell and, arms flail-ing, blun-dered in-to the Grell, throw-ing the weapon off just as it was fired. The beam bare-ly missed Winslow's head, and he caught a whiff rem-inis-cent of sum-mer thun-der-storms. Be-fore the Grell could re-gain his foot-ing and snap off an-oth-er shot, Winslow rushed him. With his sword arm he shoved Shake-speare out of the way. With his oth-er hand he plunged the bal-lock dag-ger in and then up with a force that lift-ed the diminu-tive alien off his feet. Winslow threw him aside and plunged for-ward.

The En-glish were crowd-ing in, butcher-ing the Grel-la and smash-ing at the in-stru-ments they didn't un-der-stand. Vi-sion screens and banks of lights be-gan to flick-er out.

Winslow left all that to the oth-ers. He pressed on through the chaos to-ward the dais where Sett 44 stood be-hind his con-trol desk. Their eyes locked in a split sec-ond of mu-tu-al recog-ni-tion—a com-mu-nion of sorts.

Yes, it's me, you mag-got, Winslow thought sav-age-ly. And I've come to kill you!

But then there was a loud hum-ming and an in-com-pre-hen-si-ble flash-ing of lights, and the dome above that cen-tral com-mand dais be-gan to low-er it-self down. It set-tled over the dais and clamped it-self on-to the top of the wrap-around desk, en-clos-ing Sett 44 in an open-work cage. Look-ing up-ward at the ceil-ing where it had been, Winslow saw what it had con-cealed: a cir-cu-lar tun-nel lead-ing up-ward.

An es-cape hatch, he re-al-ized. Even as the thought flashed through him, the now-en-closed dais—whose base ev-ident-ly held the same mys-te-ri-ous en-gines as the Grel-la fly-ers—be-gan to rise up-ward to-ward the tun-nel.

Winslow had no time for thought. He dropped his sword, clenched his bal-lock dag-ger in his teeth, and ran the rest of the way as fast as pump-ing legs and tor-tured lungs could take him. Then, just be-fore Sett 44's es-cape cap-sule could rise be-yond reach, he jumped and caught the edge of its low-er plat-form with both hands.

A split sec-ond lat-er, a wob-ble in the ris-ing cap-sule told him that an-oth-er hu-man body had added its weight. He looked to his right and met the eyes of Vir-ginia Dare, like-wise hang-ing by both hands. She had dropped her light-weapon, but her two-hand-ed sword was still strapped to her back.

Then they were ris-ing more rapid-ly, and en-tered the tun-nel.

There was bare-ly room for the two dan-gling hu-man bod-ies in that en-closed space. Feel-ing his back slam-ming against the tun-nel walls, Winslow sus-pect-ed that Sett 44 was de-lib-er-ate-ly

swing-ing his ve-hi-cle from side to side, try-ing to dis-lodge his two un-want-ed pas-sen-gers. He held on grim-ly in the dark-ness. Above, he could glimpse a faint glow of light, grow-ing steady-ly stronger.

Abrupt-ly, they burst from the tun-nel in-to the great ar-ti-fi-cial-ly lit dome above. Be-low was the small city. Di-rect-ly be-low, about fif-teen feet un-der-neath, was what looked like a land-ing field for the fly-ers, which were des-per-ate-ly stream-ing to-ward the great open-ings in the dome. Sett 44 swung his es-cape cap-sule on-to a course to fol-low them.

Through the whistling of the wind, he heard Vir-ginia Dare's shout. "He's go-ing to get out and head for the arch! He'll be able to go through and warn the Grel-la in the next world be-yond to coun-ter-at-tack in full ar-ray with ships that can force their own way through the por-tal, with-out the aid of the arch."

Even as Winslow was con-sid-er-ing the con-se-quences of that, Sett 44 made a se-ries of side-to-side swing-ing mo-tions. Winslow bare-ly man-aged to hang on. Vir-ginia Dare wasn't so lucky. Winslow heard her scream, and caught sight of her falling to-ward the land-ing field be-low.

As be-fore, when he had watched John White die, Winslow de-nied him-self all emo-tion. That could come lat-er, if he was alive. For now, he con-cen-trat-ed ev-ery fiber of his be-ing on climb-ing, hand over hand, up the un-der-car-riage of the es-cape pod. He oc-ca-sion-al-ly al-lowed him-self glances ahead, where the great open-ing in the base of the dome was grow-ing and grow-ing, the night out-side riv-en with the flash-es of bat-tle.

Fi-nal-ly, lift-ing him-self up with a last, ag-oniz-ing one-hand-ed heave, he glimpsed Sett 44's head above the con-trol pan-el.

Hang-ing on grim-ly with his left hand, he took the bal-lock dag-ger from be-tween his clenched teeth with his right hand, drew it back, and hurled it.

It was not a throw-ing knife, and lacked the prop-er bal-ance. It clanged off the edge of the con-trol desk and, de-flect-ed from its course, struck Sett 44 a glanc-ing blow on the cheek be-fore falling in-to the abyss be-low.

Star-tled by the blow, Sett 44 briefly lost con-trol of his ve-hi-cle be-fore right-ing it and bring-ing it to a hov-er-ing po-si-tion just in-side the wide ex-it por-tal to-ward which he had been steer-ing. He raised a hand to his cheek, brought it away cov-ered with the un-nat-ural Grel-la body flu-id, and looked around. He soon saw Winslow, weapon-less, hang-ing by both hands.

He stood up, leav-ing the es-cape pod to hov-er, and looked down at Winslow. His tiny li-pless mouth opened slight-ly in what Winslow imag-ined was a smile. He reached in-to a pock-et and with-drew an ob-ject which was ob-vi-ous-ly a weapon—too small to be of any mil-itary use, but doubt-less ad-equate for its present in-tend-ed pur-pose.

There was a deaf-en-ing clang, and a con-cus-sion that sent the es-cape pod stag-ger-ing side-ways. Sett 44 was thrown off his feet, and Winslow bare-ly held on. Then the dam-aged pod be-gan slant-ing drunk-en-ly down-ward and to the side. As it did, Winslow glimpsed the fly-er that had glanc-ing-ly col-lid-ed with it, even more dam-aged and like-wise on its way down.

His eyes met Vir-ginia Dare's.

She must, he had time to think, have hit the ground in that land-ing area be-neath us and sur-vided the fall. We weren't very high or mov-ing very fast when she fell—and she's noth-ing if not tough. And she knows just enough about those fly-ing boats to get one aloft, and pi-lot it to a col-li-sion.

But then she was out of his field of vi-sion—and Sett 44 was back in-to it, ris-ing un-steady-ly to his feet. He took aim again with the weapon he had man-aged not to drop.

The pod smashed in-to the side of the vast ex-it door with a force that fi-nal-ly broke Winslow's grip. He fell ten or twelve feet, in-stinc-tive-ly twist-ing to the side and hit-ting the floor with a roll. He went on rolling, out of the way of the falling es-cape pod, just be-fore it crashed.

Sett 44 crawled from the wreck-age, to-ward the weapon he had dropped. It lay on the floor about twelve feet from him and a good deal fur-ther from Winslow, who heaved his bat-tered body up and tried to force it to walk.

Then the crippled flyer hit the floor and skidded over with a scream of tortured metal, smashing in to the grounded escape pod and recoiling several yards before lying still on a short distance from Sett 44's hand-weapon. Virginia Dare stood up and lowered herself to the floor with obvious pain. She must have hurt her ankles in her fall. But they were not broken, for she slowly walked toward the weapon.

Sett 44 crawled faster, pulling his broken body along in a grotesquerie of haste, emitting what had to be wordless sounds of pain.

Virginia Dare, limping though she was, reached the weapon first. With the hardest kick she could manage, she sent it spinning across the floor into the shadows.

A few fleeing Grel-la were starting to run through the wide door. Eilon-wë appeared behind them, shooting them and cutting them down, pursuing them into the dome. Virginia Dare ignored them all. She drew her sword from behind her left shoulder and, moving even more slowly than before, advanced on Sett 44.

"Captain!" Winslow heard a familiar voice.

"Owain!" he shouted back as the Welsh-man emerged from among a crowd of Eilon-wë. "You're alive!"

"Indeed, Captain. I was only able to plant bombs in two more of the tunnels before patrol spotted me. I eluded them, but then I had nowhere to go but the arch. There, I returned to the Near Void and hid until the excitement began. Before returning to the real world I got to watch some of their flyers coming through the arch as they made good their escape. You should have seen it! They flickered for an instant in the Near Void, like something revealed in the dark by flash of lightning, before vanishing into the Deep Void." He looked around as the Eilon-wë poured on into the dome in pursuit of the fleeing Grel-la. "It looks like you did for the rest of the tunnels."

Winslow allowed his abused body to slump back down to the floor. "Yes. Well, the Grel-la did for some of us, too." The memory of John White would no longer be held at bay. At least, he thought, remembering the fate of White's daughter and son-in-law, he only died once.

Owain was silent for a moment, then sank to the floor beside Winslow. "I'm sorry I didn't do better, Captain."

"Don't talk foolishness. There are quite a few Eilon-wë alive now who would have been consumed by Saint Antony's fire if you hadn't done what you did."

They watched as Virginia Dare reached Sett 44. She winced with pain as, with one foot, she rolled him over onto his back. She planted her foot on his midriff where the solar plexus would have been on a human and held her sword with the point resting, ever so gently, on the scrawny throat. The huge empty dark eyes stared up at her.

"Look at my face," she said quietly. "It is the last thing you'll ever see. And some day—maybe a thousand years from now, but some day—a face that looks like mine will be the last thing that the last Grel in all creation ever sees, just before a human kills him."

With a quick, economical flick of her wrist, she tore out his throat.

Seventeen

Considering what they had come to witness, it was a curiously subdued group that stood on a landing of the vast Grel-la dome, looking out over the half-ruined cityscape and the arch beyond it.

The Queen stood at the head of a small group of humans that included Walsingham, Dee, Winslow, Virginia Dare and the few remaining elders among the Roanoke colonists. Elizabeth had long since been without the elaborate cosmetics and wardrobe that had almost defined her, holding at bay the signs of aging she had always loathed. Her hair was conspicuously gray at the roots, and was rapidly losing its artificial crinkly curliness. All her wrinkles were exposed, without the mask of white make-up that had concealed them. She wore the utilitarian Eilon-wë garment, little different for male or female. All was stripped away.

She had nev-er looked more re-gal.

Be-side the hu-man group stood the Eilon-wë, with Ri-ahn at their head. The oth-er sheuath lead-ers stood be-hind him: Imal-far (as was fit-ting), Avaer-ahn (in-sist-ing to ev-ery-one who would lis-ten that the at-tack had been his idea all along), Leeriv-en (fi-nal-ly with a con-sen-sus to fol-low, thus lend-ing her the il-lu-sion of con-sis-ten-cy), and the var-ious oth-ers. But Tyralair stood be-side Ri-ahn. Like all of them, she stared at the soar-ing arch that loomed over all the Grel-la works that clus-tered at its feet. But her face wore an ex-pres-sion that was strange-ly am-biva-lent, con-sid-er-ing that she was present at the mo-ment of her peo-ple's fi-nal, defini-tive awak-en-ing from a night-mare that had last-ed thou-sands of years.

Those Grel-la fly-ers that had man-aged to es-cape had flashed through that arch and van-ish-ed, thus con-firm-ing Vir-ginia Dare's in-spired guess as to its func-tion—al-though Tyralair was of the opin-ion that it prob-ably re-quired a pair of arch-es, one at each of the two por-tals in the two linked worlds. If any fur-ther con-fir-ma-tion had been need-ed, Owain's ob-ser-va-tions from his van-tage point in the Near Void would have pro-vid-ed it. So what was about to hap-pen now was nec-es-sary. Of course, af-ter sup-press-ing the last re-sis-tance and es-tab-lish-ing firm con-trol over the city, the Eilon-wë had cut off all pow-er to the arch. (They didn't pre-tend to un-der-stand all the prin-ci-ples in-volved, but they could sev-er con-nec-tions.) But no one could be sure about the full ex-ent of what the Grel-la could do, even from an al-ter-nate world be-yond. And there was no time to be lost, for giv-en the dif-fer-en-tials in time rates be-tween the worlds there was ab-so-lute-ly no way to know how long or how short a time it would take the Grel-la to mount a coun-ter-at-tack.

So this had to be done, with-out fur-ther de-lay. Ev-ery-one agreed on that. And yet there was no dis-guis-ing the wist-ful look in Tyralair's eyes as she gazed at that soar-ing arch, gleam-ing in the sun.

An Eilon-wë tech-ni-cian ap-proached Ri-ahn and mut-tered some-thing in their tongue.

“It is time,” said Ri-ahn.

At first, it was bare-ly no-tice-able. There were mere-ly a cou-ple of puffs of smoke, close to the arch's two bases. Then there were a se-ries of oth-er puffs, up the arch's curve.

The sound didn't ar-rive un-til a mo-ment lat-er. Ri-ahn had said some-thing about the speed of sound be-ing in-com-pa-ra-bly less than the speed of light. Like so much of what Ri-ahn said, it made ab-so-lute-ly no sense to Winslow. But it seemed to hold up, ex-plain-ing, for ex-am-ple, why one al-ways saw light-ning be-fore hear-ing thun-der. And when this sound ar-rived, it was rather like dis-tant thun-der, even though the sky was cloud-less—not a shat-ter-ing blast, across this dis-tance. But the rum-bling grew and grew, al-ways lag-ging be-hind what they were see-ing.

The arch's col-lapse be-gan at the base, where the first ex-plo-sive charges had cut it off. As it be-gan to slide down, it al-so be-gan to break apart as the oth-er charges did their work. The great curve, in all its unimag-in-able ton-nage, dis-solved in-to seg-ments be-fore they all crashed to the ground with a sound that reached their ears short-ly there-after in a roar-ing crescen-do. Soon the breeze blew away the dust cloud to re-veal the rub-ble.

Dee broke the si-lence. “You re-al-ize, of course,” he said to Ri-ahn, “that this does not ab-so-lute-ly seal your world off. The por-tal it-self still ex-ists, and Grel-la can still come through it in ves-sels spe-cial-ly de-signed for the pur-pose.”

“Of course. But we have rea-son to be-lieve that such ships are ex-pen-sive and there-fore rel-a-tive-ly rare. This, no doubt, is why they built the arch in the first place, so their or-di-nary fly-ers could make the tran-sit. Now they can no longer do so, and we don't have to fear a sud-den swarm of in-vaders. And any ships that do emerge will have to face . . . that.” Ri-ahn ges-tured at the near-est of the weapon tur-rets. Like all the oth-ers that could be brought to bear on the por-tal, it was a-swarm with Eilon-wë, work-ing like Tro-jans to change its ori-en-ta-tion and adapt its con-trols. For-tu-nate-ly, the tur-rets Owain had dis-abled had been on the oth-er side of the city.

“Any ships that ap-pear in the por-tal will fly in-to their fields of fire,” Ri-ahn con-tin-ued. “We won't even have to re-ly on the Grel-la aim-ing de-vices, for the weapons will al-ready be point-ed

at the on-ly place from which a threat can ap-pear. And re-mem-ber, these are the heavy Grel-la weapons—larg-er and more pow-er-ful ver-sions of the small ones that, ac-cord-ing to your de-scrip-tion, de-stroyed your na-tion's fleet.”

“So any Grel-la in-vaders of your world will be con-sumed by Saint Antony's fire,” Dee nod-ded. “How fit-ting.”

“And,” said the Queen, “by keep-ing them out of your world you will al-so be keep-ing them out of ours. We will not for-get our debt to you.”

