

THE RAVENER & OTHERS



SIX DR JOHN DEE & EDWARD KELLEY
OCCULT MYSTERIES

DONALD TYSON

The Ravener & Others

Six John Dee and Edward Kelley Occult Mysteries

By Donald Tyson



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donald Tyson is best known as the author of numerous nonfiction books on the traditions of Western magic. He has written about such varied topics as the Tarot, the runes, the Kabbalah, Enochian magic, astral projection and spirit evocation. He is also the editor of annotated modernized editions of the occult classics *Demonology* by King James the First, *The Three Books of Occult Philosophy* by Cornelius Agrippa, and Agrippa's *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy*. He originated the unique divination systems of rune dice and rune astrology, and designed the Necronomicon Tarot deck.

He is the author of a biography of H. P. Lovecraft, as well as an original version of Lovecraft's dreaded Necronomicon and several other works based in Lovecraft's Necronomicon Mythos. Tyson's novels include *The Messenger*, about a haunted hunting lodge in Nova Scotia; *Alhazred*, about the life of the author of the Necronomicon; and *The Tortuous Serpent*, about John Dee and Edward Kelley's occult adventures in Bohemia.

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THE CURSE

John Dee coughed discretely and spat a bit of gristle that had nearly choked him into his hand. The sound was lost beneath the raucous music of crumhorns and tabors. Elizabeth the First, seated beside him at the long dining table with only the stout figure of her royal treasurer, William Cecil the Baron Burghley, to separate them, did not turn her head from the couples dancing on the open floor.

He motioned behind his chair for a pageboy to bring a towel and fastidiously wiped his neat silver-grey beard and manicured fingernails. Surrounded as he was by younger noblemen adorned in the latest embroidered ruffs and pearl-encrusted silk doublets from the Continent, Dee's plain fur-trimmed gown with its archaic slit sleeves and his scholar's skullcap gave him the appearance of some grey ghost risen from the past to disapprove the gaiety of the feast.

A raven amid a field of peacocks, he cast his pale gaze over the energetic courtiers and ladies-in-waiting who whirled and leapt on the slates of Kettleridge Hall. It was one of the new gavottes from France where the men were expected to fling the women into the air with a lusty shout and catch them. The fire blazing on the stone hearth was more than enough to counter the chill night air of early winter, and each courtier's powdered face ran with sweat. Dee gave silent thanks his age exempted him from joining in.

As though she had caught his furtive thought, Elizabeth leaned her head past Burghley's ample shoulder.

"Are you sure you won't try a step, Master Dee?" she asked loudly over the beating of the drums. "We think we are fit enough to be caught, if you are still man enough to throw us."

"Your Majesty, it is out of the question," he said with a smile, meeting her direct gaze. "My bones are like dry sticks."

"Nonsense! Cecil, what have you to say?"

A look of genteel horror came into the portly treasurer's wrinkled eyes.

“Have pity, your Majesty. After all the roast I’ve eaten my belly would burst like a rotten bladder.”

“Damn your excuses,” said Elizabeth with mild contempt. She poured red wine into a pewter cup and pushed it along the board to Dee. “Drink some of this Portuguese swine piddle that Lady Kettleridge has given us, good Master Dee. You’re too dour by half.”

Reluctantly Dee sipped the port wine. An ascetic by nature, it was his custom to drink nothing stronger than water, but the whim of the Queen was not to be slighted.

If her loud remark about the wine disconcerted Lord and Lady Kettleridge, they gave no sign. Together they sat at the left hand of the Queen forlornly watching the chaos her traveling royal court made of their house. While the monarch was tenant of their country estate they were deprived of authority, and could only pray Elizabeth would grow bored and leave before she and her entourage emptied both larder and wine cellar. Their sole defence was to make the food and drink, which they could not avoid providing, as unpalatable as possible.

Across the rim of his cup Dee studied the features of a slender, red-haired girl who had earlier caught his attention. She seemed unnaturally pallid as she skipped and twirled in the ruddy torch glow. Despite her exertions her brow remained dry. Nor did she laugh with the other dancers. Her attractive young face bore a strained look.

As he watched, she suddenly broke away from the blond youth who was her partner and began to spin amid the couples with arms raised over her head, moving out of time with the music. From the gap of her mouth beneath her staring eyes a low moan issued and climbed into a keening wail. She stumbled into several of the dancers, who drew back from her and left her by herself before the hearth in the centre of a widening circle.

The musicians raggedly broke off their playing. A lady shrieked. Dee stood from his chair. The blond courtier who had at first drawn back with the rest approached the girl, but she fought him savagely with her nails, hissing and spitting like a scalded cat. A tall swarthy man with a spade-shaped beard cut after the Spanish fashion moved quickly forward from his standing place beside the hearth. Dee hastened around the end of the table.

As the dark man touched her, the girl struck at him and fled directly into the open arms

of Dee. He wrapped her about the elbows and pinned her flailing hands to her sides, drawing away his face to avoid the violent back and forth jerks of her head. The dark man approached across the floor but was caught from behind and whirled about by the blond youth, who glared at him venomously.

Scarce attending to this exchange, Dee dragged the girl to the great stone fireplace, its blackened oak mantel beam taller than his head, and thrust her close to the flames. The heat from the glowing embers was like a blast from hell. It dried the sweat from Dee's face even as it spurted and stretched his skin drum-tight across his sharp cheekbones.

"Madman, what are you doing —" cried the dark man. He struggled free from the hands of the youth and ran toward the fire.

"Leave him!"

Elizabeth's shrill but compelling voice cut through the frightened babble with absolute authority. It was a voice so accustomed to command that none but the strongest will could disobey it. The dark man froze in mid-step.

"This is our physician and trusted advisor, Doctor John Dee, as most of you well know," said the Queen, approaching the fire, her wide skirts sweeping the floorboards. "We will let him practice his art unhindered."

The courtiers and their ladies backed away with bows and deep curtsies.

Tears started from Dee's eyes at the searing in the backs of his hands as waves of heat from the fire beat against them. He bent the girl directly over the hearth. Her shriek had the clean sound of honest pain. With a shudder she fell limp. Dee drew her forth and laid her into the waiting arms of two serving men while a middle-aged woman in a plain dress wrung her fleshy hands and fluttered around the unconscious girl like a wood-hen.

"Remarkable," Burghley muttered. "I've never seen the like in all my years."

"Put your mistress abed, Dame Edith," Elizabeth ordered the flustered matron. "We will attend on her presently."

She turned her hawk gaze on Dee.

“Physician, when you may leave your patient, we wish to talk with you in our private chamber.”

With trepidation Dee stepped past the pikemen guarding the door and went into the bedchamber of the Queen. There was some danger in remaining overlong in the royal presence. Her Majesty was generous and wise, but given to changeable moods that ranged from gay caprice to towering fury. For all his keen wit Dee never knew what to expect.

She sat in an unpadded wooden chair beside a canopy bed in her night dress. A maid behind her unbound her hair as she studied her strong, lined features in a hand mirror. Her wig rested on its wooden prop on a nearby table.

“Your hair is grey, Master Dee, but mine is white as snow new-fallen in December.”

She dropped the mirror onto her knee and gestured him to a chair opposite her. Gratefully Dee eased himself into it. The night had been long and his legs were weary.

“Why think you I left the comforts of Hampton Court to burden good Lord and Lady Kettleridge with the bedding and provisioning of my retinue?”

“I presume you wish to hunt the stag, your Majesty,” he said, somewhat warmed by her familiar form of address.

“And why do you presume I bade you attend this expedition?”

“That I know not.”

The Queen snatched the brush from the hand of the maid and waved her out of the room. She began to brush her own hair, tugging vigorously at the knots.

“I wished you to observe the health and demeanour of Anne Downing, a maid-in-waiting in whom I have taken an interest.”

“The girl tonight,” Dee said, his curiosity quickening.

“Yes.” She watched him shrewdly. “Of late she has been fretful and inattentive. Sickly. You know I cannot abide sickness about me.”

“But why travel to the country? Would it not have been simpler –”

“As to that, Master Dee, I have a separate motive. I desire to see the girl wed, and William Pike, the man I have chosen for her, has no liking for the court, but is a good friend of Lord Kettleridge. You may have observed him – the strong, dark man who rushed to her aid.”

Dee recalled the solemn man in black with the spade beard and swarthy skin. He nodded.

“Pike is a sea captain, not unlike our good servant Drake, who at this moment is I trust amassing Spanish gold in the New World.”

“The sun is long since set in the New World, your Majesty,” Dee said with a smile.

“No matter.” She ceased brushing her hair and closed her eyelids. They showed the wrinkled texture of ancient parchment. “Time enough for my fierce dragon to sleep on the billows of the sea after his work is complete,” she said distantly.

Recalling herself with a frown, she sent the hairbrush clattering onto the table and looked at Dee.

“When the girl’s father died – who was George Downing that served my father, the King, well against the French – he left his lands and ships to his son, Roland. The girl got only a meagre pension and lives on the grudging charity of her brother and her cousin John Rollins, who you saw her dancing with this night.”

“He was the blond stripling in the French attire?”

“A foppish peacock, yet he is kind to his cousin and bears himself toward her as a truer brother than the brother of her flesh. His father, Abel Rollins, was partner with George Downing in his merchantman trade along the Moorish coast. Both men were mariners

and fast friends. The children often played together, until a bond of affection grew between them.”

“Young Rollins seemed not to favour Captain Pike.”

“Little matter what Rollins thinks,” she said with force. “It’s the girl’s mind that concerns me. She remains utterly unmoved by Pike’s attempts to court her. Granted they are clumsy, yet he is a comely and well-formed man. That perverse child appears at times repulsed by him.”

Dee suppressed his inner amusement. It was a common pastime of the Queen to play matchmaker. Her unions, though invariably practical, were seldom happy.

“Perhaps it is a matter of her affections, your Majesty.”

“Damn her affections! What have they to do with anything? He is a man lacking in social grace with wealth and good prospects for the future. She is of good family but poor as a church mouse. They are ideally suited.”

“If your Majesty ordered the wedding –”

“There is no need to order it – surely the girl will see reason in her own time. But she is fey and capricious. I think she has some form of brain fever, and I want you to cure her of it.”

“She has no brain fever, Majesty.”

“Then what is it that ails the child?”

“As to that – I believe she is being slowly poisoned.”

The Queen said nothing. All the petulance vanished from her manner.

“Are you certain of this, Master Dee?”

“All diagnoses are subject to error,” he said carefully. “But I would wager my house and lands at Mortlake that I am right.”

“What manner of poison?”

Dee shrugged his narrow shoulders.

“Who can say? They are as many as the leaves in the wind. It is not a metallic salt – lead and arsenic leave obvious signs. A herbal compound, I should guess, perhaps composed of mandragora, hellebore, aconite or other noxious weeds that play on the mind.”

“Then we are dealing with a witch.”

“So it appears.”

Elizabeth rose and clasped her hands together before her at her waist. They were strong hands, Dee observed, capable of many tasks not all of which were pleasant. She strode to the door and opened it.

“Summon our Baron Burghley,” she told one of the startled guards. He hastened to obey.

“This is an evil turn of events, Master Dee,” she said while they waited for her counsellor. “An assassin who can reach a member of the royal court may seek to strike higher. I want you to find me this witch.”

When William Cecil arrived, the Queen tersely related what Dee had revealed. Cecil was horrified.

“What servants has Anne Downing who might have access to her food?” Dee asked.

“Only Edith Page, her nurse,” the treasurer said with a frown. “But she has been with Lady Downing for nigh on twenty years.”

“There is one other you forget, Cecil,” said the Queen. “An old woman, a serving drudge, who attached herself to the girl last spring.”

“Yes,” Cecil said. “A feeble-minded old hag named Ruth Hobby that Lady Downing employed out of charity.”

“Where is this woman?” Dee asked. “I wish to question her.”

“She is quartered over the kitchen, I believe. I will have her brought here at once.”

Cecil left to gather in the old woman. There was movement in the darkened halls of the house, and the tense mutter of voices. Subtly the sense of alarm spread itself in a widening ring.

“Has the girl ever spoken to you of enemies, Majesty?” Dee asked while they waited.

“Never,” she answered in a bitter tone. “What enemies could a slip of a girl without wealth or possessions make? No one would gain by her death.”

Cecil returned with a four man guard and several other members of the Queen’s Privy Council. His broad face was haggard.

“We found the old woman. She was strangled in her bed while she lay asleep.”

They hastened to the servant quarters, the Queen having paused just long enough to wrap an emerald-green travel cloak about her shoulders. Its voluminous folds covered her from neck to foot so that only the toes of her leather bed slippers projected under it as she trod imperially along the halls, her counsellors and guards following close behind.

The servant rooms were in an uproar. Half-dressed kitchen maids and drunken lackeys clustered around the open door of the narrow chamber that held the corpse of the old woman. Dee saw the body stretched at a grotesque angle across a straw-stuffed mattress, its shrivelled grey head on the floor, one naked leg inclined against the stone wall. The face of the crone bore a fixed look of uncomprehending horror.

A man knelt beside the bed, his attention on the floor beneath the open casement window. He looked up when they entered but did not rise. The lantern in Cecil's hand highlighted his strong, angular features and well-formed limbs, which were clad in matching doublet and hose of midnight blue. He was in his late twenties, with a full beard and straight black hair that hung in streaks over his low forehead, and piercing charcoal eyes. A big man, yet quick and precise in his movements, there was a subtle air of danger about his manner.

"Stand, fool," Cecil said gruffly. "This is the Queen."

Without haste the man unbent himself and bowed from the waist.

"Your Majesty," Dee said quickly, "this is my skryer and assistant, Edward Kelley. He is well skilled in arcane matters and has been of much help to me in my recent researches."

Elizabeth nodded coolly, examining Kelley's faintly ironic gaze.

"Sirrah, you are not altogether unknown to us. We have had report of you from our

treasurer Burghley.”

“Good report, I trust, Majesty,” he said, his voice deep and unmodulated.

“In fact he called you a lying, crop-eared cutpurse.” She smiled and tilted her head to either side as she looked at him. “But I see your ears are yet whole, so perhaps he spoke over-harshly.”

The face of the skryer betrayed no emotion. He merely inclined his head and cast Cecil a glance from the corner of his eye.

Dee bent in study over the neck of the old woman. There were clots of green-black clay on her throat and clumps of a similar colour on the filthy cover of the mattress. He saw other bits on the floorboards leading to the window, and something else that shone white in the glow of the lantern. He crossed to where it lay and picked it up.

“What is that?” the Queen asked, approaching to look at it as he turned it under the lantern window.

“A finger bone, Majesty,” Dee muttered.

“Aye, and this is grave mould,” Kelley said, kicking a clump with the toe of his boot.

“What devilry is this?” Cecil demanded. “Was this woman killed by a corpse?”

Kelley gave a short, harsh laugh. Dee held up a hand to silence him.

“My Lord, when the dead walk, as odd times they do, they carry no grave earth with them, nor bones neither.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose in disgust as she stepped past the grizzled head of the old woman and peered down through the open window.

“Nothing of flesh and bone could climb this wall,” she said, indrawing herself. “What means this puzzle?”

Dee set the fragment of bone beside the corpse on the mattress and wiped his hands on

its rough cover.

“If this hag was slowly poisoning Anne Downing to induce a semblance of madness, as I suspect, perhaps her master wished to silence her before she could be put to the question.”

“And who might her master be?” Cecil asked.

“That we must discover.”

“Whoever it is, they have a smattering of occult lore, but lack a true understanding of the mysteries,” Kelley said. “Grave earth – pagh!”

“The night is late and we are tired,” the Queen said. “Captain, take this stinking carcass and put it in the stable. Mount a guard on it. Detain anyone who approaches.”

The captain of the guard moved quickly to obey.

“As for you, Dee, and you, Master Kelley, we expect you present when we question the girl on the morrow.”

Dee bowed low, and Kelley also but with less reverence, as the monarch swept past them from the death room.

“Here is foul sorcery, my friend,” Dee muttered below the hearing of the guards, who bent to gather up the corpse. “I like not the smell of it.”

“If you had heeded me, we would be in Bohemia now,” Kelley said sullenly.

“You know the spirits forbade us to leave the country. Mayhap this was their reason.”

“Damn the spirits. Are we always to be bound by their will?”

“If it is the will of God,” Dee said simply. “For you know they speak in His name.”

Kelley said nothing. Dee sensed the restlessness in his soul and was troubled. If only he possessed the skill of skrying and could see the Enochian spirits with his own eyes, he

could divorce himself from the dark moods of the alchemist and pursue his occult researches alone. But Kelley had the gift of second sight, and Dee for all his skill and learning, knew that he had it not.

The following morning Dee and Kelley presented themselves at the chamber Lady Kettleridge had allotted Anne Downing and her nurse. Dame Edith sat by the bed of her mistress wringing her plump hands and gazing down at her charge with tender concern. Anne Downing lay in a white linen gown under a quilted coverlet, her red-gold hair fanned over the pillow, her cheeks the colour of wax. She nodded weakly at Dee.

The Queen had ordered a harpsichord placed in the room. As Dee and Kelley entered she sat before it playing. Dee recognized the tune as one written by her father, the late Henry the Eighth. Elizabeth had tried her own hand at musical composition, but she lacked her father's fine melodic sense. She played with skill and precision but little vitality. The two men waited until she finished.

"Physician Dee, your patient is much recovered," she said when she chose to notice them.

"So I observe, your Majesty."

"We have informed her of the death of her servant Ruth Hobby. She stood it well."

Dee approached the bed from the window so that he would have the best light falling over his shoulder. The room was warm but not stifling. A fire in the grate counteracted the draft that blew through the cracks around the casement and stirred the embroidered tapestry hanging against the wall.

Bending over the bed, Dee raised the eyelids of the girl one after the other with his thumb and peered into her pupils. He felt the glands in her neck and leaned close to smell the odour of her breath. He parted her hair to look at her scalp and took up one of her small hands to study the roots of her fingernails. All the while Kelley paced restlessly on the other side of the bed and stared about the room like a hungry wolf.

“We have seen to her diet. From now on she eats the foods from our own table in the presence of our serving man.”

“A wise precaution, Majesty,” Dee murmured.

“Why did you hold me to the fire?” the girl asked in a low voice as he leaned over her to place his ear next to her heart.

“You were having a fit, child,” he said. “Sometimes a violent shock can hasten a crisis, as God willed in your case.”

“I remember,” she said with a frown. “I was dancing with John when the madness came upon me. Alas, it is sure to come again.”

Dee looked at her in surprise.

“Nonsense. Now that we have removed the poison from your food you will soon be well.”

“I know nothing of poison,” she said, confused. “The madness is a curse foretold by my father on his deathbed. It is my fate and I cannot escape it.”

Dee looked at the impassive face of the Queen, which gave no sign.

“Tell us this curse,” Kelley said, stepping to the bed.

Anne Downing shrank away from him until he withdrew a pace.

“It was the night my father lay dying of a fever contracted years earlier in his seafaring days on the African coast,” she began tremulously. “He called his family about him. Roland, my brother, was there, and John Rollins, who became like a son to my father after his own father, Abel Rollins, was lost in a tempest. It was midsummer and the air lay smothering hot over the house. My father was near naked because of the heat and bound upon the bare bed frame, for he had been raving in fits and would have injured himself were he loose. Near first cockcrow he came to himself and beckoned me near. I bent over him. With red, staring eyes and fever-cracked lips he told me I must never wed, that there was a curse upon me, a curse of madness that would fall upon my

children. Then he died.”

“Was any other you have not named present when the curse was spoken?” Kelley asked.

“My mother, who is dead now, and my nurse Edith Page,” she said, inclining her head to the matron seated by the bed.

“It was just as she told you, your honours,” Dame Edith said, forcefully nodding her grey head. “He spoke the curse with the death rattle fair in his throat, he did.”

“And when you felt ill and suffered the fit you thought the madness was come upon you,” the Queen said from her seat at the harpsichord.

“What else was I to think?” Tears welled in Anne Downing’s soft brown eyes. She blinked them away. “I have been dreading it for more than a year now, ever since the night my father died.”

Dee brushed her forehead tenderly. The girl was not unlike his own beautiful young wife, Jane, whom he had left at home in Mortlake.

“Poor child,” the Queen said. “So this is why you would not bear the wooing of Captain Pike.”

“In part,” the girl said hesitantly. “Though of a truth, your Majesty, I have no liking for Captain Pike. He is a dour, sullen man who never makes me laugh.”

The Queen snorted.

Quickly Dee said, “Can you think why Ruth Hobby would try to poison you?”

“There is no reason,” the girl answered with conviction. “I treated her kindly and paid her what she might expect from any other lady.”

“It’s clear the old woman was an agent for some other,” Kelley broke in impatiently. “Who are your enemies, girl?”

“I have no enemies, sir.”

“You have one, by God, you can trust to that.”

“Do not frighten the child,” Dee told his dark companion.

Kelley fell silent and crossed to the window to stare out over the forest in the valley below Kettleridge Hall. He toyed moodily with the edge of the tapestry.

“We will not try the maiden further,” Dee said to the Queen as he arose from the bed. “Sleep and wholesome food will soon make her well, now that the source of her sickness is ended.”

“But it is not,” Anne Downing said simply. “I am still accursed. My father said so.”

“We will leave her in your care, Dame Edith,” said the Queen, also rising.

At that moment Captain Pike entered the room, announced to the Queen by the captain of her guard. She waved him forward. His long, bony frame seemed ill at ease. He shifted and looked about defensively.

“I come to see Anne, to know how she be faring,” he said roughly.

“Well you should, Captain, or you were no true gentleman,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “Talk to her, but briefly. She must have her rest. Come, Dee. You too, Master Cutpurse.”

In the corridor the Queen stopped.

“Can you make cloth from these tangled threads?” she asked Dee in a low voice.

“Not yet, Majesty. But more lies hid here than meets the eye.”

“So we believe also. We have not forgotten your service to us when the witch doll in our likeness was found in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. You have your oracles?”

“I do, your Majesty,” he said, casting a significant eye toward Kelley.

“Use them. We must sound the bottom of this dark sea. Else I fear some evil will work its will on that sweet child.”

Dee and Kelley silently busied themselves with preparations for the ceremony of divination. They were in Dee's chamber, a large, windowless room near the rear of the house, as Dee had requested. It was late at night. The house lay shrouded in sleep.

Dragging a small marble table to the centre of the floor, Dee covered it with a white cloth taken from his travel trunk. Meanwhile Kelley scratched a large double circle around the table on the floorboards with a piece of chalk and wrote cabalistic symbols between its boundaries.

Reverently, Dee lifted a wax pentacle between both hands and positioned it in the centre of the makeshift altar. Its complex surface markings had been etched by him at the instructions of celestial spirits speaking through the voice of Edward Kelley, his skryer. Covering the wax seal with a cloth of red saye, he placed atop it his obsidian shewstone, a small black disk of volcanic glass polished like a mirror that was supported upright in a wooden stand. Around the black mirror he set a bottle of consecrated water, a brass oil lamp, and a dish of consecrated salt.

While Kelley put two chairs into the circle, Dee drew from the trunk his journal wherein he kept a careful record of all his magical experiments. Only then did he remember that he had neglected to pack fresh ink. Regretfully he returned the journal to its place.

"Have you purified yourself?" He asked Kelley as he extinguished the candles by which they had worked.

"I've washed and prayed," Kelley said in his habitually querulous tone. "I'm as pure as need be."

"Then let us begin."

While Kelley sat in the chair before the altar and stared into the obsidian shewstone

upon its pedestal, Dee cleansed the magic circle by walking thrice about it sunwise, first with salt, then with water, and lastly with the flame of the lamp, which he returned still burning to the altar top. In a clear voice he stated their purpose in conducting the ritual and asked for divine guidance and aid. Speaking a prayer in Latin, he sat in the chair to the right of Kelley.

For some time Kelley gazed silently into the polished black mirror, his eyes vague and unfocused. He cocked his head now and then as though listening to distant whispers. The flame of the lamp cast flickering shadows over the hard planes of his face.

“Is the veil lifted?” Dee said when Kelley did not speak.

“No, it stays firm,” Kelley murmured absently.

Dee rose to his feet and threw up his hands in invocation.

“Holy spirits, we implore your aid! Help us understand the foul crime that is being worked within these walls. Spirits, heed our prayers.”