“I ob-serve that you have not be-gun adapt-ing any of the tur-rets that face in the op-po-site di-rec-tion,” Wals-ing-ham ob-served. “Are you not con-cerned with the Grel-la still re-main-ing in oth-er parts of this world? Of course, they can no longer es-cape through the por-tal.” He in-di-cat-ed the wreck-age that had been the arch. “But what if they or-ga-nize them-selves and mount a coun-ter-at-tack against you here?”

“We are aware of the dan-ger, but so far they have been too stunned to take any ac-tion. Not that they have any great ca-pa-bil-ity to do so. They are scat-tered thin-ly around the world—mangers of plan-ta-tions and mines and fac-to-ries staffed by Eilon-wë slaves, for the most part. And they are un-armed ex-cept for small and light-ly equipped mil-itary de-tach-ments scat-tered among them.”

“Why haven't the Eilon-wë of those oth-er lands risen up against them, over the course of the cen-turies?” Walsin-gahm want-ed to know.

“Some-times they have—and been sav-age-ly pun-ished by ex-pe-di-tions from this fortress. This has al-ways been the cen-ter of their pow-er. Fear of reprisals from it has kept the Eilon-wë sub-mis-sive across most of the world. But now we have been spread-ing the word that it has fall-en, and that the re-main-ing Grel-la are trapped in our world and cut off from any hope of re-in-force-ment. Up-ris-ings are break-ing out all over this con-ti-nent, and have be-gun to spread to oth-ers. The Grel-la are lead-er-less and on the de-fen-sive . . . and, by all ac-counts, com-plete-ly de-mor-al-ized. Noth-ing like this has ev-er hap-pened to them be-fore. They can scarce-ly be-lieve it.” Ri-ahn looked like he still scarce-ly be-lieved it him-self.

“Still,” Wals-ing-ham cau-tioned, “those mil-itary de-tach-ments—even if, as it seems, they're more like sher-iffs than sol-diers, and have on-ly the light-weapons—can do much hurt.”

“No doubt. But we can help. We've al-ready be-gun to send out cap-tured fly-ers load-ed with weapons and ex-pe-ri-enced fight-ers . . . and, more im-por-tant-ly, rep-re-sen-ta-tives to bring the sheuaths of the oth-er re-gions in-to our al-liance.”

“That may be a del-icate mat-ter,” said Wals-ing-ham with an air of stud-ied un-der-state-ment, as he con-tem-plat-ed the al-tered po-lit-ical dy-nam-ics of an ex-pand-ed league.

“In-deed.” Ri-ahn's glance slid aside, in the di-rec-tion of his fel-low sheuath lead-ers. Winslow tried to imag-ine what was go-ing through his mind, and the not nec-es-sar-ily iden-ti-cal things go-ing through theirs. “But on-ly if we are unit-ed can we hunt the Grel-la to ex-tinc-tion through-out our world and se-cure our-selves against their re-turn. We've learned that now—thanks in part to you.”

“Yes, un-doubt-ed-ly,” said Dee in tones of some-what per-func-to-ry in-ter-est. “But for now, we have an ex-per-iment yet to per-form.”

Tyralair vis-ibly perked up.

* * *

“Now re-mem-ber what I told you,” said Winslow to his two com-pan-ions. “When we en-ter the area of the por-tal, it will be ex-act-ly as it was when we did the same thing on Croa-toan Is-land, Doc-tor Dee—”

“Yes, yes,” puffed Dee as he strug-gled to keep up.

“—but you must both fol-low the in-struc-tions I gave you in or-der to re-main in this world's Near Void.”

Even as he spoke, the world fad-ed in the now-fa-mil-iar way. He au-to-mat-ical-ly in-voked the pat-terns of thought that en-abled him to linger in the Near Void. And, he saw, Dee had done

the same, for the ma-gus was there in sharply de-fined col-or, walk-ing about as Winslow had told him he could do, look-ing around him in won-der at the blurred gray-ness of the ma-te-ri-al world.

But Tyralair was still part of that world, stand-ing for-lorn amid its dim-ness and star-ing in the di-rec-tion where her hu-man com-pan-ions had van-ished.

The two men willed them-selves back from the Near Void and walked back to face Tyralair. "I'm sor-ry," said Winslow in a voice turned gruff by feel-ings of in-ad-equa-cy.

"Oh, don't be," said Tyralair with an airi-ness which would not have de-ceived a child. "It was nev-er more than a pos-si-bil-ity. Now we know for cer-tain that the qual-ity that per-mits ef-fort-less en-try in to the void through an opened por-tal is unique to hu-mans. Knowl-edge is al-ways to be sought . . . even when it dis-ap-points our hopes."

"And now that you Eilon-wë pos-sess the records and de-vices of the Grel-la for study," said Dee, try-ing to be en-cour-ag-ing, "you can doubt-less dis-cov-er their se-cret of forc-ing a ves-sel through a por-tal to an-oth-er world."

"That's right," said Winslow hearti-ly. "We'll wel-come you as vis-iters to our world yet."

"I would like noth-ing bet-ter. And I do not doubt the pos-si-bil-ity. But any such vis-its would have to be brief ones, giv-en the dif-fer-ence in time rates. If, for ex-am-ple, I were to spend a year in your world, I would re-turn to find that al-most twen-ty years had passed in mine."

"I once said some-thing of the sort to Vir-ginia Dare," Winslow re-called. "She ex-plained why it was not an in-sur-mount-able ob-sta-cle for the Grel-la. But for you . . ."

"Yes," Tyralair sighed. "Per-haps it is just as well that we can-not pass through un-aid-ed."

Dee cleared his throat. "We, how-ev-er, can. And the time has come for mak-ing prepa-ra-tions to do so, and re-turn to our own world."

"Which means," Winslow said thought-ful-ly, "that the hu-mans who have lived here so long have a de-ci-sion to make."

The hall filled al-most all of one of the build-ings un-der the great over-arch-ing dome. No one knew what the Grel-la had used it for, but it held all the sur-vivors of Raleigh's Roanoke colony who had blun-dered in-to this world nine-teen years be-fore, and their off-spring, sit-ting on im-pro-vised bench-es. And it had the look of a meet-ing hall, for there was a dais at one end. There, John Dee stood and ad-dressed the as-sem-blage, with Wals-ing-ham, Winslow and Vir-ginia Dare be-hind him.

"By now," Dee was say-ing in his well-trained voice, "you are all aware of the dif-fer-ence in the rates at which time pass-es in the dif-fer-ent world. If you don't un-der-stand it, do not be trou-bled; nei-ther does any-one else. Nor do we need to un-der-stand it. All we need to know is that, by God's grace, it works in our fa-vor. While a day pass-es here, on-ly a lit-tle more than an hour pass-es in our own world.

"Nev-er-the-less, each such hour is an-oth-er hour in which the Gray Monks, through their Span-ish pup-pets, rule over Eng-land—which is an hour too many. So, now that the Grel-la can no longer pre-vent it, Her Majesty and those of us who came here with her must re-turn with-out fur-ther de-lay, bear-ing with us the cap-tured Grel-la weapons that can turn the scales in our world.

"Any of you who wish to come with us can, of course, do so. I must tell you, how-ev-er, that we have on-ly two ships—which we last saw just be-fore they were blown away in a storm—and even those two were crowd-ed. If you come with us, we will have to leave most of you on Croa-toan Is-land, to await lat-er trans-porta-tion back to Eng-land."

"With Man-teo's peo-ple," Am-brose Vic-cars nod-ded. Then his thick gray beard broke in a smile. "But of course! I for-got. Good old Man-teo him-self is very lit-tle old-er than we re-mem-ber him!"

"Lit-tle old-er than you re-mem-ber him," a young-sound-ing voice from the crowd cor-rect-ed. It was like a re-lease, for an am-biva-lent mut-ter-ing now filled the room.

A man in his twen-ties stood up and spoke hes-itant-ly. "Your lord-ships, I'm Robert El-lis. My

fa-ther Thomas El-lis is long dead . . .”

“Yes, Robert,” Winslow prompt-ed. “You fought well in the raid on the Grel-la fortress. Say your say—you've earned the right.”

“Well, Cap-tain, what I meant to say is . . . I can dim-ly re-mem-ber the world we came from, for I was a boy then. But on-ly dim-ly . . . and many of us were born here and can't re-mem-ber it at all.” El-lis stretched a hand be-hind him as though for sup-port. A teenaged girl took it. His voice firmed up. “We've lived among the Eilon-wë, we have friends among them. We speak their tongue. And now we . . . well, we've be-gun to give our-selves a re-al link with this world.” He drew the teenaged girl to his side, put an arm around her shoul-ders, and took on a look of qui-et de-fi-ance.

So, thought Winslow with an in-ner chuck-le, now there's a sec-ond gen-er-ation of na-tive-born hu-mans on its way in-to this world. Ev-ident-ly Vir-ginia wasn't the on-ly one among them to de-cide that the rea-sons for their re-luc-tance to have chil-dren no longer ob-tain, now that there is a pos-si-bil-ity of go-ing home. On-ly some of them have be-gun to won-der just ex-act-ly where “home” is, now that they have the lux-ury of won-der-ing.

Wals-ing-ham stepped for-ward, and Dee yield-ed place to him. “Her Majesty and I have spo-ken to Ri-ahn and the oth-er sheuath lead-ers. There will be a place here for any of you who wish to re-main. And re-mem-ber, such a de-ci-sion is not ir-re-vo-ca-ble. Cap-tain Winslow will show you how to lo-cate the por-tal, and now that the Grel-la dan-ger is re-moved you can pass through it when-ev-er you choose. And no mat-ter how long you take to make up your minds, on-ly a twen-ti-eth of that time will have passed in our world.”

“By the same to-ken,” Dee cau-tioned, “the de-ci-sion to de-part with us will be some-what ir-re-vo-ca-ble. If you should de-cide af-ter, say, a year to re-turn to this world, you will find it—and ev-ery-one in it you knew—twen-ty years old-er.”

The mur-mur-ing in the room sank an oc-tave. They hadn't thought of this.

Vir-ginia Dare stepped for-ward and stood be-side Winslow. “The strug-gle against the Grel-la has bound our lives to-gether all these years. Now those bounds are loos-ened, and each of us must de-cide as an in-di-vid-ual what is best for him-self or her-self—and for our loved ones.” For an in-stant her eyes wa-vered in Winslow's di-rec-tion. “All I can say is that I my-self am re-turn-ing. We've freed one world from the Grel-la. Now there's an-oth-er to be freed.”

In the end, the ma-jor-ity of them—es-pe-cial-ly the youngest, and those with the strongest at-tach-ments among them-selves—de-cid-ed to re-main, a de-ci-sion they could tell them-selves was on-ly pro-vi-sion-al. But the few re-main-ing old-er ones, and a larg-er num-ber of the younger ones than Winslow would have ex-pect-ed fol-lowed Vir-ginia Dare in-to the ef-fec-tive-ly one-way jour-ney back.

Ev-ident-ly, free-ing worlds from the Grel-la was a hard habit to break.

They stood on the low-er slopes of Elf Hill, in a tight-ly packed group—those who re-mained of the par-ty from Heron, and those of the Roanoke colonists, led by Am-brose Vic-cars, who had elect-ed to re-turn. All were laden with all they could car-ry of parts of cap-tured Grel-la weapons—they could be dis-as-sem-bled, and Dee was con-fi-dent he had learned how to re-assem-ble them—and the even more im-por-tant cylin-ders that held, by some un-fath-omable means, the en-er-gies that pow-ered those weapons. They were lim-it-ed to what they could car-ry, so they had es-chewed the hand-held light-weapons, for they didn't ex-pect to have to face Grel-la so armed. It was more im-por-tant to car-ry as many of the sur-pris-ing-ly heavy cylin-ders as pos-si-ble, for once those star-born en-er-gies were ex-haust-ed the an-ti-mat-ter weapons would be use-less. Even the Queen had scoffed at Wals-ing-ham's scan-dal-ized protests and game-ly heft-ed a weapon com-po-nent of some-thing that was translu-cent but was not glass. Held by her, it looked like a large scepter out of some realm of faërie.

By un-spo-ken com-mon con-sent, none of the En-glish who had cho-sen to cast their lot with this world were present. Any nec-es-sary farewells had al-ready been spo-ken.

But Ri-ahn and Tyralair were there. All the pompous of-fi-cial cer-emonies of leave-tak-ing

were past. This was some-thing else.

“I feel di-min-ished by our in-abil-ity to aid you as you have aid-ed us,” said Ri-ahn.

“You should not, for it is no fault of yours,” Wals-ing-ham as-sured him.

“No,” Dee agreed. “It is the work of the Fates, or the Norns, as our pa-gan an-ces-tors would have said.” Winslow ex-pect-ed the Pu-ri-tan Wals-ing-ham to bri-dle, but he didn't.

Vir-ginia Dare stood be-fore Ri-ahn. “If there's one thing I've learned here, I've learned not to de-ceive my-self. I'll nev-er see you again.”

“Prob-ably not. Or, if you do, I'll be so old you'll hard-ly rec-og-nize me. So per-haps it is best that you leave now, be-fore all our mem-ories over-come your re-solve.”

From be-hind him, among the Heron's com-pa-ny, Winslow heard Shake-speare say, “If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quick-ly.”

Ri-ahn bowed deeply to the Queen. She in-clined her head in turn. Then she walked up the hill. All the oth-ers fol-lowed, ex-cept Vir-ginia Dare. She paused for a last look. Then she took Winslow's hand and fol-lowed as well.

The world that now be-longed to the Eilon-wë again fad-ed away. Then it van-ished al-to-geth-er, and for the sec-ond time Winslow found him-self in the emp-ty, silent, im-ma-te-ri-al alone-ness of the Deep Void. But he some-how knew that he was still hold-ing Vir-ginia Dare's hand.

He found he was hold-ing it when Croa-toan Is-land be-gan to emerge in shades of gray.

Eighteen

It was dusk on Croa-toan, so the change when they emerged from the Near Void wasn't as startling as it would have been in broad day-light. They were in the same un-nat-ural-ly reg-ular area of thin sec-ond-growth veg-eta-tion from which they had de-part-ed.

Look-ing around him at the thick-er for-est that sur-round-ed them, Winslow saw al-most at once a doz-ing fig-ure sit-ting propped against a tree trunk. And his fea-tures broke in-to a grin, for he rec-og-nized the Heron crew-man who had in-ad-ver-tent-ly passed through the Deep Void.

“Mor-ris!” he called out. “I'd know you any-where—asleep as usu-al!”

Amid the laugh-ter of his ship-mates, Mor-ris jerked awake and scram-bled up-right, on-ly to fall im-me-di-ate-ly on his knees at the sight of the Queen, who mo-tioned him to his feet.

“Your Majesty! Cap-tain! You're back al-ready! But of course—I keep for-get-ting about the time mag-ic. What hap-pened? How went the bat-tle?”

“We won, and the pow-er of the Grel-la in that world is bro-ken. They're lit-tle more than a hand-ful of fugi-tives now, and the Eilon-wë are hunt-ing them down like trapped rats.”

“God be praised! If on-ly I'd been there . . .” Mor-ris came to an abrupt halt, and his ex-ul-tant ex-pres-sion dis-solved in-to a mask of em-bar-rass-ment. “As God is my wit-ness, Cap-tain, I nev-er sought to—”

“Of course you didn't,” Winslow as-sured him, clap-ping him on the back. “You were as ea-ger as any of us to come to grips with the Grel-la. No one thinks ill of you. We ex-pect-ed to lose some of our num-ber to the Deep Void. All tak-en with all, we were lucky to lose on-ly the two of you. And you did ex-act-ly as you were told, let-ting the tides of the Deep Void car-ry you back here and wait-ing for our re-turn.”

“Aye, Cap-tain. It's on-ly been a cou-ple of days here, you un-der-stand, and the two of us have spent them stand-ing watch-es here.”