The impassive silence devoured his plea. It stretched beyond the walls to the darkness of the night sky. When Dee had stood for several minutes listening to the sound of his own breaths, Kelley stirred.

“Something comes. Look, by the hearth.”

Dee turned. He could see nothing beside the cooling embers in the fireplace but shadows. Yet it seemed that one shadow flickered and moved independently. He blinked to clear his eyes but could not be sure.

“It is Madimi,” Kelley said with greater certainty. “She stands and waits.”

Madimi was one of the spirits they had on past occasions contacted. She came in the form of a golden-haired girl of seven years wearing a dress of finely-woven saye that changed from red to green as the light struck its silk strands from different angles.

“Child of God, may Jesus cherish and protect you,” Dee said. “Will you speak?”

There was a pause in which Kelley seemed to listen. He looked at Dee.

“She says the matter bores her, but she will answer for your sake.”

Dee stared at the rippling shadows.

“Madimi, know you the curse that hangs over the head of Anne Downing?”

“She says her Mother has told her of it,” Kelley answered after a moment.

“Why must madness descend from father to child?”

“Because the father committed a great wickedness.”

“Of what kind?”

Kelley did not at once reply. Dee glanced at him. Finally he said:

“The father ordered the slaughter of all the women and children of an African village after the men had fled into the forest to avoid capture as slaves. The magic man of the village put a terrible curse on his head. It was not to hurt him directly, but would fall upon the ones closest to him.”

“A curse of madness?”

“Yes.”

“What was the curse?”

“It would fall upon his joy and descend down through his hope.”

“Madimi, how may we turn aside this curse?”

“She is angry,” Kelley said after a time. “She pouts. She says it cannot be averted. It is too strong.”

There was a loud clatter as the iron poker leaning against the brickwork of the fireplace

slowly fell over.

“She grows restless,” Kelley said.

“Madimi, wait,” Dee said quickly. “You must tell us who poisoned Anne Downing.”

“It was Ruth Hobby.”

“Who ordered Ruth Hobby to do it?”

“She will not tell,” Kelley said in disgust. “She says it is not proper to carry tales.”

“You must tell, Madimi,” said Dee sternly. “By the justice of Christ, you must.”

“She says she will show me a pantomime. Now she is gone.”

Dee settled heavily into his chair in disappointment. The spirits were capricious and too often spoke in riddles. It required great patience and ingenuity to deal with them.

Kelley gazed into the obsidian shewstone for several minutes. Dee could do nothing but wait.

“The veil lifts,” Kelley muttered. “I see a scene within a bedchamber. An old man lies bound on the bed. He is dying. Five others are with him.”

“George Downing,” Dee said.

“The girl Anne Downing stands at the footboard, and beside her a blond youth.”

“John Rollins.”

“At the door sits the dog-faced Edith Page. Another old woman is with her of finer features, and a fat young man.”

“The mother and Roland Downing, Anne’s brother,” Dee murmured.

“The old man raves. Now he beckons the girl to him. She approaches around the post of

the footboard. He speaks.”

“Can you hear his words?”

Kelley cocked his head as though listening.

“He looks at her. Fear and sorrow are in his eyes. His lower lip trembles, cracked with fever and bloody between the cracks. He says: ‘Anne, you must never be wedded ...’ Now his voice falls off so that I cannot hear. Now his eyes roll about the room. ‘A curse upon your head ... madness ...’ Now he looks back to the girl. ‘The sins of the fathers ...’ He is dead.”

Kelley stood up and shook himself as a dog will throw off the rain from its coat.

“There is no more. The veil is drawn.”

Without argument Dee stood and concluded the ritual with the required gestures and prayers, then opened the magic circle and stepped out to light several candles. He picked up the fallen poker and stirred the dying embers of the fire in the grate. Kelley took a wineskin filled with sack down from a peg on the wall, where he had previously placed it, and drank deep.

“At the least we now know something of the curse, though how it joins with the poison I cannot think,” Dee said.

“Nor me. Nor do I care. To my mind the girl’s a fool to take up with that golden-curled fop.”

“Rollins?” Dee said in surprise. “Think you she loves her cousin?”

A knowing look stole across the face of Kelley.

“The dolt stood behind the tapestry in her room the whole time we were there. He must have hidden when the Queen entered.”

Dee stared into his dark, mocking eyes and remembered the movement of the tapestry. He began to pace, deep in thought.

“Why did you not speak?”

“For what purpose? I have no quarrel with Rollins, to embroil him with the Queen. Besides, if he was there both Dame Edith and the maid must have known ... if she is a

maid, which I doubt.”

“Little wonder she would not favour Pike’s suit. The Queen will be furious. Do you suppose Pike learned of the affair and poisoned the girl from jealousy?”

Kelley shook his head.

“Pike’s an honest seafarer. He would run Rollins through with his sword, not act through the girl.”

“And it does not explain the connection with the curse, if there is one.”

Kelley took another drink of sack and sat heavily in a chair with the wineskin cradled in his lap.

“This puts me in mind of a play I saw near London at Burbage’s Theatre. A prince feigns madness, and his lover is so overcome with grief that she runs mad in good earnest and drowns herself.”

Dee’s stopped pacing the floor and turned to his skryer.

“In the obsidian stone you saw George Downing roll his eyes when he pronounced the curse upon his daughter, did you not?”

“Aye. He could not bear to look at her when he spoke the words.”

A timid knock drew their attention to the door of the chamber. Kelley stood with a light step, and still holding the wineskin in his left hand, drew his long dirk in his right and approached the portal. He slid its bolt and opened it slowly.

Dame Edith Page entered with a candle. She drew back when she saw the dirk. Kelley slipped it into its sheath at his belt and pulled the matron into the room by the elbow. Dee observed that she had been crying. Her doughy cheeks were streaked and her eyes red-rimmed.

“I had to see you, sir,” she said to Dee in a tremulous voice. “You must save my mistress before she gets herself in trouble, as I know she will, sir, unless you do

something.”

Dee led the woman to a chair and seated her while Kelley shut the door.

“How is your mistress going to get herself into trouble?” he asked quietly, taking her rough hand.

“Well, sir, she is terrible fond of her cousin John Rollins, who has been courting her in secret so as not to rouse the displeasure of her Majesty. Most think of them as brother and sister, but there’s a bit more to it than that.”

“Are they sinners of the flesh?” Dee asked.

“He comes to her at night,” she said, blushing. “I don’t stay to see what they do.”

“Go on, then.”

“Tonight my mistress was in a terrible state. She says I must wake her before first light. She says she is to wed John Rollins at the church of the ruined monastery a mile east of here at dawn tomorrow, and that Rollins has bribed a papist cleric to do the ceremony and make it legal.”

“Did you try to dissuade her?”

“I did, sir, most horrible hard. But her mind is fixed. I don’t think she be still right in the head. I dislike going against my mistress, but I got to thinking how angry the Queen will be.” She dropped her voice. “And they do say that young Rollins has been courting another lady-in-waiting and plans to marry her when she comes of proper age to get at her monies and lands. ‘Tis what they do say, sir.”

“You did well to tell me,” Dee said to reassure her. “We will protect your mistress. Now you must answer a question.”

“If I can, sir,” she said, blinking ponderously.

“How did the mother of John Rollins die?”

“Why, she went mad, sir. ‘Tis well known. They kept her locked in a little windowless room nigh on twenty year before she died.”

Dee looked at Kelley.

“Remember what Madimi said about the curse. It would fall upon his joy and descend down through his hope.”

“Hope lies in the children,” Kelley murmured. “And joy –”

“The wife. It must be the wife.”

“I don’t understand, sir,” Dame Edith said.

Dee pulled her gently to her feet.

“Go back to your mistress. Do not fear. We will keep her safe.”

When the nurse left, Dee turned to Kelley with angry lights dancing in his pale amber eyes.

“The Queen must know of this. We will need her authority. There is the devil’s work to do this night, and little time.”

The ruin of the monastery church rose above a grove of ancient oaks that ringed the low hill it occupied in the forest. It had stood deserted for half a century, ever since the Old King in a fit of rage against Pope Clement the Seventh had ordered the seizure of Church lands and the expulsion of the monks from England. Fire from a lightning strike had brought down the roof two decades ago. Saplings of birch and poplar flourished on what had once been the open lawn around it.

Dawn was just beginning to redden the eastern sky between the leafless boughs of the oaks when a solitary rider approached along the narrow country lane that was the only access to the ruin. Behind him on the flanks of his sturdy grey cob were slung travel boxes. He led by the reins a second riderless palfrey with a woman's saddle and equipage. The hooves of the horses crunched the hoarfrost and rustled the dead brown leaves that lay in the lane.

The rider dismounted. Wrapped in the mist of their hot breaths, he tied the steeds to a birch sapling. With a furtive look about he strode toward the gaping doors of the church, his scarlet cloak billowing behind. He entered and stopped to survey the scene.

At the far end before the stone altar, which was decked with golden leaves and the twisted brown stalks of dead wildflowers, stood a monk in a black robe that covered him to the feet, its pointed hood pulled low over his face. His hands were clasped in his sleeves. He bowed his head at the blond youth. To the left facing the monk knelt a girl in a white wedding gown. Her face was veiled. She did not turn at the rustling sound of the young man's approach.

The courtier knelt beside her. He studied her veiled profile nervously, and then appeared to screw up his determination. Firmly he nodded for the monk to begin.

The monk started to chant rhythmically in Latin. He took up a censer that smouldered on the altar and suffumed the crisp winter air, then asperged the two with holy water.

Raising his arms to heaven in final invocation, he joined the hand of the girl with that of the young man. From a pocket in his robe he drew out a golden ring and gave it to the courtier.

Smiling strangely, the youth slid the ring over a pale finger of the hand he held. The monk pronounced them wed. The girl turned and slowly lifted her veil.

For a moment the youth remained transfixed. A rattle choked his throat. He shrieked and stumbled erect on leaden legs. The figure in the white gown laughed, but it was not the laugh of a living woman, nor was it human. Without warning it vanished and left the echo of its mockery rebounding from the mute stones.

Dee slid back his monk's hood and looked at John Rollins. There was no triumph on his ascetic, timeworn face, only sorrow and determined resignation. From behind the altar through a small doorway issued the Queen, followed closely by William Cecil and Edward Kelley. Elizabeth seemed emotionless. Cecil's bluff features reflected horror mingled with dread. Only Kelley appeared to derive a sour amusement from the events just past.

Rollins worked his mouth soundlessly. His eyes rolled. With an inarticulate cry he drew his sword and advanced on the Queen. Elizabeth raised the snaphance duelling pistol that she held hidden under her emerald cloak and shot him. The lead ball passed through the muscle of his arm and chipped the stone floor. Rollins dropped his sword. Clutching his wound, he stumbled from the church. The sound of galloping hoof beats diminished into the distance.

"He cannot escape," Elizabeth said. "My guards wait for him in the lane."

"Even should he evade your guards, he can never escape from himself," Dee said heavily.

"You are quite certain he is mad?" she asked.

"For the rest of his days – and perhaps beyond them."

"I confess," said Cecil in puzzlement, "I fail to see why Rollins wished to wed Anne Downing. She has no wealth, and I thought he cared for the girl."

“He may have cared,” Dee said. “But she was a great threat to his future welfare. She knew the curse that hung upon him without knowing that she knew. At the deathbed of her father only she and Rollins stood close enough to see his eyes fall upon the youth when the old man spoke the fatal words of warning. He must have guessed at the last that a tie of love had grown up between the cousins, and so he betrayed the secret he had sworn to keep about the curse placed on the head of his closest friend and partner, Abel Rollins, by an African devil man.”

“What was the curse exactly?” Cecil asked.

“The most terrible imaginable,” Dee said. “It did not touch the elder Rollins directly but passed on to his wife and children, and so down through his line. Madness for his wife, and the contagion of madness for the future wives of his male progeny.”

“To divert suspicion the villain tried to drive the girl mad with potions so that the others in the death-room, Roland Downing and the nurse Edith Page, would go on believing the curse pertained to Anne,” Kelley explained to Lord Burghley. “When that failed he thought to do the same thing by wedding her secretly, then denying the union later after the madness had set upon her.”

“That would leave him free to marry a woman of wealth and position,” Dee continued. “Since he would still be bound in the sight of God by the first ceremony, the second would not be valid, and thus Rollins’ second wife would not go mad – or so he hoped.”

“Thereby he intended to defeat the curse and protect the honour of his family name,” Cecil said with understanding. “But what of the grave mould in Ruth Hobby’s chamber?”

“A ruse, nothing more,” Kelley said. “Rollins planted it to obscure her murder and make it appear the old drudge was a witch.”

“A cunning devil,” Cecil muttered.

“But you have made the devil bite his own tail, Master Dee,” said Elizabeth in an admiring tone. “Did I not know you for a holy man, I would have you hanged on Tower Hill as a sorcerer. Where are the instruments of your art?”

Dee went behind the altar and took up a linen-covered bundle from a crevice between the stones.

“This must be buried in the earth where it will lie undisturbed,” he said gravely. “For they are wedded for all eternity.”

He cradled the bundle in his arm like a babe and drew back the cover. Beneath it lay two small dolls of wax and wood embracing each other. One was dressed in the habit of a courtier. The other wore a white wedding gown. A thin band of gold wire wound around them and bound them close. The face of both dolls was the face of John Rollins.

HACKLEY GRANGE

- 1 -

The rays of the morning sun glinted like thickly scattered jewels on the newly-opened green leaves of the oaks, giving promise of a glorious spring day. Already its warmth had driven the low mist from the Thames and was rapidly drying the silver beads of dew on the tender grasses that cloaked the gently-sloping bank.

John Dee tugged free the twine that had become tangled in the guide loops of his bamboo pole and made an experimental cast. His hook, so gaily decorated in its deceiving feathered tuft, flew listlessly through the air above the slow river eddies and dropped out of sight in the greenish water. Spring rains had swelled the river and made its flow more turbid than was usual in this little backwater where the meander of the stream bent around his house and lands at Mortlake.

“I don’t know why you dragged me out here,” his friend Edward Kelley murmured in a voice that was like the dangerous rumble of distant thunder.

“I thought you might enjoy the change from ceaseless hammering and sawing,” Dee said without turning his eyes from the line where it disappeared into the water.

“Fishing is no occupation for gentlemen.”

“It’s called angling, and it is considered to be a new form of art.”

The men sat on folding chairs facing the river. Through the screen of trees at their backs came the faint rapping of hammers.

Kelley eyed Dee’s attempts to reel in the length of twine on its spool with a scowl until his patience deserted him. He reached across for the pole and took it none too gently

from Dee's hands. With a few deft tugs he straightened out the line and reeled it in, then with a skilful flick of his wrist sent the hook far across the pond.

Dee's eyelids lifted slightly.

"You told me you had never fished."

"Neither have I," Kelley confirmed, working the reel. "Not with such a foolish contraption as this."

It was often that way, Dee reflected. The alchemist professed to detest all forms of physical labour, but in spite of himself showed an uncommon facility for them. Dee suspected Kelley would rather have been helping the workmen from London install the new paneling in his library, were he not too proud to be seen with a saw in his hand.

The noise and bustle of the workmen about the house had made Kelley short-tempered, so Dee had asked him to come angling to prevent his headstrong friend from resorting to the port bottle. As for himself, Dee was more than happy to let his wife Jane deal with the irregular and no doubt reasonable demands of the carpenters. It was impossible to conduct any spirit séances with Kelley while the work was in progress. The teachings of the Enochian angels would just have to keep themselves in reserve for a more propitious occasion.

Kelley's grunt drew Dee's attention back to the river. The big man was slowly tugging on the taunt line until the pole bent, and reeling in the slack when he relaxed it.

"You've caught a fish," Dee observed.

"A turtle, more like," Kelley muttered.

As the carcass rose to the surface and slowly turned over, both men were silent. With great care, Kelley maintained a constant pressure that was enough to move it toward the bank but not enough to snap the bowed pole.

"Do you recognize him?"

Dee nodded.

“That’s Toby Walpole, what’s left of him. He was the only son of Joshua Walpole, the owner of Hackley Grange, some three miles up the river.”

Making a face of disgust, Kelley hauled the thing out of the water and onto the bank by its swirling, long blond hair, which almost seemed alive.

An effeminate countenance that might have been handsome in life was swollen and discoloured by bruising that did not quite obscure an expression of – well, what was the expression, Dee wondered. Horror? Fear? Surprise?

“He looks like a man who was running from something he dreaded, but didn’t run fast enough.” Kelley said.

“He’ll run no more, in this life or the next.”

The bloated, naked corpse was severed above the waist, just under the rib cage. A portion of its spine extended below the raw viscera. Legs or feet, there were none.

“What do you suppose happened to the poor wretch?”

Dee silently shook his head as he bent to examine the edges of the ragged wound that had divided the torso. It was like no injury he had ever seen. Surely the lad must have become caught in a mill, or fallen beneath the wheel of an ox-cart.

“The river current is almost dead here,” Kelley said as he gazed across the pool. “The corpse must have been washed in by the rains last week, and sat on the bottom for days.”

He turned and noticed Dee tugging at the tightly-clenched fingers of the dead youth’s left hand. The fingers were blackened as though scorched by a flash of gunpowder. As Dee unfolded them one by one, a small object fell to the new spring grass. The older man studied it, and then handed it to Kelley.

“What do you make of it?”

The alchemist hefted it, his interest quickening. It was some kind of metal, heavy and lustrous, with a bronze colour that tended to green.

“I’ve never seen an alloy like this one. Gold and copper, maybe some tin, and something else I can’t put a name on.”

He held the little object up to catch the sunlight on it and turned it between his fingers. It was hammered work, some kind of heathenish idol four inches long fashioned in the shape of a squatting female figure with a distended pregnant belly and the head of a dragon. Three pairs of breasts adorned its torso. The demon’s knees were wide-spread, exposing its open sexual parts, as though it were in the act of giving birth. The snarling face had a foreign look.

“Ugly thing,” Kelley said. He glanced at Dee, who tugged the silver hairs of his spade beard in his habitual gesture of meditation. “Any idea what it might be?”

Dee’s penetrating amber gaze met his.

“A notion, perhaps. Why don’t you sound it out? See what the angels have to say about it.”

Kelley closed his eyes and pressed the chill metal idol to his forehead. His lips moved as though in prayer, but made no sound. Dee waited impassively. From experience he knew it might take seconds or many minutes for his friend, who was the most gifted seer Dee had ever known, to establish a link with the Enochian angels, always assuming the angels bothered to involve themselves. They were capricious and were motivated by their own purposes, which were not the purposes of men. They usually appeared to Kelley in a globe of crystal. Whether they would answer his call in its absence, Dee did not know.

Beads of sweat appeared on Kelley’s weather-beaten forehead. He rolled the metal idol slowly between the palms of his hands as though preparing to cast a set of dice. Abruptly, he opened his eyes and exhaled the breath he had been holding.

“Ave says it is a thing of darkness from the Old Times. It’s ancient. Older than the Romans.”

“Ask him who the idol depicts.”

Kelley shook his head.

“They won’t name the demon. I already asked.”

“Not much help,” Dee murmured in disappointment.

“They seldom are. If you’d follow my advice, we’d have nothing more to do with them.”

Dee had heard this argument many times and was not disposed to regard it when his mind was occupied by the mystery of the corpse. He walked around it and lifted one shoulder with the toe of his boot, holding it elevated to examine the back. Much of the exposed surface of the skin on both sides was scoured by deep scratches, no doubt sustained when the river current had borne the body down over stones and submerged logs to this quiet backwater. A trickle ran from between the waxen lips. He let the shoulder fall back to the grass.

“Let’s return to the house. I’ll get Joseph and his lad to carry these remains to the smaller shed where they won’t be molested by crows, and send him to inform the constable.”

“What are you going to do about this?”

Dee met his eye and smiled a wan smile.

“Walpole must be informed of his son’s death. I will ride to Hackley Grange and give him the news myself. Coming?”

Kelley grunted affirmation.

The road up the riverside was a good road, but the bordering trees had not been cut back the previous summer, and the new spring growth hung over the wagon ruts, forcing the men to go single file in a few places, with the tall weeds in the domed centre of the track brushing the bellies of the horses. They reached the Grange around noon.

It was located midway up the gentle slope of a low but expansive hillside. Kelley had never seen it. He studied the stone walls of the sturdy two-level farmhouse with an appraising eye. Though only slightly smaller than Dee's house at Mortlake, it was not nearly so picturesque. Even so, it bespoke a degree of affluence. The deep-set narrow windows were glass, and the pitched roof was slate rather than thatch. His gaze slid over the well-kept barn, the outbuildings, the sheep grazing on the lawn, and the cows pastured higher up the slope near an apple orchard. A chorus of water fowl gave evidence that the Thames was not far removed on the other side of the house.

It was an idyllic scene, the tranquility of which was about to be shattered by horror, and he was the bearer of that horror, or at least the co-bearer. Men seldom smiled in greeting when first they saw his dark, imposing figure stride toward them. They seemed to sense that he carried an ill wind with him. If the tenant of this estate smiled, the smile would not endure long.

They let an unspeaking youth with a sallow complexion and a foreign cast to his features take their horses for watering, and followed the brick walkway across the lawn to the front door. A tall Arab serving man with a bald crown and a cadaverous countenance ushered them into the hall. He was one of the tallest men Kelley had ever seen, with a spine as straight as an ash pole. He appraised Kelley from beneath the heavy-lidded eyes on either side of his hawk-like nose and went to fetch his master. Dee had said nothing about foreign servants, and the alchemist idly wondered how they had found their way to Surrey.

Kelley's nostrils flared. An exotic scent like that of roses hung on the air. To his

calculating eye, the impression of prosperity was more apparent inside than it had been outside. An enormous bronze vase stood in the corner by the staircase on the polished slates, its sides covered with the graceful characters of some flowing Eastern script he had never before seen. The centre of the floor was covered by a brightly coloured Persian rug with a geometric design. Oil portraits, presumably of previous owners of the Grange, decorated the sombre walnut paneling, which was not unlike that being installed in the library at Mortlake under the watchful eye of Dee's youthful and beautiful wife, Jane.

The thought of Jane Dee momentarily took the scowl from Kelley's forehead. If ever there was an angel incarnate, it was Jane Dee. In spite of the many undeniable advantages in intellect, breeding, lineage and court connections that Dee held over him, the only thing of Dee's that Kelley had ever coveted was Dee's wife. His admiration for Jane Dee bound Kelley more closely to Dee than any tie of friendship, even though he regarded the scholar as his sole true friend.

The entrance of the master of Hackley Grange broke Kelley's reverie. He emerged through an open doorway from the rear of the house at a brisk pace, drying his hands on a stained towel, which he tossed to the same impassive Eastern servant who had answered the door. Despite the stains on his fingernails, he wore a splendid silk doublet and ruff of the most recent court fashion. Kelley's keen nose detected a chemical scent beneath the rose incense. It was not entirely unfamiliar, although he could not immediately place it in his memory.

"Good neighbour Dee," Joshua Walpole said with hearty effusion, his round face beaming. "How delightful to see you again. I was beginning to think you had forgotten your promise at Yuletide to visit when the ice broke on the river."

Dee allowed his slender fingers to be seized and pumped in a muscular handclasp. Walpole was a man who exuded vital energy to an almost alarming degree. His mane of tawny hair cascading in waves to his shoulders, his clean-shaven chin, and his pale blue eyes matched those of his dead son, but there the resemblance ceased. Whereas Walpole the elder was short and deep of chest, with broad though rounded shoulders and a thick neck, his son had been graceful of limb and long-necked to the point of effeminacy – something not necessarily a hindrance to ambition in the present royal court, Dee thought wryly.

Walpole was not of noble family but had made a vast fortune in the Mediterranean spice trade. On one of his protracted expeditions to the Lebanon region he had married a native of Syria. She had not been Christian, but was rumoured to have converted shortly before the marriage ceremony. After her sudden death from some Oriental plague, Walpole had returned to England with his infant son. He had said little to Dee about his brief and tragic marriage, and Dee had never pressed him for more details, but once when the trader was in his cups he had confided to Dee that his wife was of divine blood. From this extravagant claim Dee had gathered that she was related to some Eastern potentate, since in the Eastern nations royalty was equated with divinity. Walpole never mentioned her given name or displayed her portrait, even though he took great pride in the portraits of his ancestors, and would relate their personal histories with a ludicrous and somewhat pathetic enthusiasm, in view of their low estate.

For several years Walpole had been giving indications to anyone and everyone connected with the court of Elizabeth that he wished Toby to become known there. When introduced to the lad, Dee had found him charming and eloquent, much more so than his father, and had gone so far as to mention his name to William Cecil, the Queen's royal treasurer and her chief advisor, but as Dee had expected, nothing came of it. The sons of well-to-do land owners and merchants trying to insinuate themselves into the Queen's court were legion.

A social class had grown up in England under the benevolence and opportunity of Elizabeth's reign, a class so new, it did not even yet have a name. It was a strange kind of middle class, Dee reflected, neither of the lower strata of peasants and shopkeepers, nor of the better respected clergy or nobility. It was forever restless. Having gained so much, it was compelled to seek still more. Dee suspected his warm welcome at Hackley Grange had more to do with his royal connections than with any personal feelings on Walpole's part.

Eventually, Dee's solemn countenance penetrated Walpole's hectic attempt at fellowship.

"What's the matter, John? Is something amiss?"

On several occasions, Dee had carried out the unhappy duty of informing a father of the death of a child. It was never an easy task. That Tobias had been Walpole's only issue added an extra burden. He described the finding of the body, but omitted the state of the

corpse, saying only that it had suffered damage while in the river. While he spoke, Kelley paced restlessly up and down the hall, as though impatient to be gone.

Walpole covered his ruddy face with his hands and bowed his head, keening in his throat. He seemed not to notice Dee's comforting hand on his shoulder. Kelley stopped pacing to watch. After a few moments, the grief-stricken man wiped his eyes and nodded to Dee with a grim set to his lips.

"He would go riding that spirited bay of his on the river path, no matter how many times I told him of the danger. Four days ago he rode out and never returned. We had exchanged heated words about his future prospects, and I'm afraid our feelings were rather choleric, so I assumed he had gone to stay in London, as he had from time to time when he wanted to get away from the Grange, and from my company. But he must have tumbled off the path into the river, both he and his horse, for it never returned to the Grange. Had it done so I would have sent the servants to search after him."

Dee patted him awkwardly on the puffed shoulder of his doublet, feeling the pearls in the embroidered stitching beneath his fingers. The thought passed through his mind that the ostentatious garment had probably cost more than a year's maintenance of his own house in the village of Mortlake.

"I've left instructions with my man, Joseph Gifford, that the remains of your son be brought to Hackley Grange by wagon on the morrow."

"Why not today?" Walpole demanded.

"The constable at Mortlake, Jack Reed, has been notified and will wish to examine the corpse, and the place where it was recovered. But I see no reason why he would delay the return of the remains to you. Expect them here tomorrow by the mid-afternoon."

Walpole drew a deep breath and blinked owlishly several times. He seemed to master himself after the initial shock of the news. Dee was surprised by how quickly he regained his composure. Surely there could be no more devastating blow than the death of an only child, particularly when it was the male heir who would have carried on the family name. He did not dare to imagine his own reaction should his beloved son, Arthur, meet with such a fate. In some ways Edward was fortunate to be as yet childless, though no doubt he would keenly feel the death of his infant step-daughter, Elizabeth.

“You must stay the night,” Walpole said, glancing from Dee to Kelley. “You are both tired after your long ride, and you must be here to greet your servants when they bring poor Toby back to me.”

“As you wish,” Dee told him with a bow of acquiescence. “We’ll step out to the stable and retrieve what we need from the horses.”

“Nonsense,” Walpole said. “My man Wasari can do that for you.”

Dee glanced at the tall Arab, whose face remained like a mask.

“No need for your man to bring all our travel possessions into the house,” Dee said with a wave of his hand. “We will select what we need.”

“Very well,” Walpole agreed, turning in dismissal. He went to his bald-headed servant and began to instruct him in Arabic.

“There is one other matter,” Dee said, causing Walpole to break off and turn with an expression of muted irritation.

Dee held up the small idol he had retrieved from the scorched hand of Toby Walpole.

“Have you seen this before?”

The change in Walpole’s manner was startling. Anger distorted his features. His pale eyes blazed. In rapid steps he crossed the hall and grasped for the idol.

“Where did you get that? Give it to me!”

Kelley was there before him. His powerful fingers closed around Walpole’s wrist. The two men strained for a moment as Dee stepped back. Suddenly, Walpole relaxed. A rueful expression replaced his rage.

“Forgive my ill manners. My son’s death has unhinged my mind so that I scarcely know what I’m doing. That image you hold is from my private collection of artefacts, assembled over a span of many years during my travels. I ask again, where did you get it?”

Kelley released his wrist. White marks showed where the alchemist's fingers had pressed into the skin. Walpole rubbed the place with his other hand, a forced smile on his lips.

"It was in the possession of your son. More than that I am not disposed to say at this time."

"I see. Well, now that I've identified it, you may return it to me and I will put it away safely again."

Dee shook his head.

"That is not possible. The constable at Mortlake may wish to examine it, and in any case, I have only your assurance that you own it."

Walpole blinked, anger beginning to reform in his eyes – not the heat of rage, but a colder and more serpentine enmity.

"As one gentleman to another, I tell you it is mine."

"I have no doubt that it is," Dee said in a mild voice. "Even so, I must retain it for a time. When the matter of your son's death has been discussed with Constable Reed, I will take pleasure in returning it to you."

Walpole glanced at his servant. The tall Easterner took a step forward, but his master made a discrete gesture with his hand, and the servant resumed his place. Kelley relaxed and stepped back as well.

"Very well," Walpole told Dee stiffly. "You must do what you perceive to be your duty. I will see about the preparation of your rooms."

Ignoring Kelley, he pivoted on his heel and stalked back the way he had come, his servant gliding after him like a shadow.

“How did our host’s composure strike you, when I told him of the death of his son?” Dee asked Kelley when they were finally behind the closed door of Dee’s room.

“He looked like a man being told something he already knew,” Kelley rumbled beneath his breath.

It was around ten of the clock, and sounds had a way of carrying far on still night air.

“I’m certain that bay in the stable was Toby Walpole’s horse.”

“Why would his father lie?”

“I don’t know. This whole business has a foulness about it. When Walpole saw this pagan idol, he almost attacked me.”

“So he would have done, had I not stopped him.”

“There are dark doings in this house,” Dee murmured, his eyes dreamily unfocused as he rotated the hellish little image between his fingers.

“When do you think they’ll be asleep?” Kelley asked.

“We’ll wait another hour. That should be long enough.”

The passage of an hour found them creeping along the corridor and down the stair to the front hall. Dee carried a candle in a short brass holder. He would have preferred to do without it, but the darkness was absolute.

“Where are we going?” Kelley whispered.

“Follow your nose.”

Kelley sniffed the air and caught the faint chemical tang he had detected on Walpole’s hands, only partially masked by the cloying scent of rose incense. It led him to a locked door of heavy oak planks next to the kitchen. Dee extended a black iron key.

“Try this.”

The skeleton key was not a perfect match for the mechanism of the lock, but by dint of prying and wiggling it, Kelley was able to open the door. The hinges had been greased – the door made not a sound. From the dark mouth exhaled the sharp smell of acid and the softer overlay of alcohol. The air felt damp on Kelley’s face. He took the candlestick from Dee and went first through the opening. They descended a flight of rough-cut stone steps and found themselves in a long, vaulted chamber, one wall of which was lined with shelves. A bench ran the length of the other wall. At the far end of the room, an archway led to another space beyond.

Dee lifted the candlestick from Kelley’s hand and walked along the shelves, studying the intricately-shaped glassware, and various earthen vessels, many of which were labelled in Latin or Arabic. Kelley crossed to the bench and picked up a glass flask from an iron stand above an unlit alcohol lamp. He sniffed its mouth and met Dee’s eye.

“There’s more to our host than spice trading,” he murmured. His low voice echoed from the tightly-fitted stones above his head.

“A very complete alchemical laboratory,” Dee agreed.

On one shelf sat a small library of books. Dee set the candlestick down on the edge of the shelf and pulled a volume out that was no larger than the flat of his hand, bound in black calf with corroded brass hinges. Opening it at random, he recognized at once the *Golden Bird* of Artephius, a rare but highly-prized alchemical tract translated into Latin from its original Arabic. He tossed it to Kelley, who caught it and opened it curiously.

“I haven’t read this one,” he said.

Dee drew out a larger quarto volume and found it to be an illustrated Persian bestiary. He leafed idly through its pages. Many of the creatures depicted by the artist were

mythical. The Greek sphinx, the basilisk, the manticore, the harpy – what possible interest could such a book be to Josiah Walpole, who had never given any indication to Dee of scholarship?

Sliding the book back, Dee carried the candle toward the archway at the end of the long room. As he drew near he realized that the chamber beyond was not completely dark. A weak, bluish light flickered from somewhere in its shadows. The expanding glow from his candle as he passed through the archway made him flinch reflexively at what he saw. Kelley pushed past him and cursed.

The chamber was square with a domed roof. In its opposite wall another shadowed archway opened on darkness, and in the centre of the flagstone floor a circle of well-cut stones bordered the open black mouth of a well. But it was not these things that had elicited Kelley's blasphemous curse. Against the left-hand wall of the chamber stood a stone statue some six feet tall that was almost an exact match for the small metal idol Dee had taken from the blackened hand of Toby Walpole. The statue rested on a cubic stone pedestal that elevated its demonic head above the heads of Dee and Kelley, so that they had to incline their gaze upward to meet its fiendish glare. Its snarling, bestial mouth and its clutching, taloned fingers were splashed with a rusty red that Dee recognized for dried blood. More dried blood stained the surface of a low stone altar at the base of the statue.

Yet it was not even these sights, horrifying though they were, that had drawn forth Kelley's curse. It was the thing on the altar. Dee walked around the open well mouth with care and held the candle closer. An enormous glass cylinder supported by an iron tripod stood upright on the blood-splashed stone. It was a fine example of the glass-blower's art, clear as crystal with only a slight clouding, some twenty inches in diameter and about fifty inches tall, its top sealed by a glass lid. Beneath the cylinder burned an alcohol lamp, its blue flame turned down so that the glow was only faintly visible in the candlelight.

Dee put his fingers against the glass. Warm, the temperature of blood. Within the vessel something floated in clear liquid that was being heated by the flame. At the first glance Dee had recognized it, but his mind tried to turn the knowledge aside, so that he had to look at it again before he could trace out its shape.

"Is that what I think it is?" Kelley asked.

“The other half of Toby Walpole,” Dee confirmed.

His initial revulsion controlled, Kelley put his face nearer the curved glass.

“It’s deformed,” he said.

“Hermaphrodite,” Dee corrected. “Both sexes at the same time. Toby Walpole was an hermaphrodite, an extremely rare type of monster.”

“There’s some kind of black bristles on its legs,” Kelley observed, swallowing his disgust. “Its feet – something wrong with its feet.”

“Six toes on each foot.”

Kelley stepped back. Dee took his elbow and nodded at the open well to remind him. It was not uncommon for older farm houses, built in isolation from other human habitations, to possess a secondary well within their walls for emergency use, should the house ever fall under attack. Kelley gestured at the statue.

“What is it, some kind of unholy sacrifice to this pagan devil?”

“Not a sacrifice,” Josiah Walpole said behind them. “An offering.”

There was the clink of metal, and brightness filled the chamber. In the entrance stood Walpole, a snaphance pistol in each hand. His Arab stable boy held up a tin lantern, the shutter of which he had just opened. Walpole’s tall, impassive servant Wasari and two other men of similar Eastern appearance advanced with naked steel glittering in the lantern glow.

Kelley roared as he ripped his dirk from its sheath at his waist. He leapt toward the first man and plunged the long blade into his heart. The man was dead before he struck the floor. The second slashed at Kelley’s face, forcing the big man to bend backward to avoid its point.

“Edward!” Dee cried in warning.

There was nothing Kelley could do to hold his balance. He flailed his arms, but to no

effect. As he fell into the dark opening, he turned his head and his eyes met Dee's. Then he was gone. Several moments later, Dee heard the splash.

Dee turned his pale brown eyes to Walpole. They flamed with an icy fury that had only been equalled a few times in his long and varied life. He reached reflexively for his sword, then remembered that he was unarmed. Walpole smiled with satisfaction. He spoke a few words in Arabic. The tall bald man and the other servant sheathed their knives and took Dee by each arm while Walpole held the muzzles of his pistols levelled at Dee's chest.

"Murderer!" Dee spat in accusation.

"Not at all," Walpole said as he eased down the hammers of the pistols and slid them under his belt on either side. "Your friend fell by his own clumsiness."

"You murdered your own son."

Sudden fury flashed in the short man's countenance. He struck Dee a backhand blow to the cheek.

"Never speak of my dear boy. You're not fit to say his name."

"You defile his memory with this --" Dee jerked his head at the glass cylinder "--abomination."

Walpole gazed at the slender, pitiful pelvis and legs floating within the cylinder.

"This abomination, as you call it, is the salvation of my blood, the hope of my forebearers, and the future of my name.

"This dead thing?" Dee barked a harsh laugh. If he could not attack Walpole physically, he could at least bruise his vanity, and hope to prick him into a foolish action.

“It’s not dead,” the other man said scornfully. “It lives! The elixir keeps it alive. Not only does it live, but it can be stimulated. It can be aroused to do its duty.”

Dee had no idea what the madman was babbling about. He sought to find words that would delay his fate, for there could be no doubt that Walpole intended to kill him. He could never allow Dee to leave after what he had seen.

“His duty to She Who Dances Between the Stars?”

The stocky little man raised an eyebrow.

“You know Her name? I am impressed, John, very impressed. I would not have believed there was another man in all England who knew Her name.”

“It is written in the *Necronomicon* that she was born from the rotting womb of the Goat with a Thousand Young, to spread plagues and darkness across the face of the world.”

“You’ve read Alhazred’s *Azif*? Then you know far more than I ever gave you credit for.”

“You have your own secrets,” Dee said. “I would never have guessed you for an alchemist.”

“Nor am I,” Walpole told him. “My knowledge is nothing. I depend on the wisdom of Wasari, once a priest in Syria in the secret cult of She Who Dances Between the Stars, but now my teacher and guide. He makes the pretence of being my servant, but the truth of the matter is that he calls no man his master.”

Walpole said a few words in Arabic to the tall, bald priest who clutched Dee’s right arm. The Easterner glanced at Dee with his black eyes and laughed a low, evil laugh that chilled Dee’s blood.

“I can’t even read Arabic,” Walpole said. “I learned to speak it for purposes of trade, and that was how I met Wasari, who told me that the goddess he worships could solve the problem that has plagued me all my life.”

“What would that be?”

Walpole walked around the well, staring down into its blackness. He spat into it, causing the Syrian priest to laugh again and jabber a few words in his native tongue to the other servants.

“I don’t mind telling you, since you are going to die in any case. There is something wrong with my body, some strange affliction that makes it impossible for me to engender a child on a woman.”

“You’re impotent.”

“No,” Walpole snapped. “My seed won’t take root in the womb. It might as well be water.”

“Sterile,” Dee corrected himself.

“Call it what you will. I am the last of my family line, and I found that I could not engender an heir on any woman. The devil knows, I tried often enough. Isn’t that a fine jest?” He spread his arms and turned a circle. “I own all this – the Grange, the land, my business in London, my fleet of trading ships – but there is no one to come after me. I achieved all this, and for what?”

“So the priest helped you,” Dee said.

“Yes, he told me that I was mating with the wrong kind of wife. A daughter of his goddess could quicken my seed in her womb, even though normal women could not.”

“Your Syrian wife, who died giving birth to your son.”

Walpole said something in Arabic, and the three others tittered with amusement.

“I have something to show you, good neighbour Dee, before I close your eyes forever and send you after your vulgar friend.”

“Where you sent Toby?”

Walpole flinched, then forced a cold smile.

“How was I to know that the well connects with the river? I assumed his remains would never be found.”

“In the name of God, why did you sever your son into two parts?”

Walpole turned and walked toward the dark archway on the opposite side of the square chamber from the entrance. He gestured over his shoulder with his hand and spoke in Arabic.

“All will be revealed to you, John. I want you to see this. It is a truly remarkable sight, as I’m sure you will agree.”

Dee allowed himself to be pulled along after the trader. He doubted he could break free from the grasp of both his captors before Walpole shot him. Better to bide his time and wait for an opportunity.

They entered the third chamber, which Dee realized was elongated and much the same size and shape as the first that had contained the books and alchemical apparatuses. It appeared to be empty. The stable boy with the lantern following in the rear caused their legs to cast long wavering shadows across the dark flagstones. As they walked deeper into the room, Dee realized that something occupied the far end, something quite large. At first he saw only its vague outline. It towered above the head of even the tall Syrian priest, a jumble of shadows. The boy carried the lantern forward and raised it.

Dee fought the impulse to scream. His legs began to push backward against the floor of their own volition, but his captors dragged him forward. He could not have said what it was, only that it was horrific beyond any conception of man. His mind refused to grasp its shape. The thing was so large, it almost touched the vault of the ceiling. It appeared to be sitting, or squatting, but this was impossible to determine since it did not possess limbs in the normal sense, only appendages that were in some indefinable way insectivorous, their joints bending in the wrong directions and covered with shining black chitin. A mass of ebony filaments, like eel grass, hung down limply from around a serrated anus-shaped opening that might have been a mouth, except that it was located in nothing that even remotely resembled a head.

Dee realized that he was panting for breath. A faint alien stench clogged his throat. He swallowed and had to fight down his rising gorge.

“John Dee,” Walpole said in a formal tone, “I would like to introduce to you my wife.”

“This thing gave birth to Toby?” Dee said in disbelief.

“She did what no mortal woman was able to accomplish – she gave me a son.” There was a note of pride in Walpole’s voice.

“Why did you kill him?” Dee asked.

“I didn’t kill him, you fool. I loved that dear lad more than anything else in this world. But you saw his legs, his parts. He was imperfect. What woman would ever have received him into her bed? What woman would marry him? I needed a perfect heir to carry on my family’s bloodline, to inherit all my work, and Wasari told me of a way.”

At the mention of his name, the chest of the Syrian priest swelled. He rolled his dark eyes at Dee, aware that he was being praised even though he did not understand the words.

“I couldn’t do it alone, you see. My offspring would always be mixed, partly human and partly – her. But Toby could do it. His seed, when passed through the womb that had brought it forth into the world, would be refined, just as the white tincture of alchemy is fined and refined again until it becomes pure. Toby’s son will be perfect.”

Dee experienced a nausea of the soul that very nearly caused him to lose consciousness. He fought off the blackness from his sight and tried to ignore the chill sweat that sprang out over his entire body.

“You forced your own son to mate ... with that?”

“No, fool, you still don’t understand. Toby was a good son. He knew his duty. There was no need to use force. All would have gone well, except –“

“How did he die?” Dee demanded.

Walpole seemed to forget Dee’s presence as he stood silently gazing at the thing cloaked in shadows. To Dee, it seemed to be dead, but so alien was its shape, how could its life or death be determined? After a time, Walpole spoke, as though speaking to himself.

“He was a good son. No man can lie with her and live, unless she is sedated with strong drugs. They should have been enough. They were always enough in the past, but this time, something went amiss. The compound was impure, adulterated with some inactive salt. She awoke before the consummation of the union, and became angry. She ...” Walpole coughed and paused, then went on. “She ripped my poor Toby into two pieces and threw them at me.”

“Is that why you killed her?”

“Why do I waste my words on a fool?” Walpole exclaimed petulantly. “She is not dead. Nothing of this world can kill her – Wasari called her from beyond, from the bosom of She Who Dances Between the Stars. I can’t kill her, nor would I wish to, not until she fulfills her purpose.”

“But you said she tore your son apart before he could consummate his union with her.”

“Yes, but his lower half still lives, and it can be stimulated. It can be aroused. When the cycle of the moon is right, we will try again, and this time we will succeed.”

Dee jerked his left arm free from the lax grasp of the man holding it and thrust his hand into the pocket that contained the metal icon. It was hot to the touch, so hot that it almost seared his palm, and it glowed with green flame.

“You won’t succeed without this,” Dee shouted.

Walpole’s eyes widened with recognition. He babbled in Arabic. Before the servants were able to subdue him, Dee cast the burning icon into the mass of darkness that was Walpole’s wife.

Walpole shrieked his fury, but when he spoke there was fear in his words.

“Fool, you don’t know what you’ve done. The touch of the icon wakes her. She isn’t sedated! I’ve never dared to awaken her without sedating her first.”

He drew one of his pistols from his belt and aimed it at Dee, who saw the flash of the powder in the pan. Something knocked Dee aside, and he heard the bullet go past his ear. The Syrians were babbling, and seemed to have forgotten Dee’s presence. Dee turned, and looked directly into the face of Edward Kelley.

“We have to get out of here,” Kelley said.

Within the dark mass of limbs at the end of the chamber, things were moving. The Arab stable boy cried out in terror and dropped his lantern. It fell on its side but continued to burn. In the flickering light, Dee saw him dart for the archway. Something black and barbed lashed out with incredible quickness and pierced his chest, then dragged him backward, squirming like a fish on a hook, toward the widening central maw of the devil spawn. Dee looked back at Walpole, and saw him struggling to extract his other pistol from his belt. The hammer had become hooked on the leather band. He jerked at it repeatedly, head twisted over his shoulder to gawk at the moving thing. As Kelley pulled him from the room, Dee saw something with claws that were like saw blades close around Walpole’s neck and decapitate him.

The candle in the central chamber gave them some light. Dee seized up the glass alcohol lamp that burned beneath the cylinder, intending to use it against the crawling darkness, then realized the futility of trying to stop such a gigantic mass of armor-plated limbs with such a puny weapon. The thing had begun to move, and now filled the archway behind them.

“Run, John,” Kelley shouted.

Dee ran into the first chamber with the alcohol lamp flaming in his hand. Only when he was near the stairs did he realize that Kelley had not followed him. He turned, and saw through the archway by the flame of the candle that Kelley and the bald Syrian priest were locked in a death struggle next to the well, each with his hands around the throat of the other. The Syrian must have possessed almost superhuman strength. Kelley was a bull of a man, but the priest’s slender fingers bent him to his knees. Behind them, the writhing blackness with its flickering claws and grinding maw loomed ever nearer. In the heat of combat neither man seemed aware of the danger.

Dee acted without thought. He ran to the shelf that held a large glass flask labelled in Latin *aqua fortis* that he had noticed earlier and seized it around its slender neck. Without pause he darted back into the middle room, just in time to see several black tendrils wrap around the body of the struggling bald priest, who shrieked when he realized his predicament.

“Edward, let go of him,” Dee cried.

Kelley drove a knee into the groin of the Syrian and thrust him away, leaping back and to the side as Dee hurled the flask of acid directly into the opening blackness. For a few moments, nothing happened. Then the air vibrated with a sound so low in pitch that it could not be heard, but only felt in the chest. The countless thorned limbs and whip-like tendrils began to thrash. One of them cut through the glass cylinder on the altar, spilling its contents. The others pulled the Syrian into bloody pieces.

Dee realized that he still held the alcohol lamp. He hurled it at the thing. The glass ball of the lamp shattered, spilling blue flame across the alien planes and angles of its body. The thing quivered in agony beneath the blind eyes of the stone goddess. Incredibly, its vast bulk shrank in upon itself and squeezed itself into the mouth of the well. In a moment it had disappeared downward. The light from the blue flame coruscating across its limbs continued to flicker on the ceiling of the vault for several seconds before going out. Dee heard thrashing in the water below, then silence.

Kelley struggled to push himself to his feet. The fight with the Syrian had nearly ended him. He looked around in the glow from the candle and realized that he and Dee were alone. He let Dee use his shoulder to support him as they made their way toward the staircase, since he could not have walked without help.

“I thought you were dead,” Dee grunted into his ear while they laboriously climbed the steps.

“So did I. When I realized I was still alive, I felt around in the darkness and discovered iron brackets embedded in the side of the well. So I climbed out.”

Dee smiled to himself at the modesty of the statement. He could imagine the peril of the climb in total darkness, on slime-slick, rusting iron staples.