“? 'Stand-ing watch-es'?” queried Shake-speare arch-ly, oc-ca-sion-ing a fresh gale of laugh-ter.

“Well, we're back now,” said Winslow, res-cu-ing Mor-ris. “And we've brought a rare booty of hell weapons.” He in-di-cat-ed the com-po-nents of alien tech-nol-ogy that fes-tooned them all. “We'll re-turn to Eng-land and see how the Gray Monks like be-ing roast-ed in their own un-holy fire!”

Once again, Mor-ris' face fell. “Well, Cap-tain, as to that . . . The fact of the mat-ter is, there's

been no sign of Heron or Grey-hound here. Man-teo has mount-ed watch on the coast, but nary a sail has been sight-ed.”

Winslow's eyes met Vir-ginia Dare's for an in-stant. Then he turned to face the Queen and Wals-ing-ham. No one could think of any-thing to say.

* * *

Man-teo had a great deal to ab-sorb all at once—joy at the re-turn of Weroan-za Eliz-abeth, and sor-row at the death of his old friend John White, along with much else. But he dealt sur-pris-ing-ly well with the sight of Am-brose Vic-cars as a gray-beard and Vir-ginia Dare as a young wom-an. His ca-pac-ity for be-wil-der-ment sim-ply shut down from over-load, and af-ter lis-ten-ing to Dee's at-tempt to ex-plain he sim-ply filed it away un-der the head-ing of Be-yond un-der-stand-ing; to be ac-cept-ed on faith. Since the day—not long ago to him—when he had watched the En-glish par-ty fade from sight, he had been in-ured to the un-can-ny. And the rest of his peo-ple were more than will-ing to adopt the same prac-ti-cal phi-los-ophy. So was Dick Tav-ern-er, who had once seen his fel-low colonists van-ish in-to noth-ing-ness.

Be-sides, ev-ery-one could ap-pre-ci-ate a good sto-ry. So af-ter the wel-com-ing feast, they all sat around the fire in the vil-lage's cen-tral pit and lis-tened avid-ly, far in-to the night, to the tale of the re-turnees' ad-ven-tures in a world so re-mote that, as Dee put it, one could walk un-til Judg-ment Day and not reach it.

“And so,” Dee con-clud-ed, “the Gray Monks are with-out hope of aid from their fel-low Grel-la in oth-er worlds, al-though they don't know it yet. And we've brought back the means to deal with them. On-ly,” he con-clud-ed an-ti-cli-mac-ti-cal-ly, “we have to get at them.”

“Yes,” Man-teo nod-ded. “We have watched the hori-zon ev-ery day, but your ships have not ap-peared. I fear that when we do see sails, they will be those of the Spaniards. I am sur-prised they are not here al-ready.”

“I'm not,” Winslow de-clared. “First of all, they'd cross the At-lantic in their old, slow, lub-ber-ly way of let-ting the winds and cur-rents car-ry them, swing-ing far to the south. Then they'd stop in Flori-da where the Grel-la fly-ing ship crashed, so the Gray Monks can pick up the in-stru-ments that en-able them to find por-tals. And then they'd work their way slow-ly up the coast, beat-ing past Cape Fear the way we did. And they'd pro-ceed very cau-tious-ly all the while—we're even fur-ther in-to hur-ri-cane sea-son now.”

“Nev-er-the-less,” said the Queen, “we know they're com-ing, soon-er rather than lat-er. Dr. Dee, we must be ready to re-ceive them.”

“In-deed, Your Majesty. I will be-gin with-out de-lay to as-sem-ble the an-ti-mat-ter weapons. I promise you the Spaniards and the Gray Monks will have a sur-prise in store.”

Dee set to work the next day, with the help of the as-sis-tants he had trained be-fore de-part-ing the world of the Eilon-wë. He un-der-stood the why of what he was do-ing lit-tle if any more than they did. But he had com-mit-ted to his formidable mem-ory the de-tails of con-nect-ing this to that, with the aid of the pic-ture di-a-grams Ri-ahn had sup-plied. And so the par-tial-ly translu-cent, strange-ly harm-less-seem-ing as-sem-blages be-gan to take shape.

In the mean-time, ev-ery-one de-bat-ed the best way to em-ploy them. Wals-ing-ham was the voice of cau-tion, ar-gu-ing that they should be em-placed ashore to sur-prise Span-ish land-ing par-ties. Winslow dis-agreed; he want-ed to make cata-ma-rans out of the In-di-an ca-noes and car-ry the weapons out to at-tack the Span-ish ships di-rect-ly, which was pre-cise-ly the way the Gray Monks had used them off Calais. To use weapons of such fear-some de-struc-tive pow-er against in-di-vid-ual en-emy sol-diers would be, as he put it, like “swat-ting flies with a sledge-ham-mer.” And af-ter that pow-er had been demon-strat-ed, he hoped to use the threat of fur-ther such demon-strations to force the sur-ren-der of ships in which they could re-turn to Eng-land.

They were still de-bat-ing when, one day, one of Man-teo's look-outs ran in-to the vil-lage shout-ing and ges-tic-ulat-ing fran-ti-cal-ly. “Ships,” Man-teo trans-lat-ed.

“The Spaniards—al-ready?” gasped Dee.

Man-teo put a se-ries of ques-tions to the tribesman, who drew a rect-an-gle in the dirt with his fin-ger. Then he walked over to a frame-work where the vil-lage wom-en had hung fruit they had gath-ered. He crushed a red berry, rubbed his fin-ger in the juice, and drew the red cross of St. George on the rect-an-gle.

The whoops of joy from the En-glish star-tled him.

Lit-tle time could be spent bring-ing Jonas Hal-leck, Mar-tin Gorham and the oth-ers who had been at sea up to date on all that had be-fall-en the shore par-ty. The tid-ings the ships brought back were of more im-me-di-ate ur-gen-cy.

“The hur-ri-cane car-ried us less far than I'd feared,” Hal-leck told the gath-er-ing in Man-teo's long-house. “But when it was over, we found our-selves well to the east, and a fair-ly stiff south-west-er was still blow-ing. So we had to swing well east and south work-ing our way back to the coast be-fore turn-ing to star-board and com-ing back around. We raised the coast south of Cape Fear. Clos-er in-shore than we, and fur-ther south, we spot-ted the Span-ish sails.”

“How many?” Wals-ing-ham de-mand-ed.

“We were too far and too hur-ried to count them, your lord-ship. But it's a fair-sized fleet.”

Dee looked pale. “So they must be fol-low-ing close be-hind you.”

“I think not. Just af-ter we sight-ed them, a fresh gale came up. We ran be-fore it, and it car-ried us past Cape Fear.”

It was Winslow's turn to blanch, as he tried to imag-ine the risk Hal-leck had tak-en, rid-ing a gale past that treach-er-ous cape.

“But be-fore we lost sight of them,” Hal-leck con-tin-ued, “we could see that the Spaniards were scat-ter-ing. They were close-hauled off a lee shore, and their ad-mi-ral prob-ably or-dered each ship to claw off as best it could. Now they're prob-ably re-assem-bling, and will have to work their way around the Cape Fear shoals the way we did when we first ar-rived.”

“Ex-cept, of course, that it will take them far longer,” Winslow fin-ished for him. “That gives us time.”

“Why will it take them longer, Cap-tain?” in-quired the Queen.

“Be-cause their ships are high-charged, Your Majesty, while ours are race-built.” See-ing a blank look, Winslow ex-plained. “To the Dons, the pur-pose of war-ships is to car-ry sol-diers in-to bat-tle and put them in the best po-si-tion to board the en-emy. So their ships are built the old way, with fight-ing cas-tles fore and aft, to give their sol-diers the ad-van-tage of height. This doesn't mat-ter with the wind astern—which is why they al-ways make their voy-ages that way—but to wind-ward, the size and windage of the cas-tles caus-es the ship to blow down to lee-ward, even when they're as close-hauled as they can go.” Warm-ing to his theme, Winslow failed to no-tice that his lis-ten-ers' eyes were be-gin-ning to glaze over. “In the mean-time, we En-glish have de-signed our ships for fight-ing at a dis-tance with long-range guns rather than for board-ing. So we've stripped the cas-tles off, and our ships are long and low, ly-ing snug to the wa-ter. We've al-so be-gun to cut our sails flat-ter, so they can be set clos-er to the wind. Why, Heron can make a good two point to wind-ward! At the same time—”

“Thomas,” Dee in-ter-rupt-ed gen-tly, “why don't you just say that our ships can sail in-to the wind bet-ter than theirs?”

“I did,” Winslow said, puz-zled. From Vir-ginia Dare's di-rec-tion came a sigh of ex-as-per-at-ed res-ig-na-tion.

“At any rate,” said Wals-ing-ham, tak-ing charge with his usu-al un-der-stat-ed firm-ness, “we now know for cer-tain that the Spaniards are com-ing. So we must set-tle our ear-li-er de-bate on how best to re-ceive them, and set about the prepa-ra-tions for which God has grant-ed us time. Thomas, I could al-ways ap-pre-ci-ate your ar-gu-ment that our cap-tured Grel-la weapons are best em-ployed against ships—large, flammable tar-gets—as we En-glish learned to our sor-row ear-li-er this year. My rea-son for re-ject-ing your pro-pos-al was that, giv-en the con-di-tions in

these wa-ters, the Span-ish ships would not ap-proach the shore to with-in the weapons' range. And I feared to en-trust those weapons to flim-sy craft im-pro-vised from the lo-cal ca-noes. I mean no of-fense, Lord Man-teo," he added hasti-ly. "But any mis-for-tune to those craft would leave our on-ly ad-van-tage ly-ing at the bot-tom of the sea."

"Yes, Mr. Sec-re-tary," Winslow ad-mit-ted. "That was al-ways a dan-ger."

"Now, how-ev-er, your stur-dy ships have re-turned and we can mount the weapons on them. So my one ob-jec-tion no longer ob-tains. I there-fore say: go out and meet them!"

A gen-er-al noise of agree-ment arose.

"So be it." The Queen's voice brought the hub-bub to a sud-den si-lence. "Cap-tain Winslow, on the ad-vice of our Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary and Privy Coun-selor, we com-mand you to seek out the Span-ish fleet and en-gage it." It had been a while since Winslow had heard her use the roy-al we, so the im-pact was all the greater. Then, with the sud-den shift back to the first per-son sin-gu-lar that she had al-ways used to such good ef-fect: "And I will ac-com-pa-ny the fleet."

At first, Winslow was with-out the pow-er of speech. "Your Majesty," he fi-nal-ly man-aged, "I must point out that were are go-ing in-to bat-tle, against un-fore-see-able dan-gers. I can-not per-mit—"

"By the bow-els of almighty God!" The daugh-ter of King Hal surged to her feet, and ev-ery-one else must per-force rise with her—ex-cept Winslow, who went to one knee. "Per-mit? Do you for-get, sir-rah, that you once told me your claim to au-thor-ity over your ship was 'on-ly un-der God and Your Majesty'? Will you next be set-ting your-self above God, Cap-tain?"

"But Your Majesty—" Winslow be-gan, on-ly to be over-rid-den.

"We will sail with you, Cap-tain, in this ven-ture on which the fu-ture of our realm de-pends! And be-sides," she con-tin-ued with a dis-con-cert-ing shift from im-pe-ri-ous-ness to mat-ter of fact-ness, "if you lose, what will be-come of me, wait-ing here on this is-land for the Spaniards to ar-rive? I would rather go down with your ship than be tak-en alive and pa-rad-ed be-fore my peo-ple as the fi-nal proof of their sub-ju-ga-tion."

"I be-lieve, Thomas," said Wals-ing-ham, "that I, too, would rather take my chances with the sharks than with the In-qui-si-tion."

"And I, of course, must come," Dee in-ter-ject-ed. "I be-lieve I can, with-out fear of con-tra-dic-tion, claim a bet-ter un-der-stand-ing of the an-ti-mat-ter weapons than any-one else." He nat-ural-ly failed to add that that was say-ing very lit-tle. "But Thomas, since we do, af-ter all, have those weapons, aren't you ex-ag-ger-at-ing the dan-ger to Her Majesty and the rest of us?"

"Per-haps I am, Doc-tor—as-sum-ing that the Spaniards, and the Gray Monks who sure-ly ac-com-pa-ny them, haven't brought sim-ilar weapons of their own. But what if they have?"

Dee paled a shade or two. He wasn't the on-ly one.

"Sure-ly, Thomas," ven-tured Wals-ing-ham, "they'd feel no need for such pow-er, to deal with noth-ing more than Raleigh's colonists and per-haps some fugi-tives such as our-selves." There was a gen-er-al, re-lieved nod-ding of heads.

"I de-vout-ly hope that's true, Mr. Sec-re-tary. If they don't have the weapons, then our prospects are very good. If they do, then our on-ly ad-van-tage will be their sur-prise at our al-so hav-ing them."

"Not our on-ly ad-van-tage, Cap-tain," said the Queen. "We al-so have Eng-land's ships—and the men who sail them."

"I hope you're right, Your Majesty. And what-ev-er I can do to make you right, I will do." Winslow looked around and saw Hal-leck and Mar-tin Gorham swelling with pride. And out of the cor-ner of his eye he no-ticed Vir-ginia Dare. Her face wore an odd ex-pres-sion, as though she want-ed to speak but was un-char-ac-ter-is-ti-cal-ly hes-itant.

The Queen, fol-low-ing Winslow's gaze, saw it too. "Have you any-thing to add, Mis-tress Dare?" she prompt-ed.

Still Vir-ginia Dare hes-itat-ed. Grow-ing up in the ex-ile so-ci-ety of the lost colonists, an in-fin-ity away from the fixed so-cial hi-er-ar-chies of Eng-land, she had nev-er had the ret-icence

to speak out in any kind of com-pa-ny that would have oth-er-wise been ex-pect-ed of some-one of her ori-gins. But now some-thing else seemed to be con-strain-ing her. “Your Majesty won't be of-fend-ed?”

“I'll be of-fend-ed if you de-ny us the ben-efit of your coun-sel,” said the Queen briskly. “Af-ter all, you have more ex-pe-ri-ence fight-ing the Grel-la than any of us here.”

“That's true, Your Majesty: I've spent my life fight-ing them, and I know what they are. So all the talk of En-glish and Span-ish means lit-tle to me, for the Grel-la are the en-emies of all hu-mans—of all life be-sides them-selves, in fact.”

There was a gen-er-al si-lence of blank in-com-pre-hen-sion.

“But,” Winslow fi-nal-ly protest-ed, “the Spaniards are their pup-pets, ma-nip-ulat-ed by them through the Church of Rome!”

“My par-ents, while they were alive, tried to teach me to be a prop-er daugh-ter of the Church of Eng-land. And I do try to be a good Chris-tian. But I have to say that the talk of Catholic and Protes-tant doesn't mean much to me ei-ther.” Be-fore the in-com-pre-hen-sion around her could so-lid-ify in-to shock, she hur-ried on. “Your Majesty, as lit-tle as I know of these mat-ters, I do know the Grel-la. The Spaniards may be their un-know-ing servi-tors, but it will win them no grat-itude—the Grel-la have none to give. To them, the uni-verse holds on-ly them-selves and slaves. Slav-ery will be the Spaniards' fate in the end, as soon as they've lost their use-ful-ness. Which means the Spaniards are nat-ural al-lies of ours—they just don't know it yet. So maybe our aim should be to let them know it, and wean them away from their al-le-giance to the Grel-la.”

There are ideas so out-landish that they can-not even arouse in-dig-na-tion. That seemed to be the gen-er-al re-ac-tion, as the si-lence con-tin-ued. But Winslow, look-ing around the ar-ray of faces, no-ticed two that were thought-ful rather than blank.

One was the face of Eliz-abeth Tu-dor, whose pol-icy of tac-it tol-er-ation of law-abid-ing Catholics among her sub-jects had al-ways scan-dal-ized her Pu-ri-tan sup-port-ers. The oth-er was that of one of those Pu-ri-tans' lead-ers, and Winslow would have ex-pect-ed him to be hav-ing a stroke. But this was a Pu-ri-tan who was a stu-dent of Machi-avel-li as well as of Calvin. And Mr. Sec-re-tary Wals-ing-ham looked very thought-ful in-deed.

Nineteen

Us-ing easy sail for beat-ing against the south-west wind, Heron and Grey-hound, race-built ships both, need-ed on-ly five tacks to clear the sound and gain the open sea. Four hours af-ter de-part-ing, they were a dozen miles south. Winslow, ex-pect-ing com-pli-ments on the ships' abil-ity to wind-ward, was crest-fall-en at the Queen's and Wals-ing-ham's ob-vi-ous im-pa-tience at what they con-sid-ered a te-dious back-and-forth pro-cess. Vir-ginia Dare, who had nev-er seen an ocean or set foot on a sail-ing ves-sel in her life, was too fas-ci-nat-ed by it all to no-tice.

“Now,” Winslow told his pas-sen-gers, “we'll make more sail and stand fur-ther out to sea, close-hauled on the star-board tack—” See-ing the fa-mil-iar glazed look, he cleared his throat. “Ahem! I meant to say that we'll pro-ceed south-ward, still beat-ing against the wind, fur-ther from the coast than I guess the Dons will be, but just bare-ly with-in sight of it. When we sight them, we'll come around and be in per-fect po-si-tion to win the weath-er gauge.”

“I've heard you speak of 'the weath-er gauge' be-fore, Cap-tain,” said the Queen. “I used to hear Drake speak of it. What, ex-act-ly, does it mean?”

Winslow opened his mouth, then closed it. Af-ter a sec-ond or two he opened it again . . . and closed it again. Some things are so ob-vi-ous they are dif-fi-cult to ad-equate-ly put in-to words.

“It means to be up-wind of the en-emy, Your Majesty,” he fi-nal-ly man-aged.

“Is that all?” she frowned.

“All? But . . . but Your Majesty, a cap-tain in that po-si-tion has the ini-tia-tive. He can choose his mo-ment to bear down. He can force en-gage-ment, and ma-neu-ver with the wind, which is eas-ier than against it. Fur-ther-more, the smoke of the guns drifts down-wind in-to the en-emy's face. And in this case, the Dons will be be-tween us and a lee shore, so they'll have the added

wor-ry of run-ning aground. And—”

“Yes. Of course. Thank you, Cap-tain. I see that I can safe-ly leave mat-ters in your ca-pa-ble hands.” The Queen gave a ges-ture of gra-cious dis-missal and turned to peer at the coast-line that was lit-tle more than a dark line on the hori-zon. Aboard Heron she had been re-unit-ed with her ladies-in-wait-ing and her wardrobe. Now she was re-stored to a sem-blance of the Vir-gin Queen of mem-ory, com-plete with far-thin-gale, white make-up, and dyed and crimped hair with a fringe of pearls. Winslow, who had seen her with-out all that dross, pre-ferred her that way. But he was forced to ad-mit that not ev-ery-one had so seen her, and that with-out it they might have dif-fi-cul-ty rec-og-niz-ing her for who and what she was.

Present-ly, she de-part-ed to dis-cuss some-thing with John Dee. Winslow, who on this voy-age had long since giv-en up try-ing to up-hold tra-di-tion-al re-stric-tions on ac-cess to the quar-ter-deck, found him-self shar-ing it with Wals-ing-ham and Vir-ginia Dare. For a time, they shared it in si-lence, as Vir-ginia Dare gazed in-tent-ly at the dis-tant coast. Then Wals-ing-ham cleared his throat.

“Mis-tress Dare,” he be-gan, in a voice so un-like him that Winslow wor-ried for his al-ways prob-lem-at-ical health.

“Yes, your Lord-ship?”

“I’m no lord. Call me ‘Mr. Sec-re-tary,’ please. It’s what ev-ery-one calls me.”

“Very well, Mr. Sec-re-tary. But in that case, please call me ‘Vir-ginia.’ I imag-ine peo-ple in Eng-land would be scan-dal-ized, but we’re a long way from there.”

“So we are. We are far away in-deed, and about to go in-to a bat-tle in which we may die. I will not run the risk of go-ing be-fore my Mak-er with-out hav-ing first un-bur-den-ed my-self to you, Mis-tress—Vir-ginia.”

“To me, Mr. Sec-re-tary?”

“Yes.” Wals-ing-ham drew a deep breath. “It was I, work-ing through my cat’s-paw Si-mon Fer-nan-dez, who ar-ranged for your par-ents, and all the oth-ers, to be strand-ed on Roanoke Is-land. Thomas, here, al-ready knows why: I was play-ing a game of chess with the King of Spain, and Raleigh’s colony was a piece that had to be sac-ri-ficed. On-ly . . . I had been play-ing chess too long. I had for-got-ten that my pieces were not un-feel-ing bits of carved ivory, but hu-man be-ings and God’s chil-dren.” For an in-stant, Wals-ing-ham hard-ened in-to stern-ness. “Make no mis-take: I have sent many to the rack and the scaf-fold—and some, like An-tho-ny Babing-ton, to be cut open and dis-em-bow-eled while still alive and con-scious—and I have no re-grets. They were traitors who sought the death of Her Majesty and the rape of Eng-land, and I feel no pity for them. But in this in-stance, I know-ing-ly con-demned in-no-cent peo-ple, in-clud-ing wom-en and chil-dren, to their doom. And by so do-ing I ex-posed them to a fate nev-er imag-ined even in our worst vi-su-al-iza-tions of Hell—the kind of un-nat-ural re-peat-ed deaths your par-ents suf-fered.”

For a long mo-ment the on-ly sounds were the wind in the rig-ging and the un-end-ing creak-ing of a wood-en ship un-der sail. Both seemed un-nat-ural-ly loud. Winslow held his breath, not know-ing what to ex-pect from Vir-ginia Dare—and not know-ing how he should or would be-have in re-sponse. For now, he mere-ly kept a wary eye on the sword strapped to her back.

When she fi-nal-ly spoke, her voice could bare-ly be heard. “You could not pos-si-bly have known of the shad-ow-Earth of the Eilon-wë or of the dan-gers it held, Mr. Sec-re-tary.”

“That, Vir-ginia, is a lawyer’s quib-ble. As a lawyer my-self, I need have no re-spect for it. A rob-ber may not in-tend to com-mit mur-der, but if the mas-ter of the house he robs dies de-fend-ing it—or mere-ly breaks his neck com-ing down the stairs to in-ves-ti-gate the com-mo-tion—he will hang for mur-der. Like-wise, my lack of in-tent can-not al-ter my re-spon-si-bil-ity for all that has be-fall-en you and your peo-ple for the past twen-ty years, as you have ex-pe-ri-enced time. I know I can-not ex-pect your for-give-ness. I ask on-ly that you be-lieve this: what I did was done not out of mal-ice or self-in-ter-est but on-ly out of du-ty to Eng-land.”

“If you hadn’t done as you did, Mr. Sec-re-tary, the colony prob-ably would have been

found-ed as Sir Wal-ter in-tend-ed. A tod-dler named Vir-ginia Dare would this day be liv-ing by the shores of the Chesa-peake Bay . . . and fac-ing a life that held noth-ing ex-cept death or en-slave-ment at the hands of the Spaniards, in a world ruled by the Grel-la from be-hind the cur-tains of the Vat-ican and the Es-co-ri-al, in their role as 'Gray Monks.' In-stead, we passed through the veil be-tween worlds that is the Deep Void, and you fol-lowed us. For that rea-son, mankind now has a fight-ing chance to free it-self." She flashed a crooked smile. "That, too, was not what you in-tend-ed. But in-ten-tion-al-ly or not, that is what you have giv-en us. And for that, I like to think my par-ents would have for-giv-en you. I may do no less."

Sir Fran-cis Wals-ing-ham, Privy Coun-selor and Prin-ci-pal Sec-re-tary, bowed his head to the com-mon-born young wom-an in plain Eilon-wë garb. "Thank you, madam," he bare-ly whis-pered, and waved aside her de-mur-ral at the hon-orif-ic. "I had no right to ex-pect the ab-so-lu-tion you have grant-ed me. But now I can face that which lies be-fore us with a blithe heart and a clear mind."

"For which," Winslow told her dry-ly, "you've done us all a fa-vor."

At that mo-ment, a look-out's cry of "Sail ho!" shat-tered the still-ness.

In fact, it was al-most twen-ty sails. That be-came ap-palling-ly ap-par-ent as they drew clos-er and the Span-ish fleet came in-to fo-cus against the back-drop of the coast-line of Woco-con Is-land, still fur-ther to west-ward.

"You know what this is, don't you?" Winslow asked no one in par-tic-ular. "It's the core of the Ar-ma-da—the twen-ty or so galleons that were built from the keel up as fight-ing ships. They must have come here from Eng-land as quick-ly as they could be re-fit-ted and re-pro-vi-sioned, be-fore hur-ri-cane sea-son was even fur-ther ad-vanced. I see none of the forty 'great ships'—lum-ber-ing Mediter-ranean car-go car-ri-ers that had been load-ed down with guns too heavy for them to fire with-out shak-ing them-selves apart. And none of the mer-chant ships they were us-ing as troop car-ri-ers. And none of the gal-leys and gal-le-ass-es that could nev-er have sur-vided an At-lantic cross-ing. No, they don't need any of that when they're not mount-ing a full-scale in-va-sion. There's no fat here—on-ly mus-cle."

"Why would they have thought it nec-es-sary to bring so much . . . mus-cle?" won-dered Wals-ing-ham. "As you said, they must have thought they would on-ly have to deal with a few colonists and fugi-tives."

"I imag-ine the Gray Monks in-sist-ed on it, Mr. Sec-re-tary," Winslow replied ab-sent-ly, nev-er tak-ing his eyes off that ar-ray of sails. "They weren't about to risk this ven-ture with-out the full fight-ing force of their hu-man servi-tors ar-rayed around them."

The Queen peered at the ships, whose hulls were grow-ing more dis-tinct. "They do ap-pear rather . . . formidable, don't they, Cap-tain?"

Winslow grinned wolfish-ly. "The more I hear you say that, Your Majesty, the less I'm wor-ried about them." He turned to her and ex-plain-ed the seem-ing para-dox. "Re-mem-ber what I ex-plain-ed ear-li-er about the tow-er-ing fore- and af-ter-cas-tles the Spaniards still build on their ships? It makes them look big-ger than they are—and so, I sup-pose, serves a pur-pose by fright-en-ing their en-emies. But it al-so ru-ins the ship's sail-ing qual-ities. Heron can sail cir-cles around them. And even Grey-hound, old as she is, has been cut down so she has al-most as low a free-board as a new-er race-built ship. Our ships nev-er could take full ad-van-tage of this when fight-ing the Ar-ma-da in the Chan-nel. They weren't deal-ing with in-di-vid-ual ships, but with a rigid, close-ly spaced for-ma-tion which they didn't dare pen-etrate lest they be board-ed from both sides." He gazed west-ward again. "Here, they're not try-ing to main-tain any such de-fen-sive mass of ships. They nev-er thought to need it off this des-olate coast. That's an-oth-er ad-van-tage for us."

"One ad-van-tage you for-got to men-tion, Thomas," said Dee with a kind of ner-vous lev-ity. "Their sheer, dumb-found-ed sur-prise at two ships dar-ing to chal-lenge them. But of course our re-al ad-van-tage is our pos-ses-sion of the Grel-la an-ti-mat-ter weapons."

“Ac-tu-al-ly, Doc-tor, I plan to with-hold those as long as pos-si-ble.” Winslow's eyes nev-er left the Span-ish fleet. “Ah, yes. I see they're de-tach-ing three ships to deal with the im-pu-dent in-trud-ers.” He could bare-ly keep from his voice his dis-dain at the slug-gish-ness with which the Span-ish galleons changed course to wind-ward.

“Ah . . . what was that about with-hold-ing the Grel-la weapons, Thomas?” in-quired Wals-ing-ham. He didn't ex-act-ly sound ner-vous—imag-ina-tion failed at the idea of him sound-ing that way—but he kept cast-ing glances at the con-verg-ing Span-ish ships.

“That's right, Mr. Sec-re-tary. I don't want to use them un-til I can use them de-ci-sive-ly. I want to pen-etrate to the core of the Span-ish fleet—what our ships were nev-er giv-en the chance to do in the Chan-nel.” Winslow had no idea how chill-ing his ex-pres-sion seemed to the oth-ers. “I want to get with-in range of their flag-ship and shove one of those weapons up their—” At the last in-stant, he re-mem-bered the Queen's pres-ence and con-clud-ed by clear-ing his throat.

“But, er, Thomas,” said Dee, “what about . . . ?” He in-di-cat-ed the ap-proach-ing Span-ish ships, and un-like Wals-ing-ham he sound-ed in-dis-putably jit-tery.

“Be-sides,” Winslow con-tin-ued as though he hadn't heard, “I don't think those weapons will be need-ed just yet. You see, we have a cou-ple of oth-er ad-van-tages which I haven't men-tioned yet.” As he spoke, his eyes re-mained fixed on the pat-tern of ships. Grey-hound was ahead and off the star-board bow; she would en-counter the lead-ing galleon, slight-ly lat-er than Heron would meet the oth-er two, which were more or less abeam of each oth-er as they strug-gled to wind-ward.

Winslow shout-ed a se-ries of com-mands, and Heron swooped in from up-wind, draw-ing along-side her clos-er op-po-nent—a twen-ty-gun galleon, he saw. Her gun-wales and cas-tles were agleam with the sun's re-flec-tion off breast-plates, mori-ons and bur-ganets.

“Over-crowd-ed with sol-diers, as usu-al,” he re-marked dis-dain-ful-ly. “They still think we're go-ing to let them board us.” He turned to his com-pan-ions, who looked un-easy at their un-ex-pect-ed close-ness to the en-emy. But the En-glish had learned in the Chan-nel fight-ing that the long-range gun-nery on which they had orig-inal-ly pinned their hopes was a waste of pow-der and shot; they must close prac-ti-cal-ly to with-in pis-tol range for their guns to be ef-fec-tive. He con-sid-ered sug-gest-ing that the Queen seek the rel-a-tive safe-ty of the cab-in, where the ladies-in-wait-ing now cow-ered, but then thought bet-ter of it. “Pre-pare your-selves,” was all he said.

“What 'oth-er ad-van-tages,' are these, Cap-tain?” asked the Queen in a steady voice.

At that mo-ment, the Spaniard's guns fired with a deaf-en-ing se-ries of crash-es. The three land-lub-bers in-vol-un-tar-ily ducked as can-non-balls screamed over-head. One of those balls punched a hole in Heron's main-sail, and a few lines were cut, but the broad-side had no oth-er ef-fect.

“That's one, Your Majesty,” Winslow ex-plain-ed. “It, too, re-sults from our hav-ing the weath-er gauge. The can-nons of the lee ship—that's them—are tilt-ed up-ward, and are apt to com-plete-ly miss a race-built ship like ours, with its low free-board. For the same rea-son, ours are an-gled down, so . . .” He paused with un-con-scious dra-ma, stud-ied an-gles and dis-tances, and bel-lowed, “Fire!”

Heron shud-dered as her port bat-tery belched forth an ear-bruis-ing broad-side that crashed in-to the Spaniard's hull, smash-ing tim-bers and vis-ibly rock-ing her back. Winslow roared an-oth-er se-ries of or-ders, sails were luffed, and the shak-en Spaniard glid-ed on past.