“What in the name of Christ was that thing?”

“That was Joshua Walpole’s wife,” Dee told him dryly.

Kelley mulled on this for a short while.

“If that was his wife, I’d hate to meet his mother-in-law.”

BLACK DOG

Edward Kelley leaned over the side of his saddle and spat the dust from his dry mouth. He was tired of the taste of sheep dung, which the eddies of warm spring breezes stirred from the road. He was tired of the sight of sheep, tired of their stink, tired of their incessant bleating, but most of all tired of them wandering across the rutted track of the road in great woolly-white flocks spotted by the occasional black renegade, seemingly of their own volition and with no regard for the horses or the running dogs that tried to scold them back with clamorous barking. The Cotswold Hills were pleasant enough in early spring, when all the trees sent their soft green buds bursting forth to birdsong, but there were too many damned sheep.

Two horse-lengths behind the swishing tail of his placid cob rode his wife Johanna on her Spanish jennet, her long flame-red hair on fire in the late morning sunlight. She sat her side-saddle expertly, but her young maid Bess was still having difficulty making her rented mount stay in the road. The little Irish horse wanted to wander off and browse on the buds of the alder saplings that grew along the side of the ditch.

Johanna Kelley noticed the scowl on her husband's face and smiled at his impatience.

“Catch up, Bess, we'll wait for you.”

“I'm trying, mistress, but this 'un won't heed.”

Johanna had known the plump, chestnut-curved maid since before her marriage to Kelley, and never went on long journeys without Bess for company. She needed companionship even more than usual, since John Dee and his pleasant wife, Jane, had not accompanied them into Oxfordshire on their visit to Johanna's mother.

After riding more than seventy miles westward from Mortlake, Bess should have mastered the reins well enough to point her horse in the same direction as that of her mistress, Kelley fumed silently. She had slowed their journey by half a day, at least. It

was only luck that the weather had held.

They crested a grassy rise and saw the village of Chipping Norton spread out before them, nestled at the base of a low, rounded hill that bore on its top the ruins of an earthen Saxon fortress. On a nearby bump of ground that Kelley could not dignify with the name hill, the stone church of St. Mary the Virgin stood head and shoulders above the rest of the buildings of the village, most of which were simple single or two-story stone cottages with thatched roofs. Garden squares planted with bright new-green rows broke up the regularity of the rooftops, and on fenced grass commons Kelley saw yet more sheep.

“Baah,” he muttered under his breath.

“What was that, husband?” Johanna asked in amusement as she topped the crest and stopped her mount beside his.

“We’re here,” he replied. “Finally.”

Johanna gazed with pleasure at the village of some six hundred souls in which she had been born twenty-two summers ago. No other place quite felt like home to her, not even John Dee’s great house at Mortlake where she lived with her husband and infant daughter. The narrow muddy lanes lined with wild flowers, the low hedges and dry-stone walls, the cottages that seemed to grow up from the shoulder of the land like living things, all were exactly as she remembered them from last year. Even the sharp-edged shadow of the austere parish church that lay over the thatched rooftops did not gloom her spirits. The ancient church was so tall it might almost be called a cathedral. When she was a girl, the mere sight of it had filled her with dread, and she had trembled to creep beneath the grotesque carven heads in the nave, but today she welcomed sight of it.

Dogs began to bark as they rode down the gentle slope and approached the village. Kelley had stayed in Chipping Norton many times but had no love for the place, although he grudgingly admitted to himself that it was a prosperous and neat-looking little community. The farmers and villagers did very well in the wool trade. By the standards of the rest of England, they were wealthy.

Johanna’s heart expanded to the familiar sights and sounds. Bess had also grown up in

the village.

“It’s grand to be home, mistress,” the maid said.

“Indeed it is, Bess.”

A girl of some twelve years playing with a stick and hoop at the side of the lane recognized Johanna and ran off to spread the news. When they arrived at the Seven Sisters Inn, Mother Cooper already stood in the yard before the opened door to greet them.

Johanna slid from her saddle and ran to embrace her mother. The older woman’s broad face beamed like the sun beneath her peaked black hat.

“About time you come home,” she roared, tears of joy starting at the corners of her green eyes. She glared across her daughter’s shoulder at Kelley. “Has he started to beat you yet?”

“He gets as good as he ever gives,” she said, laughing.

“That he does, Mother Cooper,” Bess said emphatically.

She started to dismount, and the Irish hobby wandered in a small circle and began to walk backwards. A quiet lad with a dirt-stained face ran to grab her reins, but before he could reach her, Bess tumbled to the grass, uninjured apart from her dignity.

“Come in, all of yous,” the older woman said through laughter, “Come in, and be welcome.”

The public hall of the Seven Sisters was almost too small to be called a common room. Dust motes danced in the slanting beams of sunlight that angled through the pair of narrow southern windows. Several farmers sat at benches, drinking ale from wooden flagons. They raised their vessels and nodded at Johanna, but scowled at Kelley and looked away. He was the outsider who had stolen the flower of the village. They might forgive him for it, in a dozen years or so, but they would never forget. A lean man sat in the corner hunched over his ale, face concealed by the brim of his felt hat. He did not look up.

“Ned, get some ale for Johanna, scoot now,” Mother Cooper told the wiry bald man behind the bar.

He smiled and turned with languid slowness to draw amber liquid from a supine cask with a wooden spigot knocked into its side. Kelley had never seen his wife’s uncle move at more than a snail’s pace, and doubted he was able.

“I’ll have one, too,” he muttered.

Everyone ignored him. Johanna’s mother drew her into the back room, chattering away like a magpie, and Bess wandered outside to remove their travel gear from the horses. Eventually, Kelley went to the keg and drew himself a flagon under Uncle Ned’s disapproving scowl.

Kelley shook his head in disgust, a lock of dark hair falling across one eye, and stared out the narrow window at the capering maid, who managed to start the horses at the end of their tethers whenever she approached to reach for the saddle boxes. Eventually, the boy who came to lead the weary beasts to the stable helped her unload the belongings.

For weeks his wife had been pining at Mortlake to see her mother, and Kelley had finally agreed to the visit, but he had no love for this place, pretty though it might be.

There was something in the air, something other than sheep's dung. The place had an ancient and uncanny feel about it that made the skin over his spine crawl. It was not for nothing that Chipping Norton had the reputation as the worst witch haunt in all the south of England, of that he was certain.

He didn't notice it so much during the day, in sunny weather, but at night a strong, clear inner voice told him wordlessly to beware. He had never tried to explain this to Johanna. He was certain she would only laugh and call him foolish.

"Eddie, old mate. Over here."

Kelley turned at the husky murmur that came from the table in the corner. The solitary labourer seated at its bench tilted back his head from his ale to reveal a pock-marked face beneath the broad brim of his hat. The alchemist recognized the sardonic features of Jack Samuels, his drinking companion back in the days when he had wooed Johanna for a lark, with no firm intention of ever marrying her. They had been close for a few months, but Kelley had never much liked the lean man, nor for that matter did anyone else. He was shiftless and not to be trusted. Women avoided him because of what the small pox had done to his cheeks, which for some perverse reason he kept clean-shaven, and men because he had the reputation of a liar.

He wandered over with his flagon of ale and sat across from Samuels.

"I hear you hooked yourself up with the Queen's conjurer near London way," Samuels said. "How's that for ye?"

"Well enough," Kelley said, taking a long and grateful swallow of his ale. It was warm, bitter, and uncommonly good. He wiped the foam away from his beard with the black bristles on the back of his hand.

Samuels leaned close with a conspiratorial glance to the side.

"Maybe I got something for ye," he whispered.

"What?" Kelley asked with disinterest. Samuels always had some illegal scheme on the fire, but most came to nothing.

“I ain’t saying I do, I’m saying maybe I do,” Samuels continued. “And if I do, would ye be interested in a piece of it, now?”

“I’m a married man, Jack,” Kelley said with a bark of self-mocking laughter. “Respectable. I shouldn’t even be sitting with the likes of you.”

“Now, now, Eddie, don’t be like that,” Samuels rasped. “We was mates, wasn’t we? When I seed you come through that door, it was like an angel spoke in my ear, ‘Here’s providence, Jack. Here’s your old mate Edward Kelley, what knows how to do things right. Share what you got with Kelley and you won’t be sorry.’”

Kelley sighed with irritation. The old devil curiosity tickled at the back of his head.

“What have you got, then, Jack? Let’s hear it.”

“That’s the way, Eddie, that’s the way,” Samuels said, slapping Kelley on his broad shoulder. It was like slapping a side of lean beef.

He peered around the common room to make sure no one was trying to overhear him, and leaned even closer.

“It’s like this ‘ere.”

It was generally understood that Mother Cooper would hold a party to celebrate her daughter's return to Chipping Norton. The villagers began to gather at the Seven Sisters at sundown without needing an invitation. By ten of the clock Kelley judged that everyone in the village must be there, with the possible exception of the vicar and his churchwardens, who did not hold with drinking and carousing. The strong ale was Kelley's sole support in a sea of unfamiliar and generally unfriendly faces. He relied on it to get him safely through the gathering without losing his temper and braining some surly bumpkin with his mallet-like fist.

The voices and laughter ringing in his ears from all sides made him dizzy. He had eaten too much and drunk too much. Not that this was uncommon behaviour for him. Away from Mortlake, the patient but reproachful face of Jane Dee did not impel him to moderate his appetites, and for that temporary freedom from restraint he was grateful – although just the memory of her beautiful brown eyes made him wish he were back there. It was a hell of a weight on the soul to love the wife of his best friend, yet never dare to show it.

Johanna's women friends from the village were a strange group. They flocked like harpies from room to room, and cast him sly, side-long glances when they thought he was looking elsewhere. When they laughed, which was often, none covered her mouth with her fingers, as would a modest woman. They had the boldness of harlots, even though there was nothing lewd about their words or dress – nothing he could identify, leastwise. They all seemed to share some secret jest at his expense, and Johanna shared it with them. Even Bess had been caught up in the laughter and the ale that Mother Cooper kept flowing so freely.

He became conscious of a twinge from his swollen bladder. He thought about unbuttoning his travel breeches and pissing into the fire that smouldered on the soot-blackened hearth stones, but decided this would not be well received. With deliberate movements, he set down his empty flagon on the oak mantle and moved through the

millling throne toward the back door of the inn.

The cool evening air revived him. He did not bother to search for the outhouse in the darkness, but went to the wall and began to relieve himself against it in one long, hissing stream.

A footfall on the turf behind him made him whirl. He reached for the stag-horn hilt of his dirk, then in the dim glow from the opened door of the inn recognized the broad shoulders and tall conical hat of his mother-in-law. He turned and buttoned his private parts out of sight. Her voice came eerily through the darkness.

“I know you’ve got a black heart, Edward Kelley” she told him. “I know the Devil counts you for his own. But you’ve been good to my girl, in your own way, so I mean to give you the wedding gift I had no chance to give when you took her away from me and wed her in secret, without first asking my blessing.”

Her words held an edge, but it was buried so deep Kelley could not judge whether she was sincere or whether she spoke in malice.

“You don’t need to give me a gift,” he told her. “I have Johanna, and that’s enough for any man.”

At that, she laughed and slapped him hard on the shoulder.

“I hear talk that you know something of the arts.”

“I’m no damned puffer,” he said hotly. “I seek the stone.”

She made a dismissive wave of her hand.

“Not those arts, the arts that are forbidden.”

“And if I did, what would that be to you?”

It did not do to speak of such things casually, not even under the cloak of night and in solitude.

“The secret wisdom is old in these parts,” she said in a low voice. “Old, but not yet forgotten by all. The standing stones remember, aye, the whispering knights and the king’s men, both. They speak to those who dance among them in the dark of the moon widdershin-ways, weaving in and out among them like warp and woof.”

Kelley realized she must mean the circle of ancient stones some three miles outside the village.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kelley said, giving his head a shake to clear the cobwebs from his thoughts.

“Aye, you do,” she said in a knowing voice. “You have the sight, same as me, same as my dear red-haired girl you took away.”

The light from the open door gleamed on the curious silver pendant she wore around her neck, hanging between her ample breasts. It had the shape of a naked woman with a pregnant belly, but no limbs and no face, and crescent horns rising from her head. Now that he thought about it, others in Johanna’s circle of friends at Chipping Norton wore similar pendants of silver. He wondered why he had never noticed them before this night? He had seen them often enough, but they had made no impression on his mind.

“Where is your gift?” he asked irritably. “Give it to me.”

“You have asked,” she said with a triumphant ring in her voice. “So now it shall be given ye.”

In the dim light her green eyes, so like her daughter’s, seemed to glow. She made a gesture with her hand in his direction, and touched the pendant between her breasts, muttering a kind of chant in a guttural language he did not recognize, unless it was the half-forgotten tongue of Cornwall that Dee had once uttered for him. It struck his ears with a similar harshness.

“The gift is given, my son,” she sighed.

“What gift?” He looked around through the darkness. They were still alone in the yard.

“It has no name yet,” she said, winking at him and laying her index finger along the side

of her nose. "It is yours, and only ye can name it. Do not wait too long, for if you don't give it a name, it will name itself, and then you will lose your mastery over it."

"Give what a name?"

"Only we who have the sight can see it, nobody else. It will stay with ye and follow at your heels and serve ye."

Her way of talking began to unnerve him. Irritation got the better of his manners.

"What are you babbling about, you crazed hag?"

She laughed with good humour and returned into the inn, leaving him standing in the night. He walked slowly once around the beaten turf of the yard to clear his head. He had always known Mother Cooper was odd. She had a reputation in the village as a wise woman. The folk in and around Chipping Norton came to her to be healed, and for potions to take away impotence or bring luck. This was the first time he had doubted her sanity.

"Mad as a March hare," he muttered.

A movement caught the corner of his eye. He whirled to face it, dirk naked in his hand. The night breeze kissed his sweating face. The yard was empty. With slow steps he backed his way toward the door of the inn. As he turned to the light to enter, a faint rustle in the grass behind him reached his ears, like the distant chuckle of mocking laughter.

I should have my head trepanned to let the foolishness out, Kelley thought to himself for the third time. But he continued tramping through the darkness after Jack Samuels and said nothing. The village of Chipping Norton lay asleep below them. It was after midnight. There was no moon, and apart from the star-shot heavens, the night was as dark as the inside of an empty tar barrel. Samuels led the way with a tin lantern, its door opened only a crack to allow a yellow sliver from the candle flame within to dance along the grassy slope at their feet.

The foolishness of what they were doing stirred a sudden chord of black humour in his soul.

“They say this place is accursed, Jack,” he murmured at the back of his companion.

“They can take what they say to the Devil when there’s gold to be had,” Samuels answered without turning.

Kelley shivered and listened. Was there furtive movement in the grass further down the hill? The faint rustle of the night breeze came to his ears. He grunted. He had tried to unnerve Samuels and had only unnerved himself. There was something to be said for a complete lack of imagination, he thought sourly.

They kept on up the slope of the ancient hill that supported the ruin of the Saxon fortress. The earthen fortification wall was little more than a ridge of grass-covered ground, irregular in places where the weather had caused it to collapse on itself. Nothing remained of the wooden structures that must have stood here centuries ago.

Kelley was sorry he had agreed to come along on this mad scheme. His head still rang from the clamour of the celebration his mother-in-law had thrown for Johanna at the inn. He had managed to shake off most of the dullness of the ale, but his travel-abused body told him he should be in bed beside his wife, asleep. Instead, he was climbing a hill to

dig up a corpse. True, it was not a task completely unfamiliar to him, but it was far from his favourite activity. At least this corpse would not stink. Saturn's sickle had seen to that.

"He's over 'ere," Samuels said.

"How do you know it's a he?" Kelley asked for the sake of being argumentative.

Samuels stopped and scratched his head beneath his hat. He shrugged.

"Got to be, don't it? This 'ere's a soldiers' fort. What would some woman be doing buried up 'ere?"

They climbed over the curving embankment and into the bowl at the centre of the ruin. Samuels began to cast his eyes over the irregular weed-choked ground with the lantern held out before him. Kelley sat down on a berm of earth, crossed his arms on his massive chest, and waited.

"'Ere it is!" Samuels said with excitement in his raspy voice. "I told you it was 'ere, didn't I?"

Levering himself up to his feet on one arm, and beating the droplets of night dew from the back of his cloak, Kelley went over to see what his former companion in crime had discovered.

Samuels was kneeling on the grass. Kelley crouched beside him. Samuels took his dagger and probed the ground with its point. The steel blade struck something hard that clinked beneath the turf.

"There's one little piece of leg bone sticking up," Samuels muttered around his tongue, the tip of which protruded from the corner of his mouth in the extremity of his concentration. "That's what gave me the nod what was 'ere."

He unslung a short-handled spade from his back and started to dig.

Kelley did not offer to help, but he took the bones as Samuels turned them out of the soft soil and arranged them into the shape of a human skeleton. After a time he found himself

interested in the puzzle of where to put each bone. It was hard to tell the little ones apart. The muddy skull had a hole the size of a half-crown in its top. The Saxon soldier had not died in the arms of his lover.

“That’s the last,” Samuels said, throwing down the spade and beating the dirt off his hands and knees. “Now it’s time for you to do your bit.”

Kelley studied the arrangement of bones in the glow from the lantern. The soldier had not been very tall. Maybe he was no more than a youth, caught sleeping at his post during some night attack. One blow from an axe, and he should have slept forever. Should have – but now he would not.

He hesitated. This was his final chance to turn around and walk down the hill and back to his bed at the inn. The work with Peter Waring at the churchyard of Walton Le Dale in Lancashire some years ago had not gone smoothly. Word had leaked of his doings. Should he be proven to have done similar work this night in a court of law, it was the rope for him. The Witch Statute passed in Parliament under Elizabeth gave a death sentence to anyone who sought after treasure with the aid of spirits for a second time. Waring had broken and talked, but it had not been proven on him at Lancashire. Even so, the rumour of Kelley’s act had dogged his heels. If this night’s work came to light, the court would not deal softly with him, that he knew. But Samuels was just as deep in it and not likely to talk.

“Stand next to me,” he told the lean man. “Closer, unless you want the hair singed off your head by hellfire.”

Samuels obediently shuffled near, a solemn expression of awe on his pock-marked face.

“Hold up the lantern so I can see what I’m doing.”

From a pocket he drew the bag of salt he had gathered at the inn and began to sprinkle it on the ground in a circle, walking around Samuels who stood mutely watching. When an unbroken circle of salt contained them both, he drew his dirk and inscribed the names of the archangels at the four quarters, and between the names at the cross-quarters the four Hebrew letters of Tetragrammaton. In a deep voice, he recited the preliminary Latin prayer to the angels for protection. He began the actual necromantic invocation itself.

As he recited the words, he mind was distracted by a persistent moving shadow at the edge of his vision, but he forced himself to ignore it. Now was not the time to lose concentration.

He finished the invocation and paused. Nothing stirred. He had not really expected a result so quickly. The spirits of the dead were slow to rise from their tombs, and this man had been dead a very long time. He repeated the invocation more forcefully. As he reached its climax, he drew forth the short rib bone he had taken from the neatly arranged skeleton and extended it to Samuels.

“Hold this.”

The lean man took the bone in his left hand with reluctance. Lacking in imagination he might be, but the unfamiliar Latin words and the strange markings on the circle unnerved him.

Kelley drew his dirk and made a small cut on the inside of his forearm. The welling blood looked almost black in the uncertain lantern glow. He held his arm over the bone and let the drops fall onto it until its surface was covered with blood.

“Throw it over with the others” he ordered Samuels.

His companion needed no second urging. He flipped the bloody bone at the skeleton with a grimace of distaste.

A third time Kelley spoke the Latin words, some so old they had lost all meaning, and were merely sounds that reverberated in the chamber of his chest and boomed forth on the air.

“Not so loud, you’ll wake the village,” Samuels hissed.

Kelley ignored him. As the power of the words built, heat flushed throughout his body, like the effect of strong rum. He felt as though he floated up off the ground and seemed to see in all directions at once.

“The bones began to glow with a pale radiance that was like moonlight, except that the star-shot sky held no moon. Greenish flames danced up from the bloody bone, which had

fallen near the skull. The flames extended themselves and formed a dancing column of green fire, so pale that it was almost invisible. The fire gathered itself into the shape of a standing man.

“Do you see that?” Samuels hissed.

“Silence,” Kelley barked. “If you value your life, stay within the circle.”

The spirit of the dead man turned its head to look at them. It was not tall, but had long, flowing hair held in place by a circlet around its brow and tied off at the ends into two bundles with lengths of leather cord. It seems to be wearing some kind of breastplate and short leather skirt studded with metal, but its legs were indistinct and merged together near the ground. Slowly, it floated rather than walked closer to the circle, until it was no more than an arm’s length away from Kelley. Samuels cowered behind him with the lantern held high and made whimpering sounds in his throat.

“By the blood with which you are nourished,” Kelley addressed the spirit in Latin, “know ye of any gold buried here?”

Latin had been the universal language since Roman times. The spirit cocked its head, and nodded slowly once.

“Show me the place where it lies,” Kelley commanded. The spirit extended its arm and pointed across the ruins of the fortress. A portion of its finger broke off and became a separate green flame that danced upon the night air like a moth. The two men watched it float across the hilltop and settle upon the ground near a low bush.

“Mark the spot in your memory,” Kelley murmured.

“Aye, it’s marked,” Samuels said.

Privately, the alchemist was relieved that he did not need to follow the spectre to the place where the treasure was buried – often the case when the treasure was some distance away. He disliked the look of the spirit and felt reluctant to leave the circle until it had been formally banished.

The rippling spectre resisted the Latin words of the banishing formula with surprising

determination. There was an expression of grim hatred on its translucent features, which changed from moment to moment, shifting from mournful to furious to malignant in the way a flickering flame will change its shape yet always return to its general form. Kelley had to repeat the banishing three times, and was preparing for a fourth repetition, when the spirit abruptly diminished and sank back down into the bloody rib bone from which it had arisen.

Kelley uttered a closing formula to end the necromantic ritual, and scuffed a break in the salt line of the magic circle. He stepped through and gestured for Samuels to follow.

With a strangled cry the lean little man shoved past Kelley and ran toward the skeleton, the tin lantern flailing in his hand. He snatched up the spade from beside the hole and sprinted across the depression of the ruined fortress to the spot on its opposite side where the green flame had settled. He set the lantern down carelessly and began to dig, throwing the dirt far and wide in his frantic need to get at whatever lay beneath the earth.

Kelley watched him for a time from some distance away, arms folded on his chest, a rueful smile on his face. Never had he seen a more naked display of greed. Samuels was possessed. He did not look at Kelley or speak a single word until the tip of the spade struck wood. He dropped the spade, fell to his knees, and began to claw frantically at the moist soil with his fingernails, digging like a dog.

“Help me, damn ye!” he said with a snarl over his shoulder.

Kelley approached and saw that Samuels had cleared the surface of an iron-bound box, much rotted and blackened by its centuries of burial. It was not large, but its sides were embedded in the moist soil. He took up the spade and began to clear around its edges while Samuels pulled frantically at the corners. At last it shifted. Kelley bent and helped his companion lift it out of the hole and set it under the glow of the lantern.

Samuels made a laughing noise in his throat and began to dig around the lid of the box with his dagger. The nails holding the corroded hinges in place pried out of the soft black wood without great difficulty.

Kelley turned to look into the darkness behind him.

“Did you hear something, Jack?”

The night exploded with white radiance, like the flash from the muzzle of a cannon, and for a time he knew nothing more.

When he came to his senses, he slowly realized that he was lying face down on the rough wild grasses, warm wetness trickling over his forehead and into one of his eyes. A chipping and scratching came from no great distance, but the sounds were meaningless to Kelley. His mind would not work. When he tried to lift his hand to brush away the wet from his eye, he discovered that his arm would not work, either. Eventually he was able to make it slide along the grass, but it did not feel attached to his body. He blinked and tried to focus his unobscured eye.

Jack Samuels sat on the ground beside the opened chest in the glow from the lantern. His hands were inside the box, and when he moved them Kelley heard metallic clinks.

The lean man turned his pox-scarred face to Kelley and narrowed his grey eyes in appraisal.

“You must have a skull like an eight-pound shot. That tap I gives you would have killed a normal man twice over.”