“Hard a-port!” Winslow shout-ed to the steers-man. With a sud-den-ness that al-most threw the Queen and the two el-der-ly lands-men off their feet, Heron swung to port. Her bowsprit bare-ly missed scrap-ing the Spaniard's poop as she crossed her op-po-nent's vul-ner-able stern.

Heron on-ly had enough gun crews to man one side's bat-tery at a time—the usu-al case. Now they ran across the decks to the un-fired star-board bat-tery.

“Fire as your guns bear!” Winslow called out. As the first gun belched fire and thun-der, the Span-ish cap-tain's cab-in seemed to ex-plode out-ward in a show-er of wood and glass. Then ball af-ter ball smashed home, and Winslow vi-su-al-ized them roar-ing down the Spaniard's length

from stern to stem, smash-ing ev-ery-thing and ev-ery-one in their path. One of them brought the mizzen-mast down, and it fell slow-ly over the star-board side, foul-ing the main-mast's rig-ging. Then they were past, and as the wind blew the rot-ten eggs-smelling clouds of smoke down-wind they could see that the galleon was adrift, seem-ing-ly out of con-trol.

“We got their rud-der, or I'm a Turk-ish pimp!” ex-ult-ed Mar-tin Gorham.

“Now hard a-star-board!” Winslow or-dered, and the steers-man hauled the whip-staff in the op-po-site di-rec-tion with all his strength. As Heron came about and be-gan to draw down on the sec-ond galleon, the gun crews crossed the deck again and be-gan to reload the port guns.

“An-oth-er ad-van-tage,” Winslow re-sumed con-ver-sa-tion-al-ly, ig-nor-ing his lis-ten-ers' stunned looks, “is our gun car-riages, which roll back with the guns' re-coil un-til their ca-bles halt them, al-low-ing the crews to reload. The Spaniards, who think on-ly in terms of a sin-gle broad-side to soft-en their en-emy up be-fore board-ing, can't do this. Ac-tu-al-ly, we couldn't have done it if we'd had to fight a bat-tle on our voy-age from Eng-land to Vir-ginia, be-cause all the clut-ter on the gun deck left no room for re-coil. But now I've had that cleared away. And this Spaniard—who thinks our port bat-tery has shot its bolt—is about to get a sur-prise.”

As they drew along-side, the wind picked up a bit and both ships heeled more sharply. So this time the Span-ish can-non-balls flew even fur-ther over-head, while Heron's smashed home at or be-low the wa-ter-line. They left their sec-ond op-po-nent list-ing alarm-ing-ly to star-board as they turned to port, cross-ing her bow—un-for-tu-nate-ly, there was no time to reload the port bat-tery for an-oth-er broad-side—and leav-ing her be-hind, tak-ing on wa-ter.

The Queen, Wals-ing-ham, Dee and Vir-ginia Dare gazed aft, where the wrecks of two larg-er ships lay wal-low-ing help-less-ly in Heron's wake. Then they turned to Winslow and sim-ply stared, open-mouthed.

He bare-ly no-ticed, as he scanned the scene re-vealed by the dis-si-pat-ing smoke. Ahead, Grey-hound was pulling away from the Span-ish ship she had raked across the bows, and was con-verg-ing on the main Span-ish body. She would close with that main body slight-ly soon-er than Heron, even though the Span-ish were now much clos-er. On-ly one of them was in a po-si-tion to in-ter-pose her-self be-tween Heron and what Winslow was cer-tain was the flag-ship.

“Yes,” Wals-ing-ham nod-ded when asked for con-fir-ma-tion. “That is the San Martín, the great Por-tuguese galleon that was the Ar-ma-da's flag-ship. I see she is still fly-ing the flag King Phillip had pre-sent-ed to his ad-mi-ral, the Duke of Med-ina Sido-nia, be-fore he sailed from Lis-bon—I re-ceived a re-port of the cer-emo-ny.” He gazed through squint-ed eyes at the huge flag. “Yes: the roy-al Span-ish arms with the Vir-gin Mary on one side and the cru-ci-fied Christ on the oth-er, over a scroll with the words Ex-urge Domine et Vin-di-ca Causam Tu-am—'Arise O Lord and Vin-di-cate Thy Cause.'?” Wals-ing-ham looked like he want-ed to spit.

“Well,” said Winslow, “we'll make for her—al-though Grey-hound will be in range first. And I think it's time to re-veal our Grel-la weapons by us-ing one of them on that galleon that's mov-ing to pro-tect the flag-ship.” Heron mount-ed two of the an-ti-mat-ter weapons, one for-ward and one aft. Winslow looked at the frag-ile, harm-less-seem-ing ob-ject that was so ob-vi-ous-ly out of place on the poop. “Dr. Dee, you'll oblige me by telling me when, in your judg-ment, we're in range of her.”

“I be-lieve, Thomas, that we will be close enough soon . . . soon . . . now!”

Winslow sig-naled to the crew on the poop, and a trac-ery of evil en-er-gies wa-vered up and down that transluc-ent tube. In the sun-light the beam it pro-ject-ed was bare-ly vis-ible or au-di-ble—noth-ing more than a flick-er-ing, crack-ling line. But it speared the ap-proach-ing galleon like a nee-dle, and at its touch her side sim-ply ex-plod-ed in-to white-hot flame with a noise like the crack of doom, fol-lowed by a shock wave that caused Heron's tim-bers to shud-der.

But at ap-pre-cia-bly the same in-stant an-oth-er nar-row line of un-nat-ural light shot out from San Martín's fore-cas-tle, and Grey-hound's en-tire waist boiled in-to seething flame, break-ing her in two. Her main-mast flew cartwheel-ing through the air, trail-ing flame, un-til it splashed in-to the

sea.

“Steers-man!” Winslow bel-lowed while ev-ery-one else stood mar-bled in shock. “Make for their flag-ship—two points to port.”

Heron, with ev-ery inch of can-vas laid on, sailed past the flam-ing wreck of the screen-ing galleon, and ap-proached the Span-ish flag-ship. Winslow could see fig-ures on her quar-ter-deck, in-clud-ing one very rich-ly dressed one and an-oth-er that was tiny and gray-robed. He al-so saw the Grel-la weapon on the fore-cas-tle swing-ing to-ward him.

Im-pul-sive-ly, he grabbed a mega-phone of stiff leather. “Hold!” he called out in Span-ish, his am-pli-fied voice cross-ing the in-ter-ven-ing wa-ter. “We have weapons like yours—you just saw us use one. Fire on us, and we will re-ply in kind.”

A hur-ried col-lo-quy en-sued on San Martín's quar-ter-deck, with the small gray-clad fig-ure ex-pos-tu-lat-ing to the splen-did-ly cloaked man, who hes-itat-ed, shook his head, and turned to speak to some-one else—the flag-ship's cap-tain, prob-ably. The lat-ter took up a mega-phone like Winslow's. “Sur-ren-der now and we will spare your worth-less heretic lives. Oth-er-wise, Saint Antony's holy fire will con-sume you be-fore you can 're-ply in kind,' Luther-an pig!”

Winslow laughed scorn-ful-ly. “We have two of the an-ti-mat-ter weapons—and yes, we know all about them. If you fire first, you'll prob-ably get one of them. But be-fore the ship goes down, the oth-er one will send you to your own pa-pist Hell!”

What fol-lowed was a mo-ment, not of si-lence—there were too many sur-vivors cling-ing to flot-sam and cry-ing for res-cue for that—but of ex-pectan-cy that was al-most un-bear-able in its tense-ness.

Wals-ing-ham stepped to the rail and took the mega-phone from Winslow's hands. “In the name of Her Majesty, I pro-pose that we meet to set-tle this im-passe.”

There was an-oth-er hasty con-sul-ta-tion aboard San Martín be-fore the same man re-spond-ed. “You lie! The heretic bas-tard you call your Queen is dead!”

With an oath, Eliz-abeth snatched the mega-phone and spoke in a voice that bare-ly re-quired it. “We are Eliz-abeth, by grace of God Queen of Eng-land, Wales, Ire-land and France, and De-fend-er of the Faith . . . and,” she con-clud-ed with-out the slight-est hint of irony, “Weroan-za of Vir-ginia—off whose coasts you are cruis-ing with-out per-mis-sion. And you, sir-rah, will keep a civ-il tongue in your head! You will al-so turn the mega-phone over to your ad-mi-ral. I do not deal with un-der-lings!”

Even at this mo-ment, it was all Winslow could do not to laugh at the flab-ber-gast-ed com-mo-tion that arose aboard San Martín. The Gray Monk seemed even more ag-itat-ed than be-fore. But the grandee turned away from him and took the mega-phone.

“I am Don Alon-zo Pérez de Guzmán el Bueno, Duke of Med-ina Sido-nia and Cap-tain Gen-er-al of the High Seas. If you wish a meet-ing, I grant per-mis-sion to come aboard my flag-ship un-der safe con-duct.”

Winslow didn't even both-er to re-claim the mega-phone. “What kind of sim-ple-tons do you take us for?” he shout-ed across the wa-ter with cupped hands. “? 'Safe con-duct!' The same kind of safe con-duct Jan Hus had from you pa-pists, I sup-pose—be-fore you burned him alive!”

“You have the word of hon-or of a Span-ish no-ble-man!”

Wals-ing-ham shushed Winslow be-fore he could make a rude noise, then con-ferred in un-der-tones with the Queen and took the mega-phone. “To avoid any mis-trust or mis-un-der-stand-ings, Your Grace, we pro-pose that we meet at a neu-tral site. Woco-con Is-land lies just to our left—I mean, to port. It is dan-ger-ous to try to pass the sand-bars in-to the sound. But giv-en the fine-ness of the weath-er, let us an-chor just out-side the in-let and take small boats to the beach—say, not more than ten peo-ple on each side. In the mean-time, our flag-ships can con-tin-ue to hold each oth-er hostage.”

There was a long pause. Winslow could not in-ter-pret what he saw of the ac-tiv-ity on San Martín's quar-ter-deck. But present-ly Med-ina Sido-nia took up the mega-phone again. “Very well. I agree. Come ahead.”

Twenty

The English party was ashore on Woco-con first, to Winslow's smug lack of surprise. Besides himself, it consisted of the Queen, Walsingham, Dee, Virginia Dare, a pair of the soldiers of the Queen's guard, and four crew-men who, with the soldiers, manned the oars of the long-boat that brought them. Winslow couldn't recall what had made him decide to include Shake-speare among those crew-men, but the young actor pulled his oar game-ly enough. They waited on the narrow sandy beach, against the back-drop of the loblolly pine forest, and watched as the Spanish party rowed ashore. Woco-con's Indian inhabitants, if any, were not in evidence.

The Spaniards also had six rowers: four sailors, and two men in cowled gray robes. Like-wise gray-robed was a diminutive figure at the sight of whom Winslow's hackles rose. The remaining three were obvious Spanish noblemen, led by the one who had spoken from San Martín's quarter-deck. As he stepped ashore, Winslow saw that he was in his late thirties, of only medium height but neatly made and rather broad-shouldered. He had the look of a horse-man rather than a sea-man, which was consistent with what Winslow had heard of the Duke of Medina Sidonia. His neatly bearded face, with its dark, intelligent eyes, was obviously that of a sensitive and thoughtful man. Not quite equally obvious, at first glance, was that it was also the face of a courageous one.

He ran his eyes over the eleven members of the English party. "I was under the impression," he said mildly, "that our agreement stipulated not more than ten persons for each side."

Walsingham stepped forward and spoke with equal smoothness. "Naturally persons cannot be construed as including Her Majesty." He made a leg and indicated the Queen with a sweeping gesture.

"Ah." Medina Sidonia looked perplexed—as well he might, Winslow thought with grim amusement. How does one behave toward an anointed Queen whom one's own Church has declared a usurper, her subjects released from obedience to her and absolved from guilt for assassinating her? It was a difficult question, especially when one had agreed to treat with her. The Duke resolved it by inclining his head fractionally lower than he would have for a lady of equal social rank and murmuring, "Madam."

For an instant, Elizabeth's eyes flashed fire at the pointed omission of "Your Majesty." But she smoothed her expression out and gave a small, quick nod and a frostily correct "Your Grace" in return.

"And I," Walsingham resumed, "have the honor to be Her Majesty's Principal Secretary." He ignored the startled glares he got from the Spaniards, to whom his name was all too well known. "And these two gentlemen are Dr. John Dee, a learned adviser to Her Majesty, and Captain Thomas Winslow of Her Majesty's ship Heron."

"Ah, yes," nodded Medina Sidonia. "The noted charlatan and the equally noted pirate."

"Privateer," Winslow corrected with a wince of wronged innocence. Dee, at his loftiest, did not deign to respond.

"I have already introduced myself," said Medina Sidonia, ignoring them. He turned to one of his fellow nobles, distinguished-looking but elderly and walking like a man who suffered from sciatica. "This is Don Juan Martínez de Recalde, Captain General of the Squadron of Biscay." Winslow looked up sharply at a man whose name was known and respected by every fighting sea-man. "And this is Don Diego Flores de Valdés, Captain General of the Squadron of Castile. And this," Medina Sidonia concluded, indicating the small gray-robed figure, "is Father Jerónimo of the Order of St. Antony of Padua."

Winslow stared at the Grell, barely recognizable as such save for his size because his cowl hid most of the alien face. His two human acolytes, however, had their cowls down, and

Winslow, look-ing at those or-di-nary Span-ish faces, saw a look he had seen be-fore on the faces of en-slaved Eilon-wë. For all the dif-fer-ence in race, it was the same look: a look too emp-ty even to hold hope-less-ness, for hope-less-ness im-plies the abil-ity to hope. These young men lacked that, be-cause their souls had been stolen. At the sight of them—hu-mans this time, not Eilon-wë—Winslow's gorge rose.

“Ah . . . Fa-ther Jerón-imo,” said Wals-ing-ham with a per-cep-ti-ble pause be-fore the name. “I am glad the Duke in-clud-ed you in his par-ty, for our busi-ness con-cerns you.”

“There could be noth-ing con-cern-ing me to in-ter-est heretics,” came the sibi-lant voice from with-in the cowl. The Spaniards mut-tered in agree-ment.

“Oh, but there could . . . Fa-ther Jerón-imo.” Wals-ing-ham's pause was now open-ly iron-ic. “Many things—and the an-swers to many ques-tions. For ex-am-ple, how we En-glish hap-pen to know about the an-ti-mat-ter weapons, and have them in our pos-ses-sion.” As he spoke, Wals-ing-ham's head turned to-ward Med-ina Sido-nia, and their eyes met.

The Duke's ex-pres-sive face was a bat-tle-ground of emo-tions, as au-to-mat-ic de-nial warred with doubts and cu-rios-ity. “We had won-dered about that,” he con-ced-ed.

“The an-swer is sim-ple enough, Your Grace. I doubt if . . . Fa-ther Jerón-imo has ex-plained to you the pur-pose of your voy-age here, save in gen-er-al-ities.” Med-ina Sido-nia's ex-pres-sion made it clear that Wals-ing-ham had guessed cor-rect-ly. “The pur-pose is to find the way back in-to the world from which the in-hu-man abom-ina-tions whom we know as the 'Gray Monks' came to in-fest ours.”

“Si-lence, heretic!” hissed Fa-ther Jerón-imo.

Wals-ing-ham swung away from the dumb-found-ed Spaniards and faced the Gray Monk. “You are too late. We have vis-it-ed that world. There, we helped the Eilon-wë free them-selves from their servi-tude to your fel-low Grel-la!”

“What bab-bling is this?” splut-tered Diego Flo-res de Valdés. But he quick-ly fell silent and, along with the oth-er Spaniards, stared at Fa-ther Jerón-imo. The Gray Monk had stag-gered back as though from a phys-ical blow, and his cowl had slipped par-tial-ly back, ex-pos-ing more of his li-pless, al-most nose-less face with its huge emp-ty eyes. He had nev-er looked more alien.

“What do these un-fa-mil-iar words mean, Fa-ther?” asked Med-ina Sido-nia in a lev-el voice.

“Yes!” said Wals-ing-ham mock-ing-ly. “Tell them what it all means, if you dare. Tell them what you are, Grel!”

“Be silent!” In-stead of the usu-al hiss, it was a ragged rasp that, Winslow de-cid-ed, must be a Grel-la shout. The Gray Monk turned to the Spaniards. “What are you wait-ing for, you cow-ards? In ad-di-tion to these less-er scoundrels, we have in our hands the arch-fiend Wals-ing-ham—Sa-tan in hu-man form! Have you for-got-ten that he sent the mar-tyred Mary Stu-art to the scaf-fold with his forged let-ters?”

“If mem-ory serves,” Wals-ing-ham in-ter-ject-ed mild-ly, “even the so-called Queen of Scots her-self aban-doned that line of de-fense at her tri-al.”

“And bet-ter still,” Fa-ther Jerón-imo went on, ig-nor-ing him, “we have the bas-tard whelp of the whore Anne Bo-leyn—prob-ably sired on her by her own broth-er!” The Queen flushed be-neath her make-up at be-ing re-mind-ed of the most scur-rilous of the trumped-up charges against her moth-er, whose re-al crime had been her fail-ure to give Hen-ry VI-II a male heir.

“Fa-ther,” said Med-ina Sido-nia cool-ly, “leav-ing aside the prac-ti-cal mat-ter that there are no more of us than of them on this beach, I promised them safe con-duct.”

“A promise to a heretic means noth-ing! I ab-solve you from it.”

“The word of hon-or of a Guzmán el Bueno means a great deal, no mat-ter to whom it is giv-en. Fur-ther-more, their ship and San Martín still hold each oth-er un-der threat of—how to put it?—mu-tu-al-ly as-sured de-struc-tion.”

“Your ridicu-lous, prim-itive ship does not mat-ter!” Fa-ther Jerón-imo brought him-self un-der con-trol with a vis-ible ef-fort. “What I meant to say, my son, is that we, un-like they, have ships to spare. The im-por-tant thing is that you con-vey me on-ward to com-plete my holy quest.”

Winslow barked laugh-ter. “We can help you with your 'quest.' What you seek is on Croa-toan Is-land, just north-east of here. And you won't need your in-stru-ments to find it. Oh, no! We'll be glad to show you the way! And once you use your fly-ing ship to go through the por-tal, you'll be just one more bit of ver-min for the Eilon-wë to erad-icate, along with all the oth-er Grel-la still de-fil-ing their world.”

Vir-ginia Dare stepped for-ward. She hadn't un-der-stood the ex-change, for they had all been speak-ing in Span-ish. But she grasped what was hap-pen-ing. And now she stood be-fore the Spaniards and the Grell. Wals-ing-ham hadn't in-clud-ed her in the in-tro-duc-tions, and it had nev-er oc-curred to the Spaniards to ask to have her in-tro-duced. In their world, a plain-ly dressed young wom-an in these cir-cum-stances could on-ly be a ser-vant to the Queen. So they had nev-er no-ticed her. Now they no-ticed—and stared at the sword strapped to her back. Their stares grew even more round-eyed as she faced Fa-ther Jerón-imo and spoke in the Eilon-wë lan-guage.

Again, the Grell re-coiled back-ward in shock. Then he ral-lied and hissed fu-ri-ous-ly at her in the same lan-guage. She laughed and spoke a few more Eilon-wë phras-es, which re-duced the Grell to a state of glar-ing speech-less-ness.

“Fa-ther,” said Med-ina Sido-nia in a voice that was now quite hard, “I do not know this tongue. But you ev-ident-ly do. Per-haps you can ex-plain.”

Dee chuck-led. “I picked up a smat-ter-ing of the Eilon-wë lan-guage while we were among them. I be-lieve she just re-it-er-at-ed what Cap-tain Winslow had al-ready told him, but phrased a tri-file more strong-ly.”

“I re-quire an ex-pla-na-tion, Fa-ther,” Med-ina Sido-nia said, more firm-ly than be-fore.

A quiv-er-ing ran through Fa-ther Jerón-imo, and some-thing seemed to awak-en in his strange eyes. Winslow had thought those eyes to be holes through which noth-ing was to be glimpsed but an in-fin-ity of empti-ness. Now he saw that there was some-thing there af-ter all: a con-tempt so ut-ter and abysmal that it passed be-yond con-tempt and be-came an emo-tion for which no hu-man lan-guage had a name.

“You 're-quire,' do you, you filthy breed-ing an-imal?” Be-fore any-one could re-act, the Grell reached with-in his gray robe and whipped out a pis-tol-shaped ob-ject. Winslow rec-og-nized it as a small hand-held ver-sion of the weapons which shaped and in-ten-si-fied light in-to a dead-ly im-ma-te-ri-al rapi-er. At a hissed com-mand in the loath-some Grel-la tongue, the two acolytes, mov-ing like the au-toma-ta they in fact were, drew sim-ilar weapons with grips mod-ified for hu-man hands. One of them point-ed it to cov-er the En-glish par-ty, in-clud-ing Vir-ginia Dare, who froze in-to im-mo-bil-ity at the sight of a weapon she knew on-ly too well. The oth-er did the same for the Span-ish sailors who stood, mouths agape, by their long-boat. Fa-ther Jerón-imo him-self lev-eled his weapon at the group of Span-ish no-bles, aimed di-rect-ly at the Duke's chest.

He made no move to fire it. But Re-calde, who hap-pened to be in the best po-si-tion the in-ter-pose him-self, shout-ed “No!” and, mov-ing as quick-ly as his age and in-fir-mi-ty per-mit-ted, threw him-self be-tween his cap-tain-gen-er-al and what his half-cen-tu-ry of war-like ex-pe-ri-ence told him was a weapon of some kind.

The crack-ling, sear-ing line of light that Winslow re-mem-bered speared Re-calde through the chest. He fell back-wards in a burst of su-per-heat-ed pink steam.

With a cry, Med-ina Sido-nia went to his knees in the sand be-side the man who had been his men-tor in the lore of the sea. But the gal-lant old ad-mi-ral was al-ready dead.

With cold de-lib-er-ation, the Grell fired his weapon again. Diego Flo-res de Valdés died.

“Any use-ful-ness they may have had to the ex-pe-di-tion,” said Fa-ther Jerón-imo, still hold-ing his weapon steady, “was out-weighed by the val-ue of their deaths, in demon-strat-ing to you how lit-tle any of your lives mean, ex-cept to the ex-tent that you are use-ful to us, your nat-ural mas-ters.”

Med-ina Sido-nia looked up from where he knelt, and his face wore a look ob-vi-ous-ly for-foreign to it: a look of cold, mur-der-ous hate. But he, like ev-ery-one else, re-mained

mo-tion-less un-der the sights of those un-nat-ural weapons.

“And now,” the Grell con-tin-ued, “to my in-ex-press-ible re-lief, I need no longer pre-tend to take your trib-al su-per-sti-tions and ab-surd meta-phys-ical hair-split-ting se-ri-ous-ly—ex-cept, of course, to your sub-or-di-nates, who will be told that the heretic Eliz-abeth has seen the er-ror of her ways and joined our ex-pe-di-tion. Thus we will avoid the de-struc-tion of the use-ful weapons aboard the two flag-ships. And she can be held as a hostage for the good be-hav-ior of the rest of the En-glish as we pro-ceed to this Croa-toan Is-land.”

“Are you in-sane?” Dee blurt-ed, heed-less of the light-weapons. “There's noth-ing left for you on the oth-er side of that por-tal. Your do-min-ion over the Eilon-wë is over. The great arch that al-lowed easy pas-sage to your oth-er worlds be-yond is a pile of wreck-age. Haven't you been lis-ten-ing?”

“Yes, I have been lis-ten-ing to your pa-thet-ic at-tempt to de-ceive me. It is, of course, all non-sense. The Eilon-wë, while some-what more knowl-edge-able than your hu-mans, are equal-ly prod-ucts of ran-dom nat-ural pro-cess-es. As such, they could not pos-si-bly have over-come a high-er, con-scious-ly self-cre-at-ed form of life. How-ev-er, your lies con-tain one el-ement of ob-vi-ous truth, which re-quires fur-ther in-ves-ti-ga-tion. Your knowl-edge of the Eilon-wë lan-guage proves that you hu-mans did in-deed blun-der on-to the por-tal—and passed through it, in some fash-ion that does not re-quire ar-ti-fi-cial aid. This must be stud-ied. Per-haps we can make use of it.”

Winslow smiled tight-ly. “You're wel-come to try.”

“It is of no par-tic-ular im-por-tance if we do not. We will sim-ply com-plete the re-pair of our scout craft, for which we have been await-ing the re-dis-cov-ery of the por-tal. In the mean-time, your Queen will be a hostage against any fool-ish at-tempt by you to use your abil-ity to pass through the por-tal when you show me its lo-ca-tion.”

Through all this, Vir-ginia Dare had stood in un-com-pre-hend-ing si-lence, re-main-ing ab-so-lute-ly still. Per-haps it was for that rea-son that the Grell seemed to have for-got-ten her pres-ence—or per-haps be-cause he had ab-sorbed the at-ti-tudes of the Spaniards among whom he had lived. It was prob-ably the lat-ter, for when she slumped down in an ap-par-ent swoon his ali-en-ness could not dis-guise his at-ti-tude of ex-as-per-at-ed but un-sur-prised con-tempt. He spoke a com-mand to the acolyte who was cov-er-ing the En-glish par-ty. The lat-ter stepped for-ward in the ma-chine-like way of his kind, still hold-ing his weapon lev-el while reach-ing down with his oth-er hand to haul her out of the way.

With ex-plo-sive sud-den-ness, she lashed out with a kick from her crouch-ing po-si-tion, con-nect-ing with the acolyte's right knee and caus-ing him to stag-ger. At the same in-stant, she surged to her feet, grasp-ing the wrist of his gun hand and forc-ing it down. He re-flex-ive-ly got off a shot, sear-ing the sand in-to a steam-ing pud-dle of molten sil-ica. Then she wrenched the arm up while grasp-ing him around the neck from be-hind with her oth-er arm. While he was still off bal-ance and un-able to bring his weight and strength to bear, she swung him around to face the be-ing who had been known as Fa-ther Jerón-imo.

The Grell un-hesi-tat-ing-ly swung his weapon to-ward his min-ion and fired a bolt that would ef-fort-less-ly burn its way through both the strug-gling bod-ies. But Vir-ginia Dare shoved the acolyte for-ward, and he took the light-ray through the head while she her-self fell to the sand. The top of the acolyte's head came off as his in-stant-ly su-per-heat-ed brain ex-plod-ed. His life-less body fell over back-wards across Vir-ginia Dare's prone form.

Med-ina Sido-nia jumped to his feet and drew his rapi-er. The Grell swung his weapon back to-ward him.

Act-ing be-fore he had time to think, Winslow sprang for-ward with a roar, sweep-ing out his sword. Lung-ing, he just bare-ly struck the weapon from the Grell's hand with the sword's point. As the Grell stag-gered back with a high-pitched hiss, Winslow had a split sec-ond to meet the eyes of the man whose life he had—to their mu-tu-al as-ton-ish-ment—just saved.

A rapid-fire crack-ling was heard as the re-main-ing acolyte fired re-peat-ed-ly at the Span-ish

sailors, who had begun an enraged rush, drawing their knives. He killed two of them before the other two bowled him over and set about their knife work. His weapon went flying and landed in the sand.

With a kind of quivering, wailing hiss, the Grell scrambled toward that weapon, his gray robe half falling off in his frantic scramble and revealing his hairless, inhuman head. Before anyone had time to react, he had reached it and scooped it up. The human-adapted grip was awkward for him, but he took it in both hands and raised it.

No one had noticed Virginia Dare pushing the dead weight of the acolyte off her and springing to her feet. But now, at the last instant, Winslow caught sight of her as she rushed in from the side, reached behind her left shoulder, and swept out the curved Eilonwë sword. There was the blinding motion Winslow remembered, and the Grell was watching his weapon, with the two hands holding it, falling to the sand.

His hiss had no time to rise to a full, high-pitched Grel-la scream. For she brought her sword around in a smooth two-handed recovery and whipped downward, laying him open from forehead to crotch.

Silence fell, shuddering, on the beach. The English sailors, who had taken no part up to now, came running up . . . only to stop and stare, as did their Spanish fellows. Then they all looked away. Shakespeare turned aside and was sick. Several others looked as though they might do the same. Winslow himself nearly gagged. For what bulged out through the Grell's slashed-open robe was nothing like the guts of men or even of beasts. And the blood that soaked into the sand was not the proper color or consistency of blood.

These were hard men, born into hard times—times when executions by hanging, drawing and quartering were considered public spectacles, and bear baitings were a favorite form of entertainment. Butchery in itself had no power to shock or disgust them. What nauseated them was a sense of filthy and obscene wrongness.

"Your Grace," Walsingham finally said after swallowing hard, "Captain Winslow spoke truth. If you wish, we will convey you to Croatoan Island and show you the portal through which the flying ship now lying crippled in Florida entered our world. If it is your further wish, we will convey you, or a trusty deputy, through the portal, where the beings known as the Eilonwë—late ly enslaved by the Grel-la, as they mean to enslave mankind—will confirm what we have said."

Medina Sidonia drew a deep breath and released it, as though to cleanse his lungs. "I would be fascinated to do so. But I don't believe it will be necessary. Not now." He gestured to indicate that at which none of them wanted to look. Then his features firmed into a mask of determination. "Besides, we have more urgent matters in hand—a cleansing that must be done. The only question is whether we deal first with the Gray . . . that is, the Grel-la in Florida, or return to Europe at once."

"Setting a course for Florida would mean beating against the prevailing winds all the way," said Winslow, relieved to be back in the world of practical seamanship. He restrained himself from remarking condescendingly on the difficulty the Spanish ships would have sailing into the wind. "Also, no seaman in his right mind wants to linger in these waters in hurricane season."

"Agreed." Medina Sidonia's emphatic nod suggested that he was only too willing to be persuaded to let the winds and currents carry them easily back across the Atlantic. "Furthermore, the Grel-la in Florida can do no harm, stranded there with their ruined craft. They can be dealt with later. It is more urgent to free Europe—beginning with England."

"England?" Dee exclaimed, clearly surprised that Medina Sidonia would want to start there. "Its liberation may not be easy, even with our antimatter weapons. I'm sure the Grel-la there have others."

"So they do. But I have reason to believe we won't have to face them." Medina Sidonia looked grave. "It is my devout hope that King Phillip will see what needs to be done, once he

knows the truth about how we have all been de-ceived. But just in case there are . . . dif-fi-cul-ties, we will need al-lies. And we have a nat-ural one in the Duke of Par-ma.”

“Par-ma!” Wals-ing-ham ex-claimed, for once tak-en aback.

“Yes. He is still in com-mand in Eng-land as gov-er-nor-gen-er-al, un-til all re-sis-tance is put down and it is safe for King Phillip's daugh-ter Is-abel-la to ar-rive and as-sume the throne, with Dr. William Allen as pa-pal legate to ad-vice her.”