Kelley’s good eye rolled to look at the spade. Its blade gleamed wetly in the light from the lantern. He tried to talk but only a croak passes between his lips. Again he tried to move his arm, and found that it was easier. The pain had started in his head – that was a good thing, he realized. It would keep him from falling back to sleep.

“No hard feelings, Eddie,” Samuels said in a conversational tone. “I couldn’t share this with you, could I? This is what I’ve scratched and searched for all my life, and never found it until this night.”

He took his hand from the box and tossed something that fell near Kelley’s cheek. The alchemist rolled his eye down and saw that it was a gold coin, as untarnished as the day it had been buried beneath the earth.

“Saxon gold. All this time it was lying up here, waiting to be found, and nobody in the village knew. It took old Jack Samuels, that everyone spits at as he walks past, to find it. The rector couldn’t find it with all his psalm-singing holiness, and that old witch your mother-in-law couldn’t find it with her devils. I found it, me, Jack Samuels.”

He pushed himself to his feet with deliberation, and wiped the point of his dagger on the thigh of his mud-stained hose. The light was at his back, casting a shadow that obscured his face. To Kelley he looked like something in a nightmare as he advanced, the blade of the dagger gleaming at his side.

“I’ll make it quick,” he rasped. “For our old-friendship’s sake.”

He bent over Kelley and turned him by his shoulder. Kelley tried to reach for his dirk but his arm barely twitched. Samuels knelt and extended the dagger toward Kelley’s exposed throat.

A flash of darkness struck Samuels on the side and knocked him away from the alchemist. Kelley heard a low growl that was like a rumble of distant thunder, and Samuel’s terrified cursing. There was the gristly sound of flesh torn from bone and a wet gurgle that diminished to silence.

With an immense concentration of will, Kelley rolled to one side. He saw Samuels sprawled on his back beside the lantern, his head turned and his blind, dead eyes staring directly into those of the alchemist, as though in accusation. The dagger lay not far from the fingertips of his outstretched hand. His throat had been torn out, and showed a bloody, ragged hole deep enough to expose his spine.

Something black and immense crouched over the corpse. It was like a plume of black smoke with serpentine tendrils waving and questing through the night air. The low rumble came again, and the thing turned to reveal a head with red eyes that blazed like coals of hellfire, and immense jaws lined with black teeth. It was something like the head of a dog, and something like the head of a wolf, and it changed from moment to moment.

As he looked at it, the black thing began to drift toward him, making the grass rustle as it passed. The massive head extended toward his face.

“Good dog,” he said in a slurred voice.

The thing seemed to snuff in satisfaction. It withdrew and stationed itself between Kelley and the corpse, its amorphous body shifting in the uncertain candle flame of the lantern.

Kelley had no clear sense of how long he lay on the cool grass with the sweet scent of blood cloying in his nostrils. He did not sleep but neither was he fully awake. Eventually, he gathered his wits and managed to push himself into a sitting posture. Blood from his wound had pooled in his left eye socket and congealed. He struggled for several seconds to open his eye, but his eyelashes were stuck together in the crust of blood. Finally he was able to tear his eye open, and looked around with something resembling normal awareness.

The lantern candle still burned, and the sky remained black, so no more than a few hours must have passed, he reasoned. It was completely silent on the hilltop. The shadow thing had withdrawn to the edge of the lantern glow, but he sensed rather than heard or saw its restless presence as it circled the two men, one alive and the other a corpse.

Kelley crawled past the grotesquely twisted body of Samuels without a glance and peered into the decayed black chest. The bottom was lined with gold coins, a hundred of them at the least, maybe twice that number. There was enough gold here to fund his alchemical experiments for the rest of his life.

As he reached for the coins, the box was enveloped in a plume of the same green fire that had composed the spirit of the dead Saxon soldier he had raised from the grave. The edge of it brushed his fingertips and froze them, covering them with white needles of hoarfrost. He sensed the danger of it, and pulled himself backward away from the box on his elbow and hip. His tried to scramble to his feet, but found that his legs would not work for him.

All around within the depression that marked the extent of the ruined hilltop fortress, green flames stirred soundlessly to life and extended themselves upward like serpents balanced on their tails until they were the height of men. Kelley blinked hard to clear his vision and saw that they were men, or at least their shades, dozens of them. The flames that composed their forms hardened their outlines, giving them faces and arms, but

below the waist they had no legs. They drifted purposefully toward Kelley on their columns of flame. There was no retreat – they encircled him on all sides.

He realized that he had pulled himself back from the box of coins until he lay half across Samuels' corpse. With a curse he seized up the dead man's dagger and threw it at the nearest of the spectres. The Saxon soldier wavered as the steel blade passed through him, but his body solidified and he resumed his purposeful approach.

The blackness that had lurked on the edge of the lantern light stepped in front of him and growled at the nearest ghost, gnashing its fangs. The spectre hesitated, and then withdrew a step. The shadow concentrated its parts and took on the definite shape of a large hound with a head that resembled that of a wolf.

“Keep them back,” Kelley murmured. “I need time to work.”

His words still sounded slurred in his own ears, but the shadow-hound seemed to understand. It darted around Kelley, snapping at the air and growling its deep rumble of distant thunder. If the ghosts of the Saxon soldiers were not stopped by its threats, they were slowed. When it thrust its massive jaws at them, they wavered and withdrew a few paces. But they would not be denied their purpose. They continued to press forward.

Kelley had none of the tools of necromancy. His prepared salt was gone, and he had not thought to bring anything else with him, believing he would not require more for the work he anticipated. He needed to cast a circle, but without chalk, without charcoal, without salt, or fire, what was he to cast it with?

He drew his dirk and began to crawl, scratching a rough circle into the ground around himself and the corpse of Jack Samuels that he lay across. The important thing was to join its beginning with its end so that it was whole and complete. The shadow-hound held the ghosts at bay long enough for him to almost complete the ring, but it was relentlessly driven back by the ghosts, until at last it stood across Kelley's useless legs and growled its defiance.

He closed the ring around them and concentrated on making the magic circle real in his mind. It was not enough to draw just a physical circle – it must be drawn in the realm of the spirits that overlies the mortal realm the way a shadow overlies the ground, and the

only way to draw it there was with the power of the will. Soon he was able to see the spirit ring with his eyes, floating on the night air like a ribbon of white fire above where he had scratched the ragged line in the earth. He channelled the power of his will into this floating circle and made it stronger and brighter.

The ghosts of the Saxons pressed against the circle on all sides, but it was to them a transparent wall with no doorway. Kelley felt the force of their straining against the ring of white flame in his mind, and he pressed back. He was gratified to see the ghosts move away, but noticed that they retreated no more than a few feet, and soon returned. One by one they drew their swords of green flame and began to hack soundlessly at the circle.

Kelley felt the strength drain from his will, and knew he could not maintain the wholeness of the circle for more than a few more minutes. The ghosts showed no sign of weakening – if anything, the nearness of their purpose seemed to give them greater solidity. Their grim faces, lined with fell determination, were clearly defined by the green flames that animated them. To Kelley's inner sight, the magic circle began to flicker on the air and dim.

“You, shadow,” he said to the darkness that straddled his feet, straining itself outward in a lust to rip and tear with its gaping black jaws. “You are mine. You were given to me.”

The hound turned its blazing eyes on Kelley and bowed its massive head.

“I give you a name, and bind you to my service,” Kelley said.

His vision blurred and doubled. He knew he could not hold the circle much longer.

“I name you Murder.”

The shadow-hound shivered over its entire body, streamers of darkness waving above it like pennants in the wind.

“Now serve me,” Kelley gasped, his eyes drooping shut. “Drag this corpse out among them and let them have it.”

It was a gamble. He did not know if the creature had enough solidity to move Samuels'

body. In order to allow it to leave the circle he would have to lower the barrier, and when he did so he would leave himself unprotected from the hacking Saxons. The hound might be able to keep one or two at bay, but the rest would have him.

Concentrating what was left of his consciousness, he opened the circle and saw the ring of flame flicker out of existence. The green ghosts stopped for a moment and stared at him.

“Take this sacrifice,” he told them in Latin, gesturing at the corpse. “Let it be blood payment for the violation of your sleep.”

Murder gripped the corpse by the neck in its massive jaws and backed away from Kelley, pulling the corpse along with it. The ghosts parted to let it pass. For a few seconds, they hesitated. Then one of them turned to Kelley and bowed at the waist, his face grim. His eyes met those of the alchemist, and Kelley felt his blood go chill. He recognized the face of the spirit he had raised from its naked bones. As though of one mind, the ghosts turned and followed the corpse. Murder dropped it and backed toward Kelley, growling softly.

The last thing Kelley saw before he slipped into unconsciousness was the ghosts clustered thickly over the corpse, their flaming swords rising and falling as they hacked at the dead flesh.

They found him where he lay in the ruin of the old fortress the next morning when Johanna reporting him missing from their bed. He was clutching in his fist the gold Saxon coin that Samuels had thrown at him, and he would not release it, or so they told him later when he regained his senses. Mother Cooper nursed him for three days, when it was a matter of keen debate in the village whether he would live or slip into death, but on the morning of the fourth day he opened his eyes, cursed, then asked for water.

Mother Cooper nodded to her daughter, who stood watching from the foot of the bed.

“Didn’t I tell you, child? This ‘un has the Devil in him, and won’t die easy.”

She went to fetch water.

Johanna’s cheeks were streaked with tears and her eyes were red from weeping. There were black shadows beneath them from lack of sleep.

“You need rest, woman,” Kelley said, watching her from his sick bed.

“Mind your health and I’ll mind mine,” she replied hotly, her green eyes flashing with the familiar fire he had seen so often.

Kelley raised himself on one elbow and looked around the room. He heard the sounds of conversation from below, and the clink of plates.

“Where am I?”

“In my old room at the Seven Sisters,” Johanna told him. “My mother thought it would be more peaceful here than at the front of the inn.”

“What happened?” he asked cautiously, watching her from beneath his lowered eyelids.

“That you must tell me,” she said in a tart tone. “What were you doing up at the old fort in the middle of the night anyway?”

“What did you find up there?”

“What do you mean?”

“Damn it, woman, don’t vex me. What was at the top of the hill?”

“We found nothing but you, sprawled on the ground beside a lantern and a spade with your head bloody.” She nodded at the table beside the headboard of the bed, and Kelley saw the Saxon coin. “You had that old coin in your hand, but the Lord alone knows where you got it.”

“Nothing else?” he asked again.

“Nothing,” she said emphatically.

Their conversation ceased when Bess entered with a tray bearing a small pitcher of water and a pewter cup.

Later that day, Kelley managed to climb to the top of the hill and into the fortress ruin. His legs were still weak but at least they held him upright. There was no sign of the skeleton of the Saxon soldier, no corpse, no iron-bound box, and no gold. The holes that Samuels had dug had healed themselves so completely that Kelley was not certain where they had been. Everything looked different in the daylight. Even if he succeeded in locating the place where the box had rested beneath the grass, he was certain it would not be there now. The ghosts of the dead meant to keep what was theirs.

Movement caught the corner of his eye. A pale shadow shifted in the tall grass at the edge of the embankment. It was transparent in the sunlight, but distinct enough for Kelley to make out against the background over which it moved. Kelley waited while Murder slid nearer.

“So we’re together now,” he said.

Part of the shadow became more dense, and two red eyes flashed, then faded. He

nodded.

“So be it, then.”

THE SHEWSTONE

Edward Kelley paused and scowled across the passageway at the panels of the closed door to John Dee's study. Saul had been in there with his learned friend for more than an hour and Kelley didn't like it. Dee might be the most intelligent man in England, but when it came to dealings with people he could be as trusting as a child. From time to time, raised voices murmured through the oak panels. Dee scarcely ever spoke in anger. Whatever that poser Saul had said must have infuriated him.

With a grunt of impatience, he snapped shut the little gilt-edged edition of the *Turba Philosophorum*. Its Latin phrases wouldn't stick in his head this afternoon. His mind was elsewhere. He stood from his seat on the bench in the library and started toward the study.

The abrupt opening of the study door stopped him.

"You're making a mistake, sir, mark my words." Saul said back into the room in a strained voice that always sounded to Kelley as thin and bloodless as the man who made it.

The alchemist glared at Saul's scrawny shoulders. Before Kelley's arrival at Dee's house in Mortlake, Saul had served Dee as his crystal skryer, a job Kelley had taken from him at Dee's insistence with some reluctance. Kelley did not enjoy communicating with spirits. In part it was because he did not trust their motives, and truth be told, in part it was because they frightened him. Saul had never forgiven Kelley for depriving him of his employment.

"I've said what I intend to say on this matter, Barnabas," Dee stated in a firm tone that asked for no reply.

Saul's bony back stiffened. He stepped across the threshold from the rush mats on the study floor to the flagstones of the corridor and shut the door none too gently. His watery

blue eyes met Kelley's flint-cold stare. A false smile flickered to life on his ferret-like face.

"A good afternoon to you, sirrah alchemist. I knowed not ye were in the house or I would have paid my respects."

"Small matter," Kelley told him. "We need no formality between us, sirrah. We know each other too well."

"Right enough you are," Saul sneered. "You gulled me out of my living with your grand talk of the red powder and the stone, and your feigning of the sight."

"You are one to talk of feigning," Kelley said. "You led my master a merry chase around the roses."

"My master, not yours. What do you town folk know of our ways? I've heard all about you, crop-ears. Don't think you're fooling none in these parts. We won't be needing any of your false title deeds or your debased coins in Mortlake."

Reflexively, Kelley reached for the hilt of his dirk. His fingers closed on air. Out of deference for Jane Dee, he usually wore no weapons inside the house. Just as well for Saul, he thought. He stepped forward and grabbed the seer by the collar of his jacket. Saul let out a squawk and struggled to twist free. He might as well have been a chicken in the jaws of a wolf.

Dee's hired man, Joseph Gifford, opened the front door of the house with a wide grin that showed the gap between his teeth. Barnabas Saul had not made any friends while he was serving Dee as skryer. He was a former lay preacher known locally as a bearer of malicious tales and a man who was not to be trusted.

Kelley regretted that the entrance to Dee's family home had but a single step down which to throw Saul, but he took some satisfaction that it had rained in the morning. The sputtering and curses of the mud-caked scarecrow could still be heard as he rode his sorry nag between the oaks that lined the bend in the lane.

"That was worth seeing," Joseph said, still grinning.

“He won’t be back,” Kelley told the servant. “Your master warned him away.”

The smile slipped from Joseph’s rosy cheeks.

“I wouldn’t be too sure, sir. That’s a right nasty piece of work you threw into the mud. If I was you, I’d watch my back when passing through the village after dark.”

“It’s that way, is it?”

Joseph nodded.

“Nothing to your face, mind. Always behind your back. But even so, Saul is a bad one to cross.”

“So am I,” Kelley said with a glitter in his dark eyes.

It was the following morning, when Kelley met with Dee for their regular skrying session with the angels of Enoch, that Dee discovered his principal shewstone missing from its accustomed place in the French cabinet that occupied the corner by the fireplace. With Kelley's help he searched the entire study. There was no need to look elsewhere in the house since the crystal globe never left that room, which Dee kept locked when he was not using it. Indeed, apart from Kelley, the wives of the two men were the only other persons who regularly saw it exposed to the light.

And Barnabas Saul, Dee reflected. A month ago he had asked Saul for his opinion on the occult qualities of the stone, which had appeared in so mysterious and unnatural a manner.

"You should never have let him see it," Kelley rumbled, reading Dee's thoughts from the other man's thoughtful expression.

Dee pulled on his long, silver beard meditatively, his pale brown eyes staring into the distance.

"He is an experienced seer, Edward. I know you don't like the man ..."

"I hate his guts," Kelley corrected.

"... but he has practical knowledge of the art. I needed to learn if he sensed any demonic taint on the stone."

"It's no more devilish than anything else we do," Kelley muttered darkly from his hands and knees.

He put his bearded cheek on a rush mat and peered into the shadows under the cabinet between its carved cherry-wood legs. The smell of soil reached his nose. Dee's

ancestral house was old, and at the time it was built, it had not been considered necessary for the rooms on the lower level to have wooden floors. The woven rush mats covering the densely packed clay were renewed every few years.

Some months ago, the skrying stone had suddenly appeared on the floor of the study, resting on one of the mats in the shadows near the outer wall. Neither man had put it there. When Dee questioned the servants, it was evident they knew nothing about it. Neither did Jane or Johanna. The angels asserted that they had given it to Dee to further his communications with them. Dee accepted it as one of their miracles. Who was he to judge what the angels of God could or could not do? Kelley had been less trusting, but no hint of how the stone had been conveyed into the study, or where it originated, was ever forthcoming.

“He must have shoved it under his jacket when your back was turned,” Kelley said, rising.

Dee nodded. The crystal was large for a skrying stone of its kind, about the size of an apple, but Saul might easily have slipped it into an inner pocket in his tattered jacket.

“When I asked him about the stone, he said it had little worth. He tried to buy it.”

“Did he, now,” Kelley said. “How much?”

“He started at two crowns and finished at five.”

“Where would a rat like Saul get five crowns?”

“Indeed.” Dee opened the drawer of his desk and took out an ovoid crystal the size and shape of a hen’s egg. “We’ll use the small stone today, Edward.”

“Shouldn’t I get after Saul and take back what he stole?”

“In good time. The work cannot be lightly set aside.”

Snorting his displeasure, Kelley seated himself before the small skrying table Dee had recently caused to be constructed according to the instructions of the angels. He cleared his mind while Dee positioned the small crystal in the centre of the cloth that covered

the table, and retired to his oratory to pray. The bulge of the circular wax seal of truth under the cloth showed beneath the wooden eggcup that held the crystal – the crystal was too small for the golden frame that usually held Dee’s principal shewstone.

After a time, Dee returned from the adjoining alcove and sat at his desk. He opened his journal and readied his quill pen, then nodded to Kelley.

The alchemist gazed with unfocused dark eyes into the gleaming, clouded depths of the crystal egg, illuminated inwardly by the clear morning light from the window. He let his emotions slip away. Only when engaged in skrying was he able to set his passions aside for a time. It was as though the storm that constantly raged in his heart grew suddenly calm. Clouds of grey swirled in the depths of the small crystal. Kelley had used it before with good results, but this morning the veil refused to lift. Instead, it became darker, and the light seemed to go out of the stone. After a dozen minutes of futile trying, Kelley shook his head and looked at Dee.

“It’s no good. They aren’t coming.”

Dee seemed outwardly unperturbed, but Kelley knew his friend well enough not to be deceived. The failure in the skrying routine, so regularly fulfilled each Monday morning, troubled the scholar more than the theft of the shewstone.

“Try again,” Dee murmured.

Kelley did not argue. He bent his head over the table and opened his thoughts, then held them open, like the door of an inn inviting the entry of wayfarers. Minutes passed. The occasional click of the wall paneling and crack of the ceiling beams as Jane Dee and the servants moved around on the floor above their heads seemed loud in the lengthening silence.

“I tell you, they’re not –”

The slam of a book as it fell onto its side in a wall shelf cut Kelley’s protest short. The iron poker tinkled as it shifted slightly in its upright stand on the hearth. Kelley turned his head slowly from the fireplace to the French cabinet, the door of which swung open by some invisible hand.

“Madimi comes,” he said in a gruff voice. “What are you playing at, girl?”

Dee glanced in the direction of the cabinet, but as usual he saw nothing. The gift of second sight was not his gift. His talents lay elsewhere, in mathematics and logic, in astrology and alchemy.

“Her green dress glows as if lit by the sun,” Kelley murmured, following the invisible spirit with his eyes. “Now she stands by the window.”

“Madimi, good welcome to you, my child,” Dee said toward blank space in front of the window. “Why will the veil within the crystal not lift?”

Kelley saw the little girl of some seven years smile sweetly at Dee. The age of the spirit was variable. Sometimes she came as an adult, but more usually as a child. Her blond hair hanging in curls to her shoulders seemed like spun gold, but her beautiful face was unnaturally pale.

“When we gave you the new stone, it took the place of all the others,” she said.

Kelley repeated her words aloud for Dee, who wrote them down.

“The stone you sent to me has been stolen,” Dee told her.

“We know. That is why I have been sent today.”

“Have you some new instruction for us?” Dee asked when Kelley relayed her words.

“No, only a warning, which you will heed if you are wise, as I know you to be.”

Dee glanced at Kelley as the alchemist spoke Madimi’s words. Sometimes it appeared that his friend was possessed, so rapt was his attention, and his voice changed to echo the intonations of whichever spirit spoke through him.

“Convey your warning, child.”

“My Mother, who knows all things, has sent me here to tell you that you must recover the stone with haste, lest the crown of gold be cast down into the mud, and a crown of

thorns pressed into its place.”

Dee’s heart leapt in his chest, but he controlled his voice.

“What mean you by these cryptic words? What crown of gold? What crown of thorns?”

“She dances,” Kelley said. “Now she bows deeply from the waist. I hear the music of lutes.”

Dee controlled his impatience. Where spirits were concerned, it was futile to demand responses. Madimi came as a child, and had the simplicity of a child.

“You dance prettily,” he said. “But what mean you by this bow?”

“The stone is more than you know it to be,” Kelley murmured. “We gave it to you to keep safe for a day that is not yet come. The fire that lies sleeping in the heart of it is not yours to kindle, for if it be quickened before its time, it will bring destruction upon the earth. What you use as a mirror is the shining blade of a sharp sword that cuts all who touch it, if it be once unsheathed.”

These words did not come as a complete surprise to Dee. He had suspected that the shewstone was more than it seemed. It was for that reason that he had sought Saul’s opinion about it.

“Madimi, what must we do?”

“She listens,” Kelley said, staring at the window. “She nods her head. She speaks. Find the stone. Bring it back. Keep it safe. Hurry, for there is little time.”

Barnabas Saul lived in the farmlands on the opposite side of the village of Mortlake from Dee's riverside house, some distance removed from his nearest neighbour. This suited both Saul and the villagers, between whom there was mutual dislike. His home was a dilapidated cottage with a sagging roof badly in need of new thatching. A copse of young oaks behind the cottage lent it a certain charm, at least until the approaching visitor drew near enough to smell it. The only ground around the cottage not choked with weeds was a small garden in front of the door in which grew straggled rows of bug-eaten turnips and beets. At the rear, three chickens scratched and clucked in the yard of a henhouse. A large shed served as a stable for Saul's solitary horse.

Kelley approached the cottage with the setting sun at his back, using the yew hedge that bordered a nearby field of oats as a screen. He stopped and crouched behind the style that gave passage through a notch in the hedge, studying the shuttered windows on either side of the door to Saul's modest dwelling. There was no sign of life, but through the open doors of the shed he could see the swishing tail of the seer's old nag, its bony shanks almost as thin as those of its master. Tormenting flies made the muscles on its haunches twitch.

Crossing the style noiselessly, Kelley crept nearer the cottage at the side to avoid arousing the placid hens in the yard behind it. He paused to look about. No one watched him from the deserted fields. It was possible that Saul was spying on him through a crack in one of the shutters, but if so it could not be helped. Saul did not own a dog. So much the worse for him, Kelley thought with a tight grin that pulled the lips from his clenched teeth.

A low voice emanated through the wall. Kelley moved around the front corner of the cottage and put his ear close to the shutters of the nearest window. He recognized Saul's thin croak. At irregular intervals the half-intelligible words were interspersed with faint metallic clinks.

Kelley stepped on the toes of his boots around the rear corner of the cottage. The chickens make clucking noises and moved away from him to the far side of their enclosure. The back of the cottage had a single small window, unshuttered. He tried the wooden latch of the door, and was not surprised to find it barred. Saul was not the most trusting soul in Christendom. Unsheathing his dirk, he slid its blade into the wide crack between the door and its frame and felt for the bar, then lifted it out of its bracket and eased the door open far enough to reach through and unhook the wooden bar from the opposite bracket at the hinge of the door.

It was dark as pitch inside. Heat radiated from the bricks of the oven, though the supper fire had gone out. His nose wrinkled against the sour odour of onions and grease. He slipped into the kitchen and closed the door at his back. A dirty plate with a knife across it occupied the table beside an empty tankard.