“Allen!” Wals-ing-ham's jaw clenched at the men-tion of the Catholic ex-ile, founder of the En-glish Col-lege at Rome, who had tire-less-ly ad-vo-cat-ed the over-throw of Eliz-abeth. “That foul traitor! And Par-ma, who rav-aged Lon-don, and be-fore that played a de-ceit-ful game of pre-tend-ing to ne-go-ti-ate with our com-mis-sion-ers in the Nether-lands, all the while know-ing that Phillip had no in-ten-tion of mak-ing peace. Oh, yes, I've read their cor-re-spon-dence.”

“As re-gards Lon-don . . .” Med-ina Sido-nia spread his hands as though to say that war was war. “And I hap-pen to know that Par-ma was un-der the King's or-ders to be . . . less than can-did with your com-mis-sion-ers. Those or-ders nev-er sat par-tic-ular-ly well with him. Ly-ing does not come nat-ural-ly to him; he is a sol-dier, not a lawyer.” Wals-ing-ham flushed dark-ly at the jibe. “I al-so know—as even you may not—that back in March he tact-ful-ly ad-vised the King that our ends might well be gained with less ex-pense by mak-ing an hon-or-able peace with Eng-land.”

Wals-ing-ham, who in fact hadn't known it, blinked once.

“And,” the Duke con-tin-ued, “I have rea-son to be-lieve that he would be amenable to our cause. You must un-der-stand, he is a prince by birth, and has for some time felt that he de-serves, as a re-ward for his ser-vices, a king-dom of his own. Or, rather a king-dom for his line, for his wife is a roy-al princess of Por-tu-gal and so his chil-dren have a bet-ter claim to the Por-tuguese throne than does King Phillip, who kept it for him-self. Like-wise, he was dis-ap-point-ed in his hopes for a king-dom in the Nether-lands. Some of the wits in the Ar-ma-da were say-ing that we'd have to fight a sec-ond war, over who would be King of Eng-land af-ter we con-quer-ed it.” See-ing that his lis-ten-ers didn't ap-pre-ci-ate the hu-mor, the Duke hur-ried on. “At any rate, I be-lieve he would join us if Eng-land agrees to sup-port his claim as King of the Nether-lands.”

“But,” Dee won-dered, “will the Dutch ac-cept him?”

The Queen an-swered him. “I be-lieve they very well might, as long as he is will-ing to re-spect their tra-di-tion-al lib-er-ties, about which they feel very strong-ly. I have al-ways tried to con-vince Phillip of Spain that if he would on-ly do so, the Dutch were per-fect-ly will-ing to be his loy-al sub-jects. Is that no so, my Moor?”

“In-deed, Your Majesty,” said Wals-ing-ham sourly. “But he of course sought to im-pose the popish re-li-gion on them, per-se-cut-ing them for their faith.”

“As Catholics are per-se-cut-ed in Eng-land for not con-form-ing to your hereti-cal church?” queried Med-ina Sido-nia point-ed-ly.

“They most cer-tain-ly are not! Her Majesty is per-fect-ly will-ing to al-low her law-abid-ing Catholic sub-jects the free ex-er-cise of their faith.” More will-ing than some of us would pre-fer, Wals-ing-ham loud-ly did not add.

“Sub-ject to a fine for not at-tend-ing your hereti-cal 'Church of Eng-land.' And you your-self have sub-ject-ed priests of the true Catholic faith to the rack and oth-er tor-tures, and even to death!”

“They were spies and se-cret agents, seek-ing to in-cite re-bel-lion and pro-cure the as-sas-si-na-tion of Her Majesty! It was for that, and not for their de-lud-ed faith, that they fell afoul of the law!”

“And you have sup-pressed the Mass!”

“Mum-mery of the Dev-il!”

“Heretic!”

“Pa-pist!”

“Oh, for the love of God, will you two have done?” The Queen's voice si-lenced the Duke as

thoroughly as it did her own Principal Secretary. She drew a deep, exasperated breath. "Can you think of nothing but your bickering? How much do our differences mean, in the face of that?" She swept an arm toward that which had been Father Jerónimo. "We must stand together against the enemies of all Christendom—no, of all mankind. Afterwards, we'll have plenty of time to decide how we should best worship the God we all share—or maybe even allow each of God's children to decide it for himself. But if we fall to fighting among ourselves, it may be that no one will be left to worship Him at all."

For a few heartbeats, Medina Sidonia and Walsingham—the Hidalgo and the Puritan—continued to glare at each other with jaws out-thrust. To Winslow, who was not generally troubled by an overabundance of imagination, it was as though History held its breath. Then one of them—afterwards, Winslow was never quite sure which—extended his hand. The other took it.

With a smile, the Queen laid a hand atop the two men's clasped ones.

"Your Grace," she said, "you have the words *El Bueno*, 'the Good,' after your name. I believe they suit you."

The Duke smiled wryly. "Honesty compels me to relate the tale of how my branch of the Guzmáns won the right to add that to the family name. One of my ancestors stood by and impassively allowed his son to be murdered by enemies who had captured him, rather than letting the boy to be used as a hostage to the disadvantage of the king he served. That is the sense in which 'good' is meant."

The Queen bestowed her most dazzling smile. "Perhaps you will now add a new meaning to it."

Medina Sidonia bowed. "Perhaps . . . Your Majesty."

Twenty-One

"The truth of the matter is," said Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma, in his Italian-accented Spanish, "I was never particularly enthusiastic about invading England. Admittedly, I once considered the idea of a surprise raid by my own forces, crossing in barges under cover of darkness."

"Did you indeed?" The Queen sounded slightly nettled by the wistful tone that had crept into Parma's voice.

The most feared general of the age had proved to be a rather small, wiry man of forty-two whose dark brown beard was trimmed and trained into a dapper point which he couldn't possibly have sustained in the field. Around his neck, beneath his ruff, he wore the chain of the Order of the Golden Fleece. Winslow couldn't overcome a sense of unreality at the thought of sitting across a table from this man, here in the Red Lion Inn at Plymouth, in the very room where it had all begun.

Now that room was crowded nearly to bursting. Its windows overlooked a harbor where Heron was lost among Medina Sidonia's galleons and the scattered, surviving English ships that had begun to trickle in.

"Yes, but the moment when that was possible passed," Parma continued imperterbably. "Afterwards, I was always skeptical of the King's plan for the Armada. It violated a basic principle of generalship by attempting a rendezvous in the presence of the enemy—quite aside from the fact that the rendezvous was in itself impractical. But beyond all that, I disagreed with the advice my uncle the King was receiving from people—especially English exiles with axes to grind—who assured him that conquering England was necessary if the Dutch rebels were to be subdued. In fact, it was precisely the other way around." He smiled. "In a world without the Gray Monks, Your Majesty could have lost your fleet and England still would have been defended by the Dutch."

"Not that she would have been likely to lose it," Medina Sidonia admitted ruefully from where he sat at Parma's right.

“Still and all,” the Queen observed, “your lack of enthusiasm did not prevent you from invading this realm.”

“No, Your Majesty,” Par-ma acknowledged forthrightly. “After the Gray Monks produced their ‘miracle,’ my duty did not permit me to do otherwise.” His features hardened. “But then, after we landed in England and I finally met His Grace here face to face, he delivered to me the sealed orders he had brought from Spain.”

“And which I had never read,” Medina Sidonia interjected. “Had we never landed here, I was under instructions to return them to the King unopened.”

“Yes,” nodded Par-ma. “They might have gathered dust in the royal archives for years or centuries before someone read them and saw, as I did, the pointlessness of the whole enterprise.”

“This is the first I have heard of these orders, Your Grace,” said Walsingham, perking up with interest at the mention of an official Spanish correspondence which, for once, he had not read.

“In essence, they authorized me to negotiate a peace if the military situation in England proved difficult, and set forth the terms the King insisted on. One of these was a monetary recompense for the depredations of English pirates—” Par-ma gave Winslow a side-long glance “—but this was understood to be a mere bargaining point. The real demands were surrender of the Dutch towns currently under English occupation, and freedom of worship for Catholics in England, including Catholic exiles, who must be allowed to return home.”

Silence stretched as Walsingham and the Queen waited for Par-ma to continue.

“Is that all?” Walsingham finally managed.

“But,” the Queen spluttered, “those Dutch towns were already under negotiation—the negotiations you were under instructions not to allow to succeed!” Par-ma made a delicate gesture that could have meant any number of things. “I would have been perfectly willing to wash my hands of the Netherlands altogether, if Phillip would only have granted the Dutch the same kind of tolerance you say he wanted for the English Catholics. And as for those English Catholics, they’re already free to worship as their consciences dictate, as I’m forever telling anyone who’ll listen. The exiles are in exile not because they’re Catholic but because they’re guilty of treason, rebellion and conspiracy to assassinate me.”

“Your Majesty has summed the matter up admirably.” Par-ma’s expressive face wore a look compounded of grimness and sadness. “So much for the holy crusade to deliver England from heresy and liberate it from the . . . ah, ahem, from Your Majesty. If necessary, my uncle was willing to settle for things that could be won by negotiation. His only real reason for invading England was to try to put himself, through his daughter, on the throne. Had I known all this—the contents of those orders, and the fact that my uncle was keeping me in the dark about them until after I had committed myself by landing in England—then I would have responded to Your Majesty’s indirect and subtle overtures, and sought a separate peace based on English support for my claim as King of the Netherlands. I would have done this even without knowing that the Gray Monks had attached themselves to the King’s ambitions and made puppets of us all.”

“But now that you do know this . . .” Walsingham let the sentence linger.

“Yes, of course.” Par-ma nodded emphatically. “I agree to Her Majesty’s stipulations. Under my reign, the Dutch will enjoy their ancient liberties as they always did under my grandfather, the Emperor Charles V.”

Grandfather on the mother’s side, and on the wrong side of the blanket, Winslow thought, but prudently held his tongue. There was, after all, no reason to doubt Par-ma’s sincerity. He was receiving from Elizabeth the kind of reward to which he had long believed himself entitled, and which Phillip had denied him. He had also heard Medina Sidonia’s account of what had happened on Wococon Island, and seen the unnatural remains that had been

brought back across the At-lantic, pre-served in a vat of wine from which Winslow wished King Phillip could be forced to drink.

“On that un-der-stand-ing,” said Wals-ing-ham smooth-ly, “we have re-ceived as-sur-ances that the Dutch will joy-ful-ly give Your Grace their true al-le-giance as their right-ful king.”

And if they don't they'll no longer have the En-glish sup-port that has en-abled them to hold out against Phillip. That might have some-thing to do with it. Winslow chid-ed him-self for the cyn-ical thought, for here again ev-ery-one was per-fect-ly sin-cere. The Dutch re-al-ly would be joy-ful to bring the war to an end and get back to the se-ri-ous busi-ness of mak-ing mon-ey, in which field they were the ac-knowl-edged mas-ters. (“Je-sus Christ is good,” their say-ing ran, “but trade is bet-ter.”) And once that com-mer-cial pow-er-house was up and run-ning, Par-ma's rev-enues from on-ly mod-er-ate tax-es would short-ly make him one of the rich-est princes in Eu-rope. Winslow wasn't sure how he felt about the jus-tice of that, as ap-plied to the man who had led his army in the sack of Lon-don. But he re-mind-ed him-self that they were all al-lies now. Wals-ing-ham's next words un-der-scored that.

“In the mean-time, Your Grace, what news of the re-sponse to your se-cret couri-ers?”

“All re-ports from our gar-risons are fa-vor-able. For-tu-nate-ly, there were nev-er more than a very few Gray Monks in Eng-land. Once the couri-ers in-formed the lo-cal com-man-ders of the true facts, those few and their acolytes were tak-en by sur-prise and dis-patched with rel-ative-ly small loss, de-spite the weapons which—by means be-yond my un-der-stand-ing, al-though you as-sure me that they do not in-volve sor-cery—turn light in-to an in-stru-ment of death.”

Dee looked trou-bled. “I wish it were pos-si-ble to spare those acolytes. As I have ex-plain-ed, they are not re-spon-si-ble for what they do, for their wills are not their own. And, with the help of the Eilon-wë, it might some-day be pos-si-ble to win their souls back from dark-ness.”

Par-ma made a ges-ture in-di-cat-ing small in-ter-est in the mat-ter. “At any rate, Dr. Dee, we have cap-tured more of those weapons—of which, I am told, you have some un-der-stand-ing which you can im-part to us. We will have still more of them when my oth-er couri-ers—the ones I have dis-patched to the Nether-lands—have al-so done their work.”

“Have you al-so sent word to Spain?” Wals-ing-ham in-quired.

“Not yet. I feel I should make sure of my po-si-tion in the Nether-lands be-fore pre-sent-ing the King with the facts. I hope those facts will speak for them-selves. So should the fact that his fleet is with us. And ar-guably I have won his min-imum de-mands! But he can be . . . dif-fi-cult.” Par-ma turned to Dee, clear-ly dis-turbed. “Is it pos-si-ble that the Gray Monks have made him . . . as their acolytes are?”

If they had, would any-one have no-ticed the change? Winslow want-ed to say.

“It is pos-si-ble,” Dee said ju-di-cious-ly. “But I would be in-clined to doubt it. That kind of en-slave-ment de-stroys the mind in the end, and an ob-vi-ous mad-man would be of no use to them. They prob-ably pre-ferred to do as you your-self sug-gest-ed ear-li-er: en-cour-age the am-bi-tions he al-ready har-bored, and make them-selves in-dis-pens-able for the at-tain-ment of those am-bi-tions.”

“Yes,” said Par-ma grim-ly. “They prob-ably had no dif-fi-cul-ty do-ing the same in France with the Duke of Guise. As you prob-ably know, they've been ef-fec-tive-ly in con-trol of the Holy League for some time.” His tone was elo-quent of a pro-fes-sion-al sol-dier's dis-dain for re-li-gious zealots, even those os-ten-si-bly on his side, with their un-con-trol-lable and un-pre-dictable en-thu-si-asms.

“At the same time,” Dee con-tin-ued, “I think it not im-pos-si-ble that they may have made such a slave of the Pope, keep-ing him in iso-la-tion save for oc-ca-sion-al, tight-ly con-trolled pub-lic ap-pear-ances and is-su-ing com-mands in his name to his un-der-lings.”

Par-ma, Med-ina Sido-nia and all the oth-er Spaniards shud-dered and crossed them-selves. “Well,” Par-ma fi-nal-ly said briskly, “be that as it may, there must be a house-clean-ing, of the Church as well as of Spain. And we our-selves must set our own house in or-der.”

“Of course,” ac-knowl-edged Wals-ing-ham. “How-ev-er, at the same time, the Grel-la in

Flori-da must al-so be dealt with. And the hur-ri-cane sea-son in those seas is now draw-ing to a close, so the voy-age can be safe-ly at-tempt-ed.”

Med-ina Sido-nia spoke up. “When we stopped there on our way to Vir-ginia, I saw rel-ative-ly few of them—they must be spread thin, here in Eu-rop-e. Al-so, I had the im-pres-sion that their ca-pac-ity for mis-chief-mak-ing is lim-it-ed, at least for now. As the one we knew as Fa-ther Jerón-imo said, they have nev-er re-paired their fly-ing ship. Part-ly this is for the rea-son he gave: they have been await-ing the re-dis-cov-ery of the por-tal through which it can take them. But in ad-di-tion, it is ev-ident-ly a daunt-ing task even for them.”

“Still,” Dee cau-tioned, “re-mem-ber what we told you of the de-vices by which they can send their voic-es wing-ing across great dis-tances. We dare not as-sume they will re-main un-aw-are of what is hap-pen-ing to their fel-lows in Eu-rop-e.”

“I know,” Par-ma nod-ded. “But con-sol-idat-ing the Nether-lands and Spain must come first. And yet who knows what dev-il-ment they may hatch in Flori-da if we give them time?”