Saul was still murmuring in the front room. No second voice answered him. Kelley crossed the strewn straw and leaned near the crack in the door that divided the front room from the kitchen. The yellow glow of a candle on a desk against the wall illuminated Saul sitting in his shirtsleeves, his hunched back to the kitchen door. The room held scant else, only a narrow cot, a trunk in the corner, a wash stand with a tin basin, and a tall cabinet Kelley took to be a sort of wardrobe.

“More where this came from, I judge,” Saul murmured to himself with a dry chuckle.

He opened a small casket on the desk and transferred into it something that caught the candlelight with a silvery flash. The music of falling coins reached the ear of the alchemist. Shutting the lid with a snap, Saul picked up a parchment from the desk and held it near the candle. He tilted it to catch the light.

Kelley kicked the door open with his heel. It rebounded from the wall with a sound like thunder and he caught it in his hand. Saul started from his chair, knocking it over backward and very nearly tumbling over it in his surprise. He clutched the parchment to his chest with both hands as though to protect it, or to hide it.

Smiling grimly, Kelley stepped through the door, the broad shoulders of his black cloak almost brushing the opening on each side.

“You!” Saul squawked, backing away. “What do you want here?”

“You know,” Kelley rumbled.

Saul glanced quickly at the casket on the desk and grabbed it up.

“Do you come to rob me? Thief! At last your true colour shows itself.”

“You dare to call me thief?” Kelley came forward, his hands reflexively clenching and opening.

“This is my house,” Saul said. He summoned what dignity he could and straightened his back. “You force your way in, what else can you be?”

“Where is it?”

“Where is what? Explain yourself, sirrah!”

Kelley struck Saul in the side of the head with the back of his left hand. The casket flew from his grasp. A scattering of coins littered the straw of the floor and the blankets of the unmade bed. Saul cowered in the corner by the chest, still clutching the parchment. With a casual stride, Kelley went to each window and threw open the shutters, then stood for a moment breathing the fresh air into his lungs. The red glow of the setting sun filled the room and revealed its squalor in harsh detail.

“Tell me where it is and save yourself a worse beating than I already intend to give you,” he said. No one was visible in the fields that lined the horizon.

Saul did not admit to the theft at once, of course. Kelley had not expected him to do so. It gave him no great pleasure to beat the whining little scarecrow of a man. He forced himself to do what John Dee would never have done. Dee would have found another way to coerce Saul into admitting the truth, a way that did not involve violence. But that was Dee, and the alchemist had no inclination to weary his brain with tricks when the fist would accomplish the same purpose more quickly.

“I sold it,” Saul shrieked at last. “Don’t hit me again, you’re killing me, I sold it, I sold it.”

Kelley lowered his arm and shook the scrawny seer by the dirty collar of his shirt.

“Who? Be quick.”

Saul flinched away from the fury in the alchemist’s dark face and blinked through swollen eyelids. He wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

A gentleman,” he murmured through broken lips. “He never told me his name.”

With a roar Kelley clenched his bloodstained fist.

“It’s true, I swear,” Saul babbled. “He never told me his name. He came around here asking questions about John Dee and the work I did for him, and did I know anything about the crystal stones Dee used? He knew about the big stone! He wanted me to buy it for him, said he would double whatever price Dee asked for it.”

This made Kelley pause in thought.

“How could he know about the shewstone?”

“Maybe I talked about it in the Black Swan once,” Saul said with an apologetic shrug of his narrow shoulders. “You know how it is. Ale loosens the tongue.”

“Is this nobleman staying at the inn?”

Saul blinked stupidly in thought.

“He must be, then. I spied him around the village this past fortnight.”

Kelley’s dark eyes narrowed.

“What does he look like?”

“Tall, he’s a tall man, almost as tall as Master Dee himself, and his hair is long on his shoulders and black as a raven’s wing. He wears a scant beard that scarce covers his chin, and his cheek is white as parchment.”

The last word drew Kelley's attention to the wrinkled sheet in Saul's grasp. He slapped the seer in the side of the head until Saul released it, and then took it to a window to smooth it out. His eyes widened with surprise. Leaving Saul behind him to curse as he scabbled for silver coins in the straw, he flipped the bar on the front door contemptuously aside and went out into the gathering twilight.

Dee studied the parchment spread on the surface of his desk by the light of his best lamp while Kelley paced the floor on the opposite side of the room.

“He was gone when I went to the inn. He must have left by horse for London as soon as he got the stone.”

“How long was he here?” Dee murmured as he read again the elegantly flowing Latin hand of the letter.

It bore no signature, but only a seal in red wax in the lower corner. Of course. A signature could be forged, but this seal could not. Its presence on the cryptic communication attested to its importance.

“Nigh on three week,” Kelley muttered, staring into the embers in the fireplace.

“It wasn’t Saul’s loose tongue in the Black Swan that prompted him to seek the stone,” Dee said. “He knew what he wanted when he came to Mortlake. Saul merely presented the easiest avenue to his purpose.”

“How could anyone beyond the bounds of Mortlake know about the stone?”

“It was my carelessness, I fear,” Dee said. “Do you remember a month or so past when the Queen stopped here on her return to Hampton Court from her tour of the south?”

“You told me of it,” Kelley said. “I was not here then, remember?”

“Yes, I remember. You took Johanna back to Chipping Norton to visit with her mother.”

“That went well,” Kelley reflected, irony in his voice. “Her brother tried to kill me with a dagger.”

“Be that as it may, the Queen came, and I may have acted with imprudence when I showed her my principal shewstone. We were not alone. Several of her courtiers and ladies-in-waiting were present.”

“What do you make of this, then?” Kelley asked, gesturing at the parchment.

Dee picked it up and held it close. His eyes were still quite good, but the light from the lamp guttered.

“There is no question about the seal. It is authentic.”

“No, I mean what do you make of the writing?”

The beautifully penned script was in Latin. Dee translated it aloud into English as he read it.

“To the Earl of Kedwick, this writing and this seal shall constitute your absolute authority to acquire the object formerly agreed upon for any price not to exceed one hundred English silver crowns, and by any means expedient, with my full protection and approval, absolving you of any and all acts you may deem needful in pursuit of this purpose. The need is urgent, the purpose just in the sight of our Lord, to whom we are both humble servants of His Order ranked at war with the Adversary. The way of deception is the path of attainment. Writ this third day of the month of April at our town house in Edinburgh, the moon in her waning crescent and Saturn rising.”

“Do you recognize the symbol?”

Dee frowned as he studied the mark. He had never before seen it on a letter of communication, least of all on a letter of such exalted origin, but the design was familiar to him from his occult studies. He traced the shape of the inverted crescent, cut through with a vertical V. It had been scratched into the parchment with hard, bold strokes.

“It is a society of great obscurity – so much so that not even the name is known outside its ranks. The V is said to represent the face and horns of the black goat, and the points of the crescent its depending ears. There are five points in the symbol, one each for the two horns, two ears, and chin whiskers of the goat.”

Kelley stared at Dee, black eyes blazing.

“A sign of the Devil.”

“So it is said.”

“But the man who wrote this is reputed to be the most godly in all Christendom. This seal makes him out as a hypocrite and a liar.”

“Only to those who know its true meaning, and they are few in number and could never prove their allegations. See how he refers to our Lord as the Adversary, and to the Dark Prince as Lord.”

“They also say he is cunning in statecraft, but a base coward withal.”

Dee nodded, running his finger over the rust-coloured wax seal.

“Tomorrow I go on the river to Hampton Court. The Queen must be informed. We will need her authority, should it become necessary to use force against this earl and his master to recover that which rightfully belongs with us, and with the angels.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Ride to London. This agent took the stone from Mortlake by horse, and may have stopped on the way to rest or for some other purpose. Learn what you can at the road houses, and try to locate where he is staying in the town. I will find out what I can at court. We must make haste, for I fear our quarry means to sail for Scotland on the first tide that offers.”

Embers clinked in the fire, sending up a shower of sparks that made a kind of chuckling sound as they rose up the chimney. Both men started visibly.

“Let Murder go with you,” Dee added. “For I fear the danger is great.”

Kelley looked over at the corner of the study, where a dark shadow stirred itself and swirled in a circle three times before settling to the reed mats once again. Only he among Dee’s household could see the shadow, although others felt a chill on their legs

that was like the touch of a winter draft when they walked through it by chance.

“I have little love for the creature,” Kelley said.

A faint growl came from the corner.

“Nor it for you, I suspect,” Dee said. “Even so, it is sworn to guard you, so take it with you to London.”

“It is the seal of my cousin’s crippled cub,” Elizabeth said with a curl of contempt on her lips. “I would know it anywhere.”

“There is no possibility of forgery, my Queen?”

“It’s his damned seal!”

She threw the parchment to the floor and stalked across the inlaid parquet hardwood of the small private audience chamber. Her lord high treasurer and chief advisor, William Cecil, Baron Burghley, bent and picked it up, grunting with effort as he straightened his back. He might be only seven years older than Dee, but the years had not dealt kindly with his joints.

Cecil’s sharp grey glance met Dee’s thoughtful gaze. The statesman struck a pose with fists on his hips, the ample breast of his jewelled silk doublet thrown forward, his heavy nose plum-coloured with displeasure.

“What makes you so certain there is a threat to the crown? It says nothing of a threat here. Mayhap the boy wants the stone as a plaything.”

He waited impatiently for Dee’s answer. Dee smiled with thin lips at Cecil’s bluff figure. It was Dee’s habit never to answer in haste, but to pause in thought before responding.

“It has been revealed to me that the stone holds both a higher purpose and a higher power.”

“Well – don’t torment us with curiosity,” the Queen said. “What is its power?”

“The full measure of it, I do not pretend to fathom, Majesty, but in skilled hands it might

be possible to use it as a window to peer into the council chambers of state.”

Storm clouds gathered beneath the single seed pearl that bedecked Elizabeth’s high brow.

“Do you mean *my* council chamber?”

“I fear that I do, your Majesty.”

“Have you been using this curious stone to watch the privy doings of the court?” Cecil demanded.

“No, William,” Dee said with a sigh. “It never offered such a purpose in my use, nor did I seek to bend it to so an unlawful a function.”

“Is that the extent of its danger?” Cecil asked.

“I fear, I very much fear from what the angels have spoken to me, that in the hands of an adept with the right knowledge of its use, it might be twisted to unfold secrets of state, and perhaps more.”

“More?”

Elizabeth stalked to the window and gazed out through the rippled glass of the diamond panes. Rivulets of rain trickled down the exterior. The day had started fine, but by the time Dee debarked at the river landing place at Hampton Court, the rain has begun to fall in intermittent torrents. Dee wondered how he could express his concerns without creating an alarm that might lead to imprudent measures. He needed the shewstone in his work with the angels. Yet if Elizabeth guessed its full threat, she might decide to order it locked away, or even destroyed.

“The stone was given to me, and to me alone, Majesty, and in my hands it has proven a source of spiritual enlightenment, but in the hands of a member of this nameless order, that has knowledge given to it from Satan himself, who knows how that radiance may be shadowed and distorted?”

“I cannot command that the Earl of Kedwick be taken into custody,” the Queen said,

facing Dee squarely.

“I understand that, Majesty.”

“He has the protection of the Scottish crown, and he is here on diplomatic affairs of the highest order,” Cecil expanded on the theme. “To arrest him on the charge that he has stolen a magic stone would be, would be ...” He struggled for the right word.

“Absurd?” Dee offered.

“Offensive,” Cecil said with a scowl. “The diplomatic repercussions would be disastrous.”

“We know more of young James’s dealings than you think, Master Dee,” the Queen said, arms folded in anger. “He hides his evil behind a veil of sanctity, and pretends to be a saint, but it is all pose. There are even a few who say his left foot is twisted in the shape of a hoof, a mark given him by the Devil as a sign of favour. True it is he cannot walk easily without aid.”

Her clear eyes narrowed with determination.

“He seeks my throne, I know it. He has never forgiven me for imprisoning his mother – not that he has any love for her, but he views it as an affront. He will have my very life if ever I am foolish enough to put it into his grasp.”

She turned decisively to Lord Burghley.

“Tell Walsingham to use his spies to locate the Earl of Kedwick, and when he has done so, inform Master Dee of his location.”

Cecil bowed without protest and withdrew to give the orders.

“There is much you have left unsaid,” she told Dee with a thin smile.

“Majesty, I have revealed to you all I know ...”

“But not all you surmise.” She cut him off with a wave of her hand. “No matter. You are

my eyes in the secret places of this world. I trust your judgment alike in matters angelic and demonic. Find your stone. Do what you must to recover it. You have my protection.”

Let that be enough, Dee thought. But he merely bowed and said nothing.

The thing of darkness followed down the rain-washed cobbles of the narrow Bankside street close at Kelley's heels like a dog, but it was not a dog. It was a familiar spirit drawn from another world by the magic of Johanna's mother, Anne Cooper, who was reputed by some to be the most powerful witch in all of England, at least in her own village of Chipping Norton. While he was visiting his wife's birthplace in the spring of the year at Johanna's insistence, Mother Cooper had bound the shadow-fiend to him in an act of malicious caprice, ostensibly to guard him from harm, but as he believed, in actuality to plague his peace of mind.

He kept this view to himself – Johanna always became furious when he criticized her family, and her anger was nothing to invite without cause. In their quickness of temper, he and his flame-haired wife were evenly matched. Whereas Kelley's outbursts of irritation would have cowed most women to timid silence, they only served to wet Johanna's instincts for combat.

Not for the first time, he wondered why he had allowed the Enochian angels to persuade him into marriage. He had been perfectly happy as a single man, free to come and go as he pleased, free to tie his hose to the bedpost if that took his fancy, but the angels would not let him be free. They had convinced Dee that he must be joined with a woman in marriage before their work could continue, and Kelley had reluctantly sought out his past lover of years ago and proposed. Much to his surprise she had accepted the match at once. He had not really expected her to say 'yes' to his suit. Arrangements for the wedding were swept out of his hands by the women at Mortlake, and he found himself propelled like a ball from a cannon into a state of matrimony.

Dee had been most unsympathetic. Indeed, the scholar almost seemed to derive a wry amusement from his friend's predicament. Now if only his wife were as lovely and as gracious as Jane Dee, Kelley reflected, he would not mind so much being bound in matrimonial service –

A great hound with a bristling black ridge along its neck and spine that was like the ridge on a wild boar thrust its head from the mouth of an alley and began to bay at Kelley as he walked past. It had an ugly canker on the side of its jaw that dripped pus. He cursed the cur and kept on, but the beast followed him snapping at his heels. Kelley stopped, aware that the dog was attracting attention. He would have kicked it, were there not the risk of spraying pus into his face.

The shadow, visible only to Kelley, slid across the cobbles toward the hound. When it was within two paces of the raucous beast, the hound abruptly fell silent. It whimpered and looked around in confusion, then cowered and edged backwards into the alley. The shadow seemed to gather its waving streamers of darkness as it moved after the cur.

“Murder!” Kelley barked.

The shadow halted reluctantly, then resumed its pursuit of its master. It sometimes obeyed Kelley’s commands and sometimes ignored them.

Kelley found the sign of the Red Bear through windblown sheets of rain. The lodging house he sought was three doors away from the tavern on the left. He recognized it from the description that had been supplied by Walsingham’s spy – an ancient three-level timber structure beneath a steeply peaked roof of rough-split grey shingles, some as thick as a brick on their ends. The windows boasted fretted wooden shutters but no glass. It was an unlikely address on Bankside for a favourite dandy of the Scottish royal court.

The spy had reported to Walsingham that Kedwick was keeping out of sight while he awaited the departure of the trading ship *Regret* for Edinburgh. The nobleman was concealed with uncommon care, and the spy had located his hiding place only just in time – the ship was due to embark on the first tide of the morrow. Upon learning the news, John Dee had dispatched a royal messenger to Kelley, ordering him to retrieve the stone. Dee remained at Hampton Court to learn more of Kedwick’s recent affairs.

“It’s just you and me, demon,” Kelley muttered under his breath as he glanced back at the shifting patch of shadow.

It seemed to quicken at his words. He wondered idly how it could hear without ears.

The thing was not always with him. Days might pass with nary a glimpse of it, and then without warning, there it was, like the memory of some past sin. At times when it came, it was so pale he could barely see it, even in bright sunlight, and he almost forgot that it was with him, but other times it stood out clearly. It was uncommonly dense this afternoon, with a thickness that resembled a cloud of ink in water.

He noticed an old woman with a basket on her arm, shawl hugged around her head against the rain. She stood staring at him across the narrow street.

“Talking to my dog,” he said, thumbing the air behind him.

She looked where he pointed, squinted, then looked back at Kelley with suspicion. He stuck his tongue out the corner of his mouth, closed one eye, and twisted his head at a grotesque angle. A frown darkened the deep lines of her face, and she huffed, spat in the gutter, and continued on her way.

“Nosey baggage,” he murmured.

The outer door was unbarred. It opened onto a narrow hall with a stairwell. He closed it quietly behind him – a door would not keep Murder out. Kelley only wished it were so easy to exclude the demonic familiar from his life. Dim grey light filtered through a wicker screen above the entrance, revealing the worn floorboards. An empty chair stood with the rat-gnawed spools of its back against the wall next to an open door. Kelley stepped past it with care, but saw no sign of life within the room apart from a sleeping ginger cat on a cold hearth.

The spy had learned that Kedwick had gone to ground on the third floor of the tenement two days earlier. If the nobleman felt the need to conceal himself, Kelley reflected, he must suspect that he was being sought out and might be difficult to surprise. There was no way to know if he was alone, or what weapons he might keep near, or even if he was presently within his room, other than to go upstairs and look.

The narrow flights of stairs groaned like the sheeted dead at each step. A bearded old man he glimpsed through an open doorway on the second level as he passed regarded him with disinterest. According to the spy, Kedwick’s door was at the end of the third floor hallway. Kelley paused at the top of the stairs to listen. No sounds reached his keen ears, other than a murmur of conversation from the floor below.

So little light seeped through the regular holes of the shutters in the window at his back, the upper corridor lay under a mantle of almost complete darkness. A mound of wax in a wall bracket showed where a candle sometimes burned, but it would not have occurred to the owner of the house to burn a candle during the day, even though there was not a penny's worth of difference between day and night in this pestilential sty with all the doors of the rooms shut, as they were now.

He advanced with cautious steps, wincing each time the floorboards spoke. He tried walking close to a wall – it made no difference. The corridor was so narrow, his broad shoulders almost brushed the walls on either side. Little chance of anyone rushing past him to escape. With caution, he laid his ear against the planks of the door at the end. The squeak of a mouse came from the other side, nothing more.

None of the rooms had locks. It seemed the house depended on the honour of its tenants, at least while they were out of their rooms and their doors remained unbarred. The door opened when he lifted the latch and pressed against it. Light streamed from the chamber, making Kelley squint. He touched his fingers to the hilt of his dirk and entered.

As he had expected from the silence, the room was empty. One of the shutters on the window hung open, allowing the slanting afternoon rain to form a puddle on the warped floorboards. The falling drops pattered softly against the wood. He shut the door behind him and began to search for the stone.

After five minutes, he straightened with a curse. The straw-filled bag of a mattress lay twisted on the floor by the bed box, its cover slashed and its innards strewn around. A rough trunk in the corner gaped empty. It had taken Kelley seconds to pick the crude brass lock of the trunk, which was nailed to the floor to prevent anyone from carrying it away. The only other furnishings, a wash stand and a small cupboard, held nothing but dust and a few rags. Four bare walls mocked his efforts. He finally admitted to himself that nothing could be concealed in the room. More than this, it did not appear that anyone had stayed in the room for weeks.

Maybe Walsingham's spy had made an error, Kelley thought. He sighed. There was nothing else for it, but to search the other rooms on this floor. He started for the door with a chill heart. Instinct told him he was on a fool's errand.

A creak of the floorboards in the corridor warned him. He had enough time to draw his

dirk before the door slammed open against the wall of the room. Two men with serious expressions entered. Both were dark of hair and eyes. They might have been brothers. It was clear from their manner that they had no interest in talk.

The foremost man reached beneath his rain-drenched cloak. Kelley expected to see a knife drawn forth – there was no space in the small room to effectively wield a sword. Instead, the man produced a long-necked flask of smoky glass and withdrew its cork stopper. A pungent scent filled the air. From his alchemical work Kelley recognized it at once. *Aqua fortis*.

As the man flicked the greenish contents of the flask at him in an expanding crescent of liquid, Kelley tore off his cloak and threw it forward like a shield. The acid splashed against the cloak, splitting on the obstruction, and the cloak fell smoking to the floor. The second man stepped around his comrade and drew forth a similar glass vial. He yanked out its plug and raised it to splash its contents at Kelley, but as he did so the alchemist threw his dirk. The staghorn hilt of the heavy blade shattered the vial. Its evil-smelling contents scattered over the shirt of the second man, though his companion was protected by his cloak. The second man began to scream, the only sound that had issued from either of the intruders. The first man smiled coldly at Kelley and stepped toward him, drawing a dagger as he came.

A black shadow formed itself on the empty air and wrapped around the man's feet, sending him sprawling across the ripped bag of the mattress. He cursed in a thick Scottish accent and began slashing at the shadow, which loomed over his face. Black jaws and teeth condensed from the darkness beneath two glaring eyes of hellfire, and a low rumble filled the room. The man threw up his arm and shrieked. It is likely that the demon would have torn out his throat, but his companion, who had regained some of his composure, kicked with the heel of his boot at the hound's head, which did not quite resemble the head of a large mastiff, nor quite the head of a wolf, either.

The familiar spirit, having become solid enough to bite, was also substantial enough to kick. It let out a kind of yelp and dissolved back into shadow. Before it could reform, the two intruders were running down the stairs with Kelley at their heels. He might have caught them had he not collided with the outraged proprietor of the house, who came striding from the doorway of his room near the front entrance just as Kelley reached him. The man was bald and fat, but not lacking in strength of arm. He held tenaciously to Kelley's legs until the alchemist cursed and kicked him in the throat.

He stopped in the street, looking both ways with the rain on his scowling face. The pair of attackers were gone, in which direction he could not guess. Blaspheming, he returned into the house to retrieve his dirk and cloak, or what remained of it.

John MacHearn, the Earl of Kedwick, moved with long but measured strides through the tall grass of the Greenwich Marshes toward the bank of the Thames. It would not do to draw attention to himself by excessive haste, not when matters had unfolded so well, and were so near their conclusion. His boot slipped in the slick mud and he stifled a curse behind tight lips. The showers had given way to a steady fall of fine drops that saturated the ground and made footing treacherous. It would have been easier to follow the riverside path and embark from the dockside, but far less private, and the fewer Englishmen who saw his face, the better for his purposes.

The boat was where it was supposed to be, waiting his arrival. Two grim-looking seamen hooded in oilcloth sat hunched over the oars, while a steersman stood in the stern, watching his approach. The boat would take him from Greenwich to the *Regret*, at anchor in the estuary of the Thames. She, in turn, would carry him across the waves home to Edinburgh.

He thought of Lord Cecil's broad face, purple with rage when he learned how Walsingham's spies had been duped to waste their time six miles away in Bankside, and allowed himself a faint smile. It was answered by the hooded steersman, who nodded as MacHearn drew near.

"Is all in order?" MacHearn demanded.

"It is," the man responded in a steady voice.

The steersman helped him from the muddy bank into the long boat, which rocked under his weight. One of the rowers steadied it with his oar. He settled himself on a bench facing the steersman, who sat in the stern with his arm over the tiller. Twilight had begun to descend behind the leaden clouds, and the water lapped like oil against the wooden side, its mirror surface marred by droplets of rain. The rowers pushed away from the muddy bank, and the boat drifted into the stream. The two settled down to long,

steady pulls on their oars.

The steersman reached into the back of the boat and drew forth a straw-covered bottle. He pulled the cork with his teeth and passed it to MacHearn.

“Something against the chill of the rain,” he said.

The nobleman smelled the mouth, then upended it. Strong port wine met his tongue. It spread warmth down his throat that expanded in his belly. After a time, he remembered his manners and passed the bottle back to the steersman, who took a long drink from its mouth. For a time they passed the bottle back and forth in silence.