“May I pro-pose a so-lu-tion, Your Grace?” of-fered Wals-ing-ham. “We En-glish can deal with this prob-lem while you are, as you put it, set-ting your own house in or-der.” He hasti-ly held up a hand. “Be as-sured that we have no de-signs on Flori-da. As re-gards those lands, we rec-og-nize the claim of Spain . . . who-ev-er is speak-ing for Spain at the time.” He and Par-ma ex-changed a mean-ing-ful look. “But, as we are now agreed, the Grel-la are the en-emies of us all. We will soon be in a po-si-tion to mount an ex-pe-di-tion while you are at-tend-ing to the Grel-la in Catholic Eu-rop-e. And,” he added, turn-ing to Winslow, “we have just the man to com-mand it—a man with some ex-pe-ri-ence in fight-ing the Grel-la.”

“So, Will, I un-der-stand they're al-ready re-build-ing the the-aters in South-wark. I imag-ine you'll be re-sum-ing your ca-reer as an ac-tor.”

“Or per-haps,” Vir-ginia Dare added, “pur-su-ing your am-bi-tion to be a play-wright.”

“Per-haps so, Mis-tress Dare. I've even re-ceived some new in-spi-ra-tion in that field. Be-fore the Spaniards de-part-ed, I met a young en-sign of my own age—a cer-tain Lope de Ve-ga. He al-so has as-pi-ra-tions in that field. We had some stim-ulat-ing con-ver-sa-tions.”

They stood on Heron's quar-ter-deck, amid the squadron that stood ready to de-part Ply-mouth for Flori-da, await-ing the Queen's ar-rival amid the cap-tains and var-ious dig-ni-taries—in-clud-ing John Dee, whom the Queen and Winslow had grant-ed leave to ac-com-pa-ny the ex-pe-di-tion to Flori-da. Winslow was be-gin-ning to fid-get, be-cause the tide would soon be out and the wind was fa-vor-able. He wasn't quite sure how Shake-speare had worked his way in-to the group, but he wasn't par-tic-ular-ly sur-prised.

“Yes,” Shake-peare con-tin-ued, “Lon-don is an ex-cit-ing place to be, with all the re-build-ing. And yet . . . Cap-tain, do you re-mem-ber when I saved your life, dur-ing the at-tack on the Grel-la fortress?”

“Of course, Will. How can I for-get?” Shake-speare, it seemed, had for-got-ten that the feat had con-sist-ed of trip-ping and falling.

“When I think back on all we've been through and done, I won-der if I've mis-tak-en my true call-ing. Per-haps I should make my way in the world as an ad-ven-tur-er rather than as a play-wright.”

Winslow placed his hands on Shake-speare's shoul-ders, looked in-to his eyes, and spoke with qui-et but in-tense earnest-ness. “Will . . . be a play-wright?”

Shake-speare bright-ened, as though hear-ing what he'd more than half want-ed to hear. “Do you re-al-ly think I'd make a bet-ter play-wright than a sea dog?”

“I think you'll make a great play-wright!” Winslow diplo-mat-ical-ly left it at that.

“You think so?” Shake-speare bright-ened still fur-ther. “Well, if you're sure you won't need me . . . De-vice, wit! Write, pen! For I am for whole vol-umes in fo-lio!” He gave a more than usu-al-ly sat-is-fied nod.

He's him-self again, Winslow thought, with am-biva-lent feel-ings.

At that mo-ment, a fan-fare of trum-pets sound-ed and a line of car-riages be-gan to turn on-to the pier. The ar-ray of lu-mi-nar-ies who alight-ed from them was won-drous to be-hold. Sir Wal-ter Raleigh was re-splen-dent in sil-very pa-rade ar-mor, es-pe-cial-ly in con-tract to Wals-ing-ham's Pu-ri-tan black. White-beard-ed William Ce-cil, Lord Burgh-ley, had man-aged the jour-ney de-spite his age. A mul-ti-tude of less-er courtiers fol-lowed. But they all feel to their knees when the last car-riage halt-ed and the first foot that de-scend-ed from it touched the pier. So did all the crowds. So did Winslow. But he raised his head and peered at the ap-ari-tion—all far-thin-gale and pearl fringes and red hair dye and white make-up—that de-scend-ed from the car-riage to the low-ly cring-ing earth. And he re-mem-bered the weath-ered, de-ter-mined queen who had braved an alien world. He missed that queen. But this was what Eng-land ex-pect-ed. This was what Eng-land need-ed. This was what Eng-land re-quired of her. And she could not with-hold it, for she and Eng-land were one—now more than ev-er.

On Raleigh's arm, she came aboard, pro-ceed-ed through the mass of kneel-ing sailors in the waist, and as-cend-ed the stair to the quar-ter-deck. "Arise," she said, and looked around. "So, Cap-tain, have you ac-quaint-ed your-self with your Span-ish coun-ter-part?"

"In-deed, Your Majesty," said Winslow, re-lieved to find him-self in the world of prac-ti-cal-ities. The Spaniards had in-sist-ed on be-ing rep-re-sent-ed in this ex-pe-di-tion, claim-ing that hon-or re-quired them to have a hand in purg-ing their Florid-ian pos-ses-sions of the Grel-la. Winslow sus-pect-ed that a de-sire to share in any cap-tured weapons and equip-ment might al-so have in-flu-enced them. At least the cap-tain they had as-signed seemed a good man, and his galleon, the San Pe-dro, seemed a well-found ship. "Al-low me to present Cap-tain Fran-cis-co de Cuel-lar."

"Your Majesty!" Cuel-lar, a hand-some man of con-sid-er-able Latin charm, bowed with the kind of al-most lan-guid court-li-ness that of-ten caused the En-glish to dis-miss Span-ish gen-tle-men as fops. But Winslow had sensed the tough-ness un-der-neath. This man, he felt sure, would sur-vive in al-most any imag-in-able sit-ua-tion.

The Queen looked around at the fa-mil-iar sights of Heron and drew a deep breath of salt air. "At times I al-most miss this ship. I see, Cap-tain, that you have elect-ed to stay aboard her, even though you now have larg-er ships to chose from."

"Aye, Your Majesty. Size in a war-ship is no par-tic-ular ad-van-tage in it-self. As long as she can car-ry a use-ful out-fit of guns, the small-er the bet-ter, be-cause she'll be hand-ier."

"Drake used to say much the same thing." The Queen's eyes took on a far-away look at the thought of Drake. "Cap-tain, I re-call when I stood on an-oth-er quar-ter-deck—that of Drake's Gold-en Hind, af-ter he had re-turned from his voy-age around the world and put 160,000 pounds in-to my trea-sury, and King Phillip want-ed his head for pira-cy. You'll have heard the tale."

"Of course, Your Majesty. Who hasn't?"

"But you've prob-ably heard it wrong. Ev-ery-one thinks I said I'd take his head with a gild-ed sword, and then knight-ed him. In fact, I hand-ed the sword to the Sieur de Mar-chau-mont, en-voy from the Duc d'Alençon, with whom I was then en-gaged in cer-tain ne-go-ti-ations." Mar-riage ne-go-ti-ations, Winslow re-called, part of the end-less diplo-mat-ic game she'd played while child-bear-ing had still been a pos-si-bil-ity for her. "I asked him to do it, be-cause it is for a knight to be-stow knight-hood." She paused. "I have no gild-ed sword here, Cap-tain. But that's a rare one strapped to your back. Give it to me."

Won-der-ing-ly, Winslow drew the slight-ly curved Eilon-wë sword and hand-ed it to her hilt-first. She held his eyes. "Kneel!" she com-mand-ed.

As though in a trance, he did as he was bid-den.

"Sir Wal-ter," the Queen said to Raleigh, "will you do the of-fice?"

Raleigh ex-am-ined the strange sword fas-tid-ious-ly. "It is hard-ly a knight-ly blade, Your Majesty."

Eliz-abeth glared. "Is it not, sir-rah? Deeds have been done with it that are knight-ly be-yond com-mon con-cep-tion. But if you're dis-in-clined . . . well, per-haps this time I'll ac-tu-al-ly do it as

ev-ery-one mere-ly thinks I did it with Drake.” And she turned to the kneel-ing Winslow who could bare-ly hear her for the roar-ing in his head. But the words in the name of God, St. Michael and St. George pen-etrate-d his con-scious-ness, and he felt the touch of the flat of the sword. It was as though that touch broke the spell, for he heard her quite dis-tinct-ly when she said, “Rise, Sir Thomas.”

He got to his feet amid gen-er-al ap-plause and the sound of cheer-ing from Heron's crew in the waist. The Queen smiled as she re-turned the alien sword.

“And now, Sir Thomas, I know you are im-pa-tient to be at sea. 'The wind com-mands me away,' Drake once said. But be-fore I de-part, ask a fa-vor of me. I'll grant any-thing with-in rea-son.”

Winslow reached out a hand and drew Vir-ginia Dare for-ward. She had al-ready drawn some stares from the dig-ni-taries, and now those stares grew bla-tant, for she was dressed in her tu-nic-and-trousers gar-ments of Eilon-wë style, scan-dalous here.

“Your Majesty, you've al-ready bro-ken one tra-di-tion to-day by knight-ing me your-self. I ask you to over-turn an-oth-er. Al-low Mis-tress Dare to ac-com-pa-ny me, re-turn-ing to the New World where she was the first En-glish child to be born.”

A tit-ter-ing arose among the courtiers, but it died a quick death as ev-ery-one saw that the Queen was not even smil-ing. And de Cuel-lar, whom Winslow had ex-pect-ed to be among the most amused at the idea, wasn't smil-ing ei-ther. He knew a war-rior when he saw one.

The Queen re-mained se-ri-ous as she met Vir-ginia Dare's eyes. “Are you cer-tain this is what you wish, Mis-tress Dare? I would have thought your de-sire would have been for my leave to mar-ry Sir Thomas.”

For the first time in Winslow's ex-pe-ri-ence, Vir-ginia Dare blushed, and her gaze brushed against his. “The thought is there, Your Majesty, and has been for some time. But how-ev-er I turn the mat-ter over in my mind, the need to cleanse my birth con-ti-nent of the Grel-la comes up-per-most. Ev-ery-thing—even my dear-est wish-es—must wait up-on that.”

The Queen met her eyes, and for a mo-ment it was as if no one was present ex-cept the two wom-en.

“It is in my heart, Mis-tress Dare, that in you the Grel-la have forged a weapon for their own de-struc-tion. I would not keep that weapon sheathed even if I could. And . . . I know what it is to be a wom-an with a Pur-pose and a Pow-er with-in her, in a world where such things are sup-posed to be the province of men. Oh, yes, I know a thing or two about that! It is what bear-ing a child must be like—it can-not be with-held. Yes, you have my leave.”

The courtiers' looks went from amused to stunned. But Wals-ing-ham, Pu-ri-tan though he was, gave on-ly a wise smile. And a thun-der-ous cheer erupt-ed from the ship's waist, led by those crew-men who had passed through the Void and fought be-side Vir-ginia Dare.

The Queen de-part-ed and the ship be-gan to clear. Winslow caught sight of Shake-speare giv-ing the ship one last, half-wist-ful look. “We'll kill some Grel-la for you, Will!” he called out.

“Kill them?” Shake-speare looked at Vir-ginia Dare, then at Winslow. “I be-lieve, Cap-tain, they're al-ready dead. They just don't know it yet. But the two of you can do me one fa-vor.”

“What's that, Will?” asked Vir-ginia Dare.

“You've al-ready giv-en me the mak-ings of a play. Bring me back an-oth-er!”

She went to his side and kissed his cheek. He beamed, and was gone.

Or-ders rang out, and the sailors went to the rig-ging. The wind be-gan to fill the sails.

Author's Note

In re-cent years there has been some con-tro-ver-sy about just ex-act-ly where on the east coast of Flori-da Juan Ponce de León first made land-fall. I have gone with the tra-di-tion-al view that it was near St. Au-gus-tine, just north of the beau-ti-ful and evoca-tive Shrine of Nues-tra Seño-ra de la Leche, about where the mod-ern tourist trap known as the “Foun-tain of Youth” is lo-cat-ed. Aside from this con-ces-sion to ro-man-ti-cism—and, of course, the am-big-u-ous-ly

successful de-nouement I have given it—everything in the Prologue about Ponce de León's 1513 expedition to Florida is true to real-world fact. This includes all the individuals I have named (a fascinating lot, unaccountably neglected by his-tor-ical novel-ists), so don't blame me for the fact that there are so many Juans. In fact, except for Thomas Winslow and the rest of the ships' companies of the imaginary Heron and Greyhound, all the humans named in this novel actually lived. Even St. Antony of Padua (not to be confused with the better-known St. Anthony the Great) is an authentic saint, and for the fictive use to which I have put him I may need the intercession of St. Francis de Sales, patron of authors, who must already have his hands full.

My portrait of the Duke of Medina Sidonia may come as a surprise to some readers, brought up on his image in popular history as a ridiculous poltroon. They may be assured that it has been half a century since any serious his-tor-ian has bought into that view of him. I hope to have done my part to counter-act this and various other entrenched misconceptions about the Spanish Armada. On that subject, everything I have written—except, of course, matters relating to “Father Jerónimo”—is as reliable as conscientious research can make it. The only liberties I have taken with the known facts about the Armada campaign are trivial ones. For example, I cannot prove that Martin Frobisher was not present for the English council of war on the morning of August 7, 1588. But his absence from the next such council, following the Battle of Gravelines, is attested, and it was probably for the reason I have suggested: that he and Drake would very likely have done King Phillip of Spain a service by killing each other.

As to why the colonists led by John White (no known relation) were in effect marooned on Roanoke Island, I am indebted to Lee Miller, author of *Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony*, whose conspiracy theory I have adopted for narrative purposes despite certain reservations. (Giles Milton's *Big Chief Elizabeth*, published in 2000 like Ms. Miller's book, reaches very different conclusions, which should give an idea of how contentious the whole subject of the Lost Colony still is.) Stephen Budiansky's *Her Majesty's Spymaster* should be read as a corrective to Ms. Miller's snide-ly Whiplash-like characterization of Sir Francis Walsingham. In fact, it should be read, period. Both views of Walsingham agree on his loyalty to England—and to Elizabeth, even though her chronic vacillation nearly drove him to vice, Puritan or no.

Some would dismiss John Dee, who may or may not have had the right to style himself “Doc-tor,” as a con man—or, worse, as a dupe of the undoubted con man Edward Kelley. But his linguistic and mathematical abilities, not to mention his services to the Walsingham organization in cryptography and other fields, cannot be honestly denied. There is also no denying his mystical and occult susceptibilities. Like many Renaissance geniuses, he still had one foot in the Middle Ages. (Also some post-Renaissance geniuses—I cite Newton and Goethe.)

Oceans of ink have been spilled over the question of Shakespeare's whereabouts and occupations during the “lost years” between the mid-1580s and early 1590s. Some would place his arrival in London as late as 1591, but a date of 1587 is supportable. The latter seems more likely given his attested status as a budding playwright by 1592, with at least Henry VI to his credit. There is no reason to suppose he was ever in any way connected with Walsingham's intelligence network, but his friend Christopher Marlowe certainly was.

The North Carolina Outer Banks have changed over the centuries under the relentless assault of the Atlantic waves. Croatoan Island probably comprised what are now Ocracoke Island and the southern end of Hatteras Island. Hatteras Island almost certainly included today's Pea Island and the northern end of Hatteras. Roanoke Island, inland from the Banks and sheltered by them, is more or less as it was. Incidentally, at the time of the story the entire area was included in what was called “Virginia.”

As regards dialogue, I have deliberately made no attempt to reproduce sixteenth

cen-tu-ry En-glish, with its un-avoid-able air of af-fect-ed quaint-ness. Eliz-abethans didn't know they were be-ing quaint; they weren't con-scious-ly try-ing to sound like Eliz-abethans.

THE END

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Saint Antony's Fire

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