MacHearn reflexively touched his hip beneath his cloak, where hung the stone in its leather pouch. It had not left his person since he had acquired it from that fool in Mortlake. He had been authorized to pay a hundred crowns, and had bought the stone for fifteen. Perhaps he should simply have killed the man and saved the price. No, he reflected, a murder would have attracted official attention. It was better this way. The head of his order would be pleased with how he had handled the affair. All suspicion and chase were in London, and here he was in Greenwich.

A laugh broke from his lips. The steersman cocked his head.

“You are in good spirits,” he observed.

“So is the farmer, when he reaches under the hen and finds a golden egg,” MacHearn said, chuckling.

“The affairs of our order prosper, then,” the steersman said, staring to the side across the water into the gloom.

“Indeed.” MacHearn told him, his good spirits making him more expansive than was his usual custom.

The steersman bent beneath the hood of his cloak to strike tinder alight, then transferred the flame to a tin lantern that hung from a pole.

“We have a long pull ahead,” he said.

“No matter. I would not mind this day if we rowed all the way to Scotland.”

The steersman nodded and eyed MacHearn shrewdly. He glanced past the noblemen as the impassive seamen, then leaned close.

“Have you got the stone?”

MacHearn’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You know of my mission?”

The steersman nodded.

“I would not have said three people in England knew of my charge,” MacHearn told him, eyes narrowed.

“You might have failed,” the steersman said. “But the mission entrusted to us could not be permitted to fail, so others were prepared to act in the event of your —” he paused.

“I understand,” the nobleman responded.

The refined accent of the steersman revealed that he was more than he appeared to be. Nor was his face as weathered or as tanned as might be expected of a common mariner. It did not surprise him that James would send others to act in the event of his failure. Happily for his future prospects in the Scottish royal court, he had not failed. He would be rewarded with the generosity that success always provokes.

“Were you told what it is we carry?” MacHearn murmured.

“Only that it is a stone of the size of an apple, and clear like glass.”

MacHearn met the steersman’s intelligent eyes.

“Not just a stone,” he whispered. “*The* stone, the very stone itself.”

“You mean ...?”

“The very stone Merlin used nigh a thousand years ago, when he skryed the fortunes of kings and the fates of kingdoms.”

The steersman nodded, his grey eyes unfocused in thought.

“Merlin’s stone,” he said to himself.

“The very same,” agreed MacHearn.

“So that is why James wanted it so badly.”

“Indeed,” said MacHearn.

He upended the bottle of port, only to realize that it was empty. With a grunt, he threw it into the sea.

“The throne of Scotland will no more be envasseled to the English whore.”

The corner of the steersman’s eye twitched, but MacHearn failed to notice.

“Scotland will rise again, proud and strong as she was in the past, and we who follow the throne shall be rewarded.”

“So you shall,” said the steersman. “May I see it?”

“What? See it?” MacHearn blinked. The port had affected him more than he had anticipated. “See what?”

“The stone,” the steersman whispered, leaning close. “Will you show it to me? It is the only chance I shall ever get to see it.”

MacHearn nodded. Once James secured Merlin’s shewstone, he would lock it away and few would even know of its existence. The port in his belly, coupled with the success of his mission, made him generous of spirit.

“Aye, just for a moment.”

He fumbled at his cloak, opened it, and untied the drawstring on the pouch at his belt.

“Here it is, the very stone that guided Arthur Pendragon to the throne of all England. And it shall guide our James there as well.”

“A beautiful thing it is, too,” the steersman breathed.

His expression changed, becoming harder. Without warning, he grabbed the shewstone in both hands and hugged it close to his chest, using his arms to shield it.

“Take him!” he barked.

MacHearn grunted and began to reach forward. He felt strong hands on both his arms. As he struggled, the boat rocked from side to side in the waves.

“Settle down, fool,” Dee barked. “You’ll have us in the sea.”

MacHearn began to growl like an animal. Foam flecked his lips. He fought to free his arm and reach the dagger at his waist. The pitching of the boat became more extreme. John Dee glanced around. In the gathering gloom they were out of sight of land. He could not even snatch away the dagger without weakening his grasp on the shewstone, and that he would not do to save his own life.

The boat capsized. All four men fell into the sea. Dee felt the weight of his boots pulling him down and kicked wildly. The thought flashed through his mind that it was a poor moment to wish he had spent more time as a boy, learning how to swim. The icy waters of the Atlantic closed over his head and cut off all sound apart from a kind of low thrumming. He struggled to kick off his boots and realized that it was hopeless – they were far too tight to remove without using his hands. With this realization, his struggle against the water ceased. It was a strange way to end a life, but no stranger than the fate of thousands of English seamen before him. The smooth weight of the shewstone pressed back against his hand in the cradle of his arm.

He felt a touch on his shoulders, and realized that he was being pulled upward through the water toward the surface. His head broke the waves, and he sputtered and coughed up water that had found its way into his throat. Strong hands pulled him over the gunwale of the boat and into its swampy bottom.

The two seamen stood over him in the dim twilight, concern on their rough faces. The lamp has gone when the boat tipped, but by the mercy of God, the boat had righted itself and had shipped only a small amount of water. Of John MacHearn, the Earl of Kedwick, there was no trace. Dee coughed out the last of the wave that had lodged itself in his windpipe, and with care brought his cupped hands near his face. The surface of the shewstone gleamed softly in the thickening gloom. With tender care, he placed it into an inner pocket of his jacket – he had lost his cloak to the sea.

“Many thanks for pulling me from the water,” he told one of the seamen, who were the Queen’s own boatmen.

The man stared at him oddly.

“I’m a poor swimmer at the best of times,” Dee went on. “In these boots I had no chance until you drew me up.”

The two men looked at each other.

“Beggin’ your pardon, sir,” the second man said. “But we didn’t pull you up. We saw you in the water and took you into the boat, but we didn’t pull you up from the sea.”

Dee sat in silence for a few moments. He looked across one side of the boat, then across the other. A light gleamed in the distance. That would be the shore light of Greenwich.

“Let’s go back to England,” he told the seamen.

With grunts of agreement, they found the emergency oars where they were strapped under the benches and set them into the locks.

“Who do you think it was pulled you from the sea?” Kelley asked when Dee had finished his story.

Dee shrugged his slender shoulders.

“Whoever it was, I’m glad they let that Scottish blackguard drown,” the alchemist growled.

“The ways of Providence are mysterious and just,” Dee murmured, staring into the fire.

They sat in the larger parlour at Mortlake. The chill that had settled into Dee’s bones during the tedious row back to Greenwich had long since been dispelled. His thoughts drifted over the events of the day. After getting dry clothes at Greenwich from the house of his friend, Goodman Fern, he had taken a boat to Hampton Court to report to the Queen and her devious lord high treasurer.

“Conceit made Kedwick careless,” Dee told them. “At another time he might have suspected something strange in my appearance or manner, but he was puffed up with the outcome of his mission, and with pleasure at having confounded you, William, by diverting your efforts to apprehend him to Bankside and away from Greenwich.”

Cecil allowed himself a quiet smile of satisfaction.

The shewstone rested on an eggcup in the middle of Elizabeth’s gaming table, in her private drawing room. The three were alone in the chamber. They gazed at the stone in silence for several seconds.

“Is it really the stone the wizard Merlin used to work his magic?” Cecil asked.

“Who can know?” Dee said, tugging thoughtfully on his long white beard. “Such a

crystal is well-nigh eternal. A thousand years would be to it as the passing of a day to us.”

“It does not look dangerous,” Elizabeth observed.

She reached out and touched it, a slight tremor in her hand that was almost imperceptible. Then, more firmly, she laid her fingers on it.

“What will you do with it, Majesty?” Dee tried to keep the anxiousness he felt out of his voice.

She picked the shewstone up from the eggcup and turned it in between her hands, saying nothing for a time. Then, abruptly, she tossed it to Dee. He caught it from reflex rather than by intention.

“You keep it. The stone is yours. The angels gave it to you, not to me, and I would not know what to do with it, anyway. Keep it safe. Use it as it is intended that you should.”

Dee stood and bowed deeply.

“Thank you, your Majesty.”

She nodded, and with the tips of her fingers waved him out of her chamber.

Now he sat at home in Mortlake in front of his own fire, the shewstone locked safely back in his French cabinet behind the locked door of his study. It would be necessary to find a more secure place for it that was unknown to Barnabas Saul.

“If Saul tried to take it again, I’d kill him,” Kelley rumbled, as though reading Dee’s thoughts. “He knows it, too.”

Jane Dee came into the parlour with a wooden platter. On it were bread and cheese, along with two delicate china cups filled with black tea, from which steam arose. She set it on the table between the men and silently withdrew, after smiling at her husband.

“So who pulled you out of the water?” Kelley asked.

“You must ask Madimi the next time you speak with her,” Dee said, and picked up his cup.

NONSUCH HOUSE

Jane Dee stepped out of the milliner's shop and paused on the cobbles, gazing in admiration down the narrow street. Shops for every conceivable purpose lined both sides as far as she could see, their colourful signs dangling close over the heads of those who rode past on horseback or seated in wagons. Most of the signs had no writing on them, which made perfect sense since most of the passers-by who looked at them did not know how to read. They advertised the nature of their trade by means of pictures. The sign above the door through which she had just emerged showed a woman's green hat banded with a blue ribbon. Colourful pennants hanging beside the signs competed for the attention of the customers who thronged what was one of the busiest commercial streets in all of London.

Above the shops, the living quarters of their owners rose for another two or three storeys. Each floor projecting beyond the floor below it, so that at their rooflines a gap of no more than eight feet or so remained to show a thin strip of blue sky. In some places opposite sides of the street were connected by elevated walkways built on massive cross beams, and portions of the street were completely roofed over, so that they were more in the nature of a tunnel than an open thoroughfare.

A rude shout from behind made her step quickly out of the way and press her back against the glass window of the milliner's shop. A man in a cart flicked his reins and set his pony jerking forward across the place she had stood a moment ago. He gave her the eye as he went past but held his tongue. There was scant room to spare between the shop front and the hub of the cart wheel. The crowded street was no more than four yards wide. When two wagons passed each other, which happened frequently, they took all of it, and the pedestrians were compelled to dance out of the way as best they could to avoid getting crushed. Even the nobles in their sedan chairs received no respect of rank. Their muscular bearers scurried aside as quickly as the commoners of the town, roundly cursing the drivers of the wagons as they did so, who paid no more attention to the insults than they did to the flies that pursued their horses.

Johanna Kelley stepped through the shop door and stood beside Jane, staring up and down the street with wide green eyes. From the doorway, her maid Bess peered nervously over her shoulder.

“No one would ever know we are on a bridge,” Johanna said loudly above the babble of voices and the rumble of cart wheels.

“It’s a true wonder, mistress,” Bess said.

Jane mentally agreed with her friend’s chestnut-haired maid. There had been nothing to indicate that they were leaving the dry land of Southwark and crossing over the rushing waters of the Thames, other than the gristly heads of executed criminals extending outward on long, angled pikes from the battlements of Traitor’s Gate, which marked the start of London Bridge. Jane had counted seven heads, each coated in tar to preserve it longer against the predations of the flies and crows. Sometimes there were as many as thirty heads on the pikes.

The husbands of the women, John Dee and Edward Kelley, had gone on across the bridge to London ahead of them, leaving the two friends to linger from shop to shop with Johanna’s maid, whose arms rapidly became laden with various purchases. Jane regretted that she had not brought Joseph, her husband’s servant, along to help Bess carry some of the packages. It was fortunate that they did not need to walk all the way across the bridge. They were only going as far as Nonsuch House, where they hoped to stay the night.

At a confectioner's shop they bought candied apples on sticks and nibbled on them as they continued along the shadowed canyon toward the bright opening that beckoned at its end. Bess juggled her packages in her arms but managed to get her teeth into the sticky coating of her apple. She was fond of sweets, as her round limbs testified.

They emerged onto a sunny open expanse that had an unobstructed view of the river on either side of the bridge. Jane saw that they had come about a quarter of the distance across the Thames. A clean breeze blew away the strong smell of horse manure mingled with cooking odours that they had been breathing between the shop fronts. They stood in a kind of public square that was nine yards wide and twenty yards long, paving stones under their shoes but heavy timbers further on where the roadway of the bridge entered through the arch of a great building with towers at its corners that were surmounted by gilded, onion-shaped domes. The building was four stories tall, and resembled the fine houses Jane had seen lining the canals during her travels through the Netherlands. It was uncommonly ornate for English architecture, with heavy timbers that framed projecting casement windows, and a good deal of what builders liked to call gingerbread – decorative carvings and trim that served no practical function. The building straddled the bridge, projecting several yards beyond its edges on either side. The overall effect was quite handsome.

“Why do they call it Nonsuch House?” Johanna asked around her candy apple.

“I imagine because there is none such like it in the entire world,” Jane said. “John told me that the building was made in the Low Countries and shipped here in pieces, and that no iron spikes at all were used to put it together, only wooden pegs. It's built on the foundation of the old Northern Gate, which was torn down some five or six years past. That's where the heads of criminals used to be impaled on pikes, but now the heads adorn the South Gate, which is called Traitor's Gate on that account. You can see where the drawbridge of the gate used to be – it's still made of timber but it can't be raised anymore.”

They wandered to the railing along the western side of the bridge and stood with dozens of others, gazing up the stream of the Thames at the small boats that rowed and sailed along its length. The larger ships were all on the other side, but could progress no further up the river due to the narrowness of the arches of the bridge, none of which was more than twenty or so feet across.

Jane leaned over the railing and looked down. The green-brown water rushed between the boat-shaped starlings that protected the massive piers of the bridge. The starlings were made of rubble that filled the space between the trunks of great elm trees that had been driven deep into the mud beneath the river. The tidal waters that had been forced up the river several hours earlier rushed between the starlings to escape back to the sea during present ebb tide, creating rapids under the bridge that were almost like small waterfalls, where the level of the water dropped some six feet.

She released the remains of her candy apple over the railing and watched it fall into the river and be instantly swept under the bridge. She turned to go. A hand laid lightly on her arm made her pause. An old woman with a shawl around her shoulders and a basket in the crook of her elbow stared up at her with earnest eyes that were like raisins set amid the wrinkles of her pink cheeks.

“Ain’t you going to stay and watch ‘em shoot the bridge?”

“I beg your pardon?” Jane inquired gently, laying her fingers on the woman’s hand and removing it from her arm.

The old woman nodded her head up the river.

“He’s getting ready to shoot the bridge.”

She followed with her gaze the direction indicated and saw a small boat backing water with its oars to remain in place against the current. In the stern sat what appeared to be a merchant with a box clutched tightly on his knees. His face was a pasty white colour. A young boatman stood behind him with his hand on the tiller of the boat, his expression grim. The two oarsmen had to struggle to hold the boat in place.

The old woman cackled with glee.

“They do say that wise men cross over London Bridge, but only fools cross under it.”

More people gathered at the railing and pressed to see the boat as word spread of its intention. It was the usual custom for boats coming down from up river to unload their fares on the bank. The travelers boarded another boat below the bridge. Only a hardy, or foolhardy, few ventured under it. The merchant must be in a very great hurry indeed, she thought. She turned to move away from the rail.

“Stay and watch, Jane,” Johanna said, her eyes dancing with excitement.

“Och, I can’t bear to look,” Bess said, putting her fingers over her face and peaking out between them.

The steersman of the boat said something that was inaudible to those on the bridge, and the oarsmen set their oars into the water and pulled hard, sending the boat rushing toward the gap between the starlings that lay under the feet of the women. The terror on the face of the seated merchant became more obvious as the boat drew near. In an instant it was swept from sight beneath the bridge. A moan escaped from the watching throng, many of whom rushed to the opposite railing. The women followed them more slowly. Jane’s heart was filled with foreboding, but applause erupted from the crowd, and with relief she saw that the little boat had made the passage under the bridge without capsizing. The white-faced merchant waved a red handkerchief in the air, smiling broadly now that his ordeal was past.

A young flaxen-haired woman in a green dress that was cut very low at the top stood watching Johanna with an odd intensity. When she saw that they were aware of her, she stepped forward and drew forth a small pendant that hung between her breasts. She held it up on its silver chain and showed it to Johanna. Jane saw that it was a small female figure carved from some green stone that might have been jade. Johanna hesitated, then gathered the chain around her own neck and held up a similar pendant, save that hers was made of silver. This display was unobtrusive and took no more than a second.

“Sister,” the strange woman said.

She reached out and brushed Johanna on the left cheek with the backs of the fingers of her right hand, and Johanna mirrored her gesture.

“I came to warn ye,” the other woman said.

“Warn me of what?”

“When I saw ye, I sensed a danger. Beware this night.”

“Beware what?” Jane asked in puzzlement.

“Beware, sister,” the strange woman said to Johanna, ignoring Jane. She moved away toward the tunnel-like mouth of the street.

They watched her pass into the shadows.

“A friend of yours?” Jane asked.

A look passed between Johanna and Bess.

“In a manner of speaking,” Johanna said.

“What do you think she meant?”

The red-haired woman shook her head.

“That I don’t know, but what she said is not to be taken lightly.”

“I’m so relieved that you could come,” Lady Alice Bosingham told Jane as she escorted Jane and Johanna into her drawing room.

“Your letter said that you needed my help urgently,” Jane told her. “I would have come on my own, but it so happened that my husband and Mr. Kelley planned a trip to the town on business, so I accompanied him. I hope my party won’t be too much of an imposition?”

“Not at all, my dear,” Lady Alice said. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am to have you stay with me. Will your two husbands be stopping at Nonsuch as well?”

“Not tonight,” Jane said, answering for Johanna. “They knew their business would keep them past the curfew, so they planned to spend the night at an inn.”

Each evening London Bridge was closed off at both ends, preventing anyone from getting on or off it. This practice made it one of the safest places to live in the entire town, and was one reason why so many shops were located on the bridge. Robberies were almost unknown.

“The men will come tomorrow,” Johanna said.

“They will be very welcome, my dear.”

Lady Alice was a woman some ten years older than Jane, tall and slender, with sand-coloured hair that had only begun to show streaks of grey and a freckled complexion somewhat damaged by the sun. Jane had been introduced to her at Hampton Court prior to her marriage to John Dee, while she was maid-in-waiting to Lady Howard of Effingham. Their relationship had been cordial but not close, and after Jane’s marriage they had lost touch. Jane had been surprised to receive the letter of distress. She had not considered herself the first one Lady Alice would call upon for aid. Even so, she had

not hesitated to reply by swift messenger her willingness to come to Nonsuch House and offer what help she could provide.

They were on the fourth floor of the impressive structure, where Lady Alice had her living chambers. The rooms were not large, but they were exquisitely decorated, if somewhat more sparsely furnished than Jane would have expected, and the view from the side windows overlooking the river was breathtaking.

A slender girl of some fourteen years of age entered bearing a silver tray with a steaming silver vessel and several small glasses. She was modestly dressed in white and wore no powder on her cheeks.

“This is my step-daughter Ruth,” Lady Alice said in introduction.

She told the girl the names of the visitors, and Ruth nodded to each woman, then continued preparing their steaming black drinks, which Jane recognized from her time on the Continent as coffee, a drink that had not yet become popular in England. The girl served them their glasses and withdrew from the room.

“She is a shy little thing,” Lady Alice said, sipping her bitter black drink. “I don’t know where it comes from, her late mother perhaps. I’m not shy, and neither is her father, Lord Bosingham. He’s a soldier, you know.”

Jane knew a good deal more than that, but she merely smiled politely and lowered her gaze to her coffee. She knew that Lady Alice and her second husband were not sleeping in the same bed, or even living in the same house. Lord Bosingham had the reputation of a rake and a drunkard, although by all accounts he was an excellent commander of her Majesty’s troops when sober. At present he was serving in Ireland, which was in the throes of the latest Desmond Rebellion.

“God’s death, this is bitter,” Johanna said, making a wry face.

Lady Alice laughed.

“It is, isn’t it? They say it is an acquired taste, though I confess I haven’t quite acquired it yet myself.”

Jane set her glass down on the table between them.

“You wrote in your letter that you were in danger,” she said. “Can you tell us what threatens your safety?”

“Of course, my dear,” Lady Alice said, setting her own glass aside. “Well, it’s rather delicate. I don’t really know how to begin.”

“You’re with friends,” Johanna prompted her.

“I know that,” Lady Alice said with a smile. She hesitated for several seconds. “To put it briefly, I am being threatened by an evil spectre in the nights.”

“A spectre?” Johanna glanced at Jane. “You mean a ghost?”

“Yes, a ghost, a shade of the dead. It comes at night and threatens harm. I’m at my wit’s end, afraid to be alone, afraid to sleep in my own bed.”

“What is the nature of these threats?”

Lady Alice stood from her chair and paced nervously to the window, where she stood gazing out and wringing her hands.

“It comes in my dreams and shows me things – dreadful things, scenes of warfare and blood in the streets. It carries a sword with which it threatens my neck, and I see it torn apart. When I wake and open my eyes ...”

She stopped and looked aside.

“Yes?” Jane encouraged her. “What else?”

The older woman shuddered.

“No, it’s too horrible. I can’t speak of it.”

Jane caught Johanna’s glance. Something had frightened Lady Alice badly, that was evident. Johanna shook her head slightly.

“Don’t distress yourself now,” Jane said soothingly. “You can speak of it later, when you feel able.”

“Thank you, my dear,” Lady Alice sighed with relief. “I’m sure it means me harm, but why does it hate me, and why hasn’t it used its terrible sword ...?”

She put her hand over her eyes and began to weep. Jane and Johanna stood simultaneously and moved around the table from opposite sides to comfort her. Each took her arm, and they led her back to her chair, and then waited for Lady Alice to compose herself.

“You say this spectre comes to you in your bedchamber at night?”

Lady Alice nodded. She continued to cling to Jane’s hand.

“Then it is obvious what we must do,” Jane said firmly. “I will sleep in your chamber tonight, and witness the ghost. You must sleep in another chamber with Johanna, who will keep you safe. When my husband, John, comes on the morrow, I’m sure he will know how to banish this spectre.”

Jane Dee tried not to succumb to a fit of nerves while she prepared her long dark hair for the bed, gazing at her pale reflection by candlelight in the oval glass on Lady Alice's dressing table. Lady Alice had a fine set of tortoise shell combs and brushes. It was a pleasure to draw them through her hair.

The wall paneling cracked and she flinched on her seat before the mirror, almost dropping the brush. The room was filled with shadows. The fire in the grate had burned down to no more than dull red embers that clinked softly to themselves. It would be a relief to climb into the box of the bed in the corner of the room and draw shut the curtains on its side and footboard. There was a sense of security behind bed curtains, even if it was a false security.

She finished tying up her hair, took the candle to the little table beside the bed, and blew it out. The chill of autumn sent a draft across the floor that curled around her bare feet and ankles. A harvest moon hung in the sky, flooding the room with soft silver through the small, square panes of Belgian window glass. It was nearly full. That meant it would shed its light for most of the night. She wondered how Johanna and Lady Alice were getting along in the bedroom across the hall, and yawned. The walk through Bankside and the shopping had fatigued her more than she had expected. With a slight dizziness, she climbed into the bed and drew the curtains together after her.

Sleep came more swiftly than she anticipated, but it was an uneasy sleep. She seemed to see, as though at a great distance, scenes of violent conflict between armed men. She saw torchlight reflected from swords as their blades rose and fell, heard the faint war cries of men and the screams of women. She realized in the vague way of dreams that the fighting was occurring on London Bridge itself, but the houses and shops along the bridge looked old-fashioned. The scene changed to a street with a large stone in the midst of it. The leader of the mob, or so it appeared to Jane, unsheathed his sword and struck it flat against the stone, then held it high to the cheers and applause of the rabble. He was a wild-looking man with a fierce expression on his face that showed no trace of

mercy. The scene changed again, and showed the Tower of London in the background. The leader of the mob was overseeing the beheading of several nobles dressed in fine robes of a style in fashion a century or more ago. The spurting blood from the neck stumps sickened Jane, but she could not look away.

The dream changed to a great hall, in which a man dressed in robes of state read aloud from a scroll before the same rabble that had committed the atrocities. Jane could not hear his words, but his robes seemed to her educated eye to be the robes of the High Chancellor. The wild leader of the rabble stepped forward and accepted the scroll from the nobleman, but Jane noted that he made no bow of his head. Again the scene changed to a country road. The wild man was fighting for his life against soldiers, who bore him down to the ground and wounded him, but whether to the death Jane could not tell. The dream shifted more quickly this time to an open public square. With a shock Jane realized that it was the square on the bridge in front of Nonsuch House, but in place of Nonsuch there was a stone gatehouse that must have been the North Gate before it was torn down. The corpse – for it surely was a corpse – of the leader of the rabble was tied between four draft horses.

Jane realized what was about to happen and tried to wake herself up, but she could not end the relentless vision. She was compelled to watch both arms and one leg of the corpse torn out by the joints. The soldiers caught the horse dragging the trunk and sheared off the remaining leg with an axe. Before the jeering multitude gathered in the square, they chopped off the dead man's head, painted it with hot tar that was bubbling in a vat over a fire, and raised it aloft on the end of a long pike.

With a smothered cry of revulsion, she was at last able to force herself awake. Her body trembled as from an ague and her sleeping gown was soaked in sweat. She lay with the bed covers clutched around her throat, breathing deeply while her heart thudded in her chest like a blacksmith's hammer. The visions had been so real, more so even than her own memories. It was as if she had stood and watched the events as they happened in front of her.

As the beating of her heart began to slow its pace, Jane became aware of a soft glow between the gap in the bed curtains at the side of the bed. It was more palpable than moonlight and seemed to move as she watched the gap, as though a lamp were being carried across the room. With a trembling hand, she reached out and flicked open one side of the curtain.

The wild man of her dreams stood before the fireplace, his wavering and indistinct body edged in dancing sparks that reminded Jane of nothing so much as the sparks that eat at the edges of a hole burned in a sheet of paper when an ember is applied to it. He glared at her and took a step forward. She found herself paralyzed and wondered if she were really awake, or if she still dreamed. An expression of pain twisted the features of the ghost, and his body seemed to elongate unnaturally as he spread his legs and raised his arms. Abruptly, like the breaking into two of an apple, his limbs were torn from his torso, and all faded to darkness except his severed head, which began to drift toward her while its writhing lips mouthed words that did not reach her ears.

When the ghostly head was near enough to reach out and touch, Jane found enough strength to lurch backward in the bed. Her hand fell on something sticky and wet by the wall. It shifted under her fingers in a sickening way that tore from her throat a series of shrieks.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Jane found the courage to open her eyes. The ghost was gone. The chamber door flew wide to admit Johanna with a candle in a wooden holder, and close behind her a more timid Bess.

“The ghost,” Jane gasped. “It was here.”

Johanna and Bess stood frozen like a stage tableau, staring at her with faces of horror. Jane realized that her right hand was covered to the wrist in clots and smears of blood, and that more of the blood had somehow gotten onto the front of her nightdress and into her hair. She turned to look behind her. Near the corner of the bed beside her pillow lay the pathetic severed head of Ruth Bosingham in a pool of partly dried blood, its eyes staring and its lips frozen in a silent scream.

When John Dee and Edward Kelley arrived at Nonsuch House the following morning, the constable of the bridge was already there with a captain of town guards. They had not yet arrested Jane Dee even though the evidence against her was damning. To her credit, Jane had managed to compose herself, and had with Johanna's help cleaned the blood from her hand and hair, and donned a modest sky-blue morning dress. They huddled together on a settee in the main hall while Bess hovered behind them. Lady Alice Bosingham sat by herself in the corner in a kind of trance, almost unresponsive to what was happening around her.

Dee hurried to his beautiful young wife. He dropped to one knee and seized her hand between his. Her slender fingers felt as cold as ice.

"Jane, are you quite well?"

She blinked at his concern and forced a smile.

"Quite well now, husband. I was not myself for a time, but I am quite well now."

"She's strong," Johanna murmured, rubbing Jane gently on the back of her neck. "She'll soon get her feet under her."

With reluctance, Dee left his wife and made a cursory examination of the two bedrooms that held the corpse. The brooding Edward Kelley trailed after him without speaking. Dee saw that a sheet had been thrown over the headless body of the girl, and another over her severed head, but neither had yet been removed from the house.

The bridge constable, a little man named Potter with a prominent belly who made his living as a merchant, followed at Dee's heels and sputtered his protests.

"You have no business here, sirrah," he concluded emphatically. "This is a matter for

the law, not for scholars of the university.”

Dee turned his attention to Potter while the three stood in Lady Alice’s bed chamber. The intensity in his penetrating amber eyes made the constable stumble back as though struck in the face.

“Do you know who I am?”

The portly little man squared his shoulders.

“Aye, you’ve a reputation in the town, Doctor Dee.”

Dee ignored the emphasis the man placed on the word “reputation” – many credulous commoners believed the rumours that he consorted with spirits, perhaps because those rumours were true.

“Then you know that I am an advisor to the Queen, and that she has often consulted me in criminal matters that concern the security of this realm.”

“This murder is a private matter,” the constable countered. “Since it happened on the bridge, the first murder on the bridge in many years I might add, it falls to me to investigate its circumstances.”

“Can you be sure it has no relevancy to the security of this nation?”

The little man blinked in thought.

“Well, no –”

“Then perhaps you would be wise to delay your actions until you have had an opportunity to hear the results of my investigation.”

The constable was obviously reluctant to relinquish any scrap of his authority, but at last did so on the strength of Dee’s close connection with the Queen. Dee’s favoured position at the royal court was well known, and no person of any rank wished to be a source of irritation to Elizabeth. Dee managed to persuade the man to permit him a few hours to investigate the matter privately before official action was taken.

While the man was whispering in the corner to the guard captain, Dee took the opportunity to step close to Edward Kelley.

“Look around all the rooms. See what you can discover,” he murmured.

Kelley nodded and moved away.

After the constable and the captain departed from Nonsuch House, Dee led Lady Alice into the same small parlour where Jane and Johanna had taken coffee the day before. He shut the door to give the woman a sense of privacy, and stood for a few moments, studying her while stroking his long white beard between his fingers. It was clear from her manner that her mind had been affected by the horror of her step-daughter’s death. He wondered if it was safe to question her, or if dwelling on the events surrounding the incident would unhinge her reason, then decided the matter could not be put off. He sat beside her.

“This must be difficult for you to bear, Lady Alice,” he said in a soothing tone.

She nodded, gazing into the fireplace with unfocused eyes.

“You don’t believe that Jane had anything to do with your step-daughter’s death, do you?”

This caused her to look at him.

“No, of course not,” she said, shaking her head. “Jane is a wonderful girl. I only wish I had never involved her in this nightmare.”

“Can you recount for me what happened when the ghost appeared to you, and precisely what the ghost did?”

Lady Alice gave a surprisingly coherent description of the apparition, in view of her emotional state. Dee listened with concentration.

“It is horrifying when the ghost is torn apart,” she finished. “But the worst is the head. It keeps coming nearer, you see, nearer and nearer, its lips writhing the whole while. I’m sure it must be mouthing blasphemies.”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” Dee agreed. “You say that in your dream, the ghost struck a large stone with its sword?”

She nodded.

“Are you by any chance related to the family of John Kemp, who served as Lord Chancellor during the reign of Henry the Sixth?”

She blinked with surprise.

“Well, yes, I suppose I am. He was my mother’s great uncle, I believe, or great-great uncle. I have no head for these things.”

“Very well. I won’t ask any more questions just now. You must be exhausted.”

He helped her to her feet and led her to the door.

“There is just one other thing that puzzles me,” he said as an afterthought.

She looked up at him and waited.

“Why didn’t you simply move out of Nonsuch House when the ghost began to trouble you?”

She blushed and dropped her eyes.

“It is not something I like to speak about, John, but my husband has cut off my allowance. I live at Nonsuch House on the charity of an old and dear friend who shall remain nameless. I would have left weeks ago, but simply do not have the money to do so.”

“I see, I see,” he said in understanding, patting her shoulder. “We’ll speak no more of it, then.”

He escorted Lady Alice from the parlour, and gestured for Johanna to bring his wife into the small room. The two women sat together while he remained standing.

“Tell me about the ghost, Jane,” he prompted.

He listened to his wife’s account of the apparition. In all substantial respects it was identical to the account of Lady Alice. He questioned her minutely about the appearance of the street in which the ghost had struck the stone with his sword, and the clothing worn by the nobles who were beheaded by the mob at the Tower of London.

“What can it all mean?” Johanna asked in bewilderment.

“The meaning is clear enough,” Dee murmured, half to himself. “What is not so plain is the motive.”

“Well I wish you would explain it to me,” Johanna told him hotly.

Dee smiled at her impatience.

“The ghost is Jack Cade, who led a revolution through London in the year of our Lord one thousand, four hundred and fifty, seeking justice for those wronged by administrators of Henry the Sixth. Cade took his sword and struck the London Stone, that you can still see today if you go to Cannon Street, declaring himself the Lord Mayor of the town. It is a tradition for Lord Mayors of London to do so. He had several prominent nobles who came under his power beheaded in front of the Tower, then set their heads on pikes and pressed their faces together so that they appeared to kiss.”

“A monster,” Jane murmured.

“So frightened was the king of his power that Henry had his Lord Chancellor, John Kemp, grant Cade and his followers a general pardon for their misdeeds. However, a week later when the immediate threat of his peasant army was past, Henry issued a new order seeking the capture of Jack Cade, dead or alive. A price of a thousand crowns was put on his head. He was wounded unto death during his capture, and died in the wagon while on his way back to London, all the while declaring that he had been betrayed by John Kemp. The King ordered his body quartered, and set his tar-covered head up on a pike atop the battlements of North Gate – the gatehouse where Nonsuch House presently stands.”

“I still don’t see why the ghost should haunt Lady Alice with such a vengeance,”

Johanna mused.

“Vengeance is indeed the appropriate word,” Dee said dryly. “She is a descendant on her mother’s side of the Lord Chancellor, John Kemp.”

The women digested this information for a time.

“I thought ghosts were insubstantial beings,” Jane said. “Can a ghost be so strong as to tear off a girl’s head from her shoulders?”

“It is unusual,” Dee agreed. “But I believe I have the answer for that as well.”

They returned to the great hall, where Lady Alice sat gazing into the fireplace. So perfect was her outward composure, it would have been impossible for a chance observer to perceive that she had suffered a tragic loss only a few hours before. Edward Kelley paced the end of the hall restlessly, like a caged animal, a scowl on his face.

“Lady Alice,” Dee said to the seated woman, “I must make a request of you. If you grant it we may learn more regarding this spectre and its motives. In any event, I believe I can tell you how to banish the ghost from your rooms.”

“What is your request?” she asked serenely without looking at him.

“Allow Edward Kelley and myself to spend this coming night in your bedchamber. We will observe the ghost one last time before we take measures to banish it.”

“And what is the manner by which it is to be banished?”

Dee stood in front of the fire. She raised her eyes to his. Kelley stopped pacing.

“As you probably know, Nonsuch House was assembled using only wooden pegs. This is one of its wonders. Not a single nail was driven during the erection of its timber beams.”

Lady Alice waved her hand vaguely.

“I fail to see the relevance –“

“Iron,” Dee said. “Cold iron. There is almost none of it in Nonsuch House. That is why this ghost is so powerful. Iron weakens spectres. Usually when they appear inside a dwelling, they can work no tangible harm because they are surrounded by hundreds of iron nails. Nonsuch House has no nails – none of any significant size, at least.”

“I understand,” Kelley rumbled in his deep voice.

“Well I don’t,” Johanna said.

“We will drive iron spikes into the threshold and window frame of Lady Alice’s bedchamber, and more spikes into the headboard and footboard of her bed.” Dee explained. “This will greatly weaken the ghost, even if it does not banish it altogether.”

“But first you wish to observe it,” Lady Alice said.

“If you would indulge us,” Dee said.

Lady Alice glanced at Jane Dee, who nodded slightly. She shrugged.

“Very well, I shall sleep in another room tonight, and you may do as you wish.”

The hour neared midnight. John Dee and Edward Kelley sat side by side on the edge of Lady Alice's bed in near total darkness. The only light was the dull red glow from the fireplace grate. Both men were fully clothed. Kelley had pulled a small table beside him, on which sat a bottle of port wine and a glass. From time to time he drank from the glass. They had said little since entering the room together and closing the door. The constable of the bridge had returned and gone, and an undertaker had removed the remains of poor Ruth. Lady Alice's maid had changed the bed sheets and blankets.

"Did you notice that the girl's neck was cut?"

"Yes," Dee said.

Kelley topped up his glass from the bottle.

"There's an empty peg in the kitchen."

Dee's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

Kelley scratched his black beard.

"More here than shows on the surface." He belched. "I need a piss."

"The privy is at the end of the hall," Dee murmured.

One of the great advantages of living on London Bridge is that privies could be located out the side of houses, and what fell through their open holes was immediately washed away by the current of the Thames.

Kelley stood. He staggered slightly, as though on board ship. He turned to look at Dee.

“Don’t lose your head while I’m gone.”

“I’ll try to stay intact,” Dee said dryly.

He listened to Kelley’s shuffling tread in the hall. The house was silent as the grave. After a few moments Kelley let out a stifled oath. He stumbled his way backward into the bed chamber, groping in the darkness for the frame of the open door. His dirk gleamed in his hand in the fire glow.

“Put that away,” Dee hissed. “You’ll frighten him.”

“Frighten him?” Kelley rumbled. “The bugger came up through the floor right in front of me.”

He fitted the point of his dirk into its sheath with clumsy fumbings, and backed to the bed, where he resumed his seat beside Dee.

As Dee watched, the air in front of the doorway became misty and seemed to glow brighter than the patch of moonlight that lay across the floorboards. It moved and pulsed, but Dee could discern no details.

“What do you see?” he demanded.

Edward Kelley was an alchemist by avocation, but he also happened to be perhaps the greatest seer England had produced since Merlin. It was for this reason that Dee paid him fifty pounds per annum to act as his crystal skryer. He had never found occasion to regret the expense, even though he was not wealthy. The seer’s gift was more than sufficient compensation for Kelley’s drinking habit and crude sense of humour. Besides which, Dee regarded the alchemist as his closest friend.

“Men are fighting,” Kelley murmured. “Farmers against soldiers. The farmers are winning. There are thousands of them. I see their leader. He’s a mean looking bastard – wouldn’t want him behind me with a knife.”

Kelley related the same scenes that Jane had already described to Dee from her dream.

The body of the ghost coalesced from the darkness, its edges lit by burning sparks that

crawled over it like bright insects. Even Dee with his lack of spirit perception could see it, so strong was the apparition's manifestation. There came a crackling in the air like that sometimes felt during thunder storms, and the faint odour of brimstone. The hairs on the back of Dee's neck lifted. Could it be that Cade ascended from hell itself to put on his mute pantomime? If so, what made the display so compelling a need for the spirit that it required liberty from the underworld?

Contrary to Dee's expectation, the ghost did not tear itself apart, but pointed at a writing desk in the corner of the room. Dee stood and approached the ghost.

"Take care, John," Kelley cautioned. There was no slur of wine in his voice. The sight of the ghost had sobered him.

Dee stood facing the ghost. No more than a yard of floorboard separated them. He felt its power through his body, in his muscles, his nerves, his very bones. The spectre's face was evil, but it was also a face of purpose. It crossed to the desk and pointed at a drawer. When Dee reached out and touched the front of the drawer, the ghost vanished.

"That was less than I expected," Kelley said.

He stood from the bed and approached Dee, who struggled to open the drawer in the darkness.

"It's locked."

Kelley brushed the scholar aside. He drew from a pocket of his doublet a small metal pick and bent to work it into the lock of the drawer by touch. The darkness made no difference – lockpicks never see inside the locks they open. In a few moments, he drew the drawer out. Dee took out its contents one by one and examined them as best he could in the moonlight, which provided the strongest source of illumination now that the fire had burned out.

"Nothing," he said in disgust, tossing the last packet of letters onto the top of the desk. "A woman's trifles."

Kelley barely grunted. He was busy tapping the back of the drawer, which would not extend all the way out from the desk. Something clicked under his probing fingers. He

drew forth a folded parchment tied with a red ribbon. It had once been sealed with wax but the seal was broken.

“Take a look at this.”

Dee bore the document into the moonlight and unfolded it. He was still reading it when a series of screams split the stillness of the night from the other side of the house.

“Jane and Johanna,” he said to Kelley.

The alchemist bolted through the door and across the hall to the room where their wives had retired to sleep. When he thrust open their door he saw their faint outlines by the glow from their grate. They were sitting up in the bed.

“Edward,” Jane said, “what –“

More shrieks cut the darkness.

“It’s coming from Lady Alice’s room,” said Johanna.

Lady Alice had elected to sleep in a room with her maid, so that Jane and Johanna could share a room between them. Dee paused only long enough at the doorway to ascertain that Jane was unharmed, then made his way to the closed door of the second bed chamber.

“Edward, for God’s sake, find a light.”

Kelley cursed and went back into the haunted bed chamber. He thrust a naked candle into the redness on the fireplace grate, and the wick sputtered to life. Shielding the candle with his hand, he carried it down the hall to Dee, who opened the door of the room from which the screams still issued, though with declining intensity.

What greeted their eyes was more suited to a slaughterhouse than a human dwelling. The floor, paneled walls, even the ceiling, were splashed with blood. The bed was sodden with redness, the pillows soaked in blood. Bits of meat – there was no other word for them – lay scattered around the room. Kelley saw what looked like a red ribbon draped over a picture on the wall, and realized that it was part of an intestine.

The fire flickered up in the fireplace, and the air was filled with the stench of burning hair. The sudden flutter of yellow flames framed the severed head of Lady Alice, or at least, such was the presumption of John Dee. The head lacked a face. Its eyes remained, however, and they seemed to start at Dee with accusation.

Whimpering sounds from the corner made him aware of the maid, whose night dress was covered with blood and bits of gore. The wives, who pressed into the room of horror behind him, gathered her up, and with the help of Bess, who wandered in with sleep-bleared eyes from the servant quarters, they succeeded after a time in washing her and dressing her in a clean shift. Try as he would, Dee could not induce the girl to say a single word about her experience. Whenever he questioned her, she began to shriek in a high, shrill voice that cracked from strain, until he desisted.

They were gathered in the great hall by the light of early morning. The bridge constable, Potter, had been to visit and had just left, none too happy to have another unexplained murder on his bridge, but somewhat mollified by Dee's assurances that this death would be the last at Nonsuch House.

Dee waved the open parchment in the air.

"It's a legal letter," Dee told Kelley and their two wives. "I won't bother reading it to you, but the sense is that Lord Bosingham was fed up with the erotic liaisons of his wife, and had determined to leave everything he owned to his only blood descendant, his daughter Ruth by his first wife. Only in the event of his daughter's death would his considerable estate fall to his second wife, Lady Alice. That was the opinion of the solicitor she consulted in secret about the matter, and I believe he was correct."

"The only way Lady Alice could inherit was to kill her step-daughter," Kelley said.

"Even so," Dee agreed. "Lady Alice cultivated a friendship with the girl to keep her close at hand while her father was off in Ireland quelling the rebellion."

"And all the while she planned the girl's murder," Jane said with a shake of her head.

"So it would seem."

"What has that to do with the ghost?" Johanna demanded.

"The ghost was purest chance, but Lady Alice took advantage of it. She needed a credible witness who could testify in a court of law to the ghost's existence and its malicious manner, so she wrote to you, Jane, and asked for your help."

"I'm such a fool," Jane said. "I thought she really needed me, but all the while she was

only using me as part of her plan to murder her own daughter.”

“If suspicion was to fall on anyone for the murder, Lady Alice did her best to make sure it fell on you,” Dee continued.

“The wicked woman,” Bess said from the doorway.

She blushed when they all turned to look at her, and bowed her way out of the room.

“Wicked indeed,” Dee said. “Willing not only to kill her own kin, but to blame the murder on an innocent.”

“I found what she used on the girl,” Kelley said. “It was hidden in the privy.”

He held up a small meat cleaver. The blade was stained with dried blood.

“She didn’t have time enough alone to clean it properly,” Dee mused. “She would have returned it to its peg in the kitchen, eventually.”

“How could she be sure that I wouldn’t wake up when she put the severed head into my bed?” Jane wondered.

“She probably gave you and Johanna something to drink that would insure your sleep for the first part of the night,” Dee said.

Jane remembered the bitterness of the coffee.

“The ghost would never have killed the girl,” Johanna said with sudden conviction. “She was not of John Kemp’s line.”

Dee nodded. He folded up the letter and put it away in the breast pocket of his scholar’s gown. It was evidence, and would have to be turned over to the bridge constable, when he got around to explaining to the portly little man the full circumstances of the two deaths. He doubted the constable would believe him, but what did it matter? The foul deed was done. Nothing would restore the poor innocent girl to life. If there was any justice to the whole affair, it lay in the manner of Lady Alice’s death.

“Would the iron nails have prevented the ghost from killing Lady Alice?” Jane Dee asked her husband.

“Probably.”

“Then I’m glad you delayed them for a day,” she said.

The silence in the hall was not disagreement.

THE RAVENER

The royal hunting lodge in Waltham Forest was extensive enough in itself to be the estate of many noblemen of more than middling means. It did not boast a moat, but it was walled with a palisade of heavy oak posts and guarded by a well-manned stone gatehouse. John Dee gave his name, and that of his companion Edward Kelley, to a guard at an elevated window. The old soldier ran a sceptical eye over Kelley's weathered, brooding features, but said nothing and waved them in.

They rode beneath the stone archway, past the pikes of two men-at-arms who stood at attention in the tunnel beneath the gatehouse. Within the grounds of the hunting lodge there was a chapel for worship, a commodious feast-hall with an attached kitchen, and several outbuildings and stables.

Over the top of the palisade Dee caught a glimpse of the Great Standing, erected some forty years ago by Henry the Eighth for viewing the hunt. It occupied high ground some distance beyond the lodge near the edge of forest. The massive beams of the open-walled, four-level structure were taller than the peak of the hall itself.

Everything within the lodge had a rustic look, as though hurriedly erected or half-finished, and apart from the gatehouse, all the buildings were made of wood. This was not happenstance, but designed to give noble visitors a sense of being in the wilderness. For the same reason, little of the enclosed ground was paved.

Dismounting inside the gatehouse, they walked their weary, sweating mounts to cool them across a carpet of browning oak leaves, recently fallen into the late autumn mud from the trees that lined the lane between the gate and the hall. Dee's light-boned palfrey had not enjoyed the long ride north from Mortlake. The spotted Spanish mare was Jane Dee's favourite riding horse due to her smooth gait, but she was accustomed to his wife's lesser weight in the saddle. He had been forced to borrow the palfrey when his own sturdier gelding had gone lame shortly before the time of departure.

They stopped before the stairs of the hall. It was an impressive building in its own way, with white mortar walls inset between diagonal timbers, a second level that projected beyond the first on massive carved beams, and a slate roof steeply-pitched to shed the winter snows. Footmen ran to remove their travel cases from their saddles, and stable boys led their horses away to be rubbed down and watered.

A footman escorted them through the great room, where a fire blazed on a soot-blackened stone hearth wide enough to sleep a family of ten in comfort. The ceiling of the chamber extended up to the rafters. Mounted heads of tusked boars, antlered stags, and snarling bears stared sightlessly down at the long feasting board that ran the full width of the hall at the room's far end. In a corner of the open floor, a quintet of minstrels played spritely music on lutes and crumhorns to entertain several dozen noblemen and their finely dressed ladies, some of whom danced an energetic, leaping peasant dance on the flags while the others watched and applauded.

A small group of bearded men more sombrely dressed in dark hues after the German fashion stood together conversing in low voices. They seemed uninterested in the dancing. Dee recognized the Baron Hasselberg, ambassador from the Imperial Court of Rudolph the Second. He was a nervous man of middle years, with a long nose and prominent Adam's apple, who stuttered when he spoke English, but curiously enough, not when he spoke his native German. Dee had been introduced to the ambassador at Hampton Court, though he doubted the ambassador would remember him.

Elizabeth sat alone at a table in a smaller chamber next to the kitchens. It looked like a room where the servants might eat their meals, but presently it held only the Queen and her principal advisor, William Cecil, the Baron Burghley, who served as her royal treasurer. He stood discreetly behind her left shoulder with his hands folded, dressed in his usual sombre black.

He nodded at Dee but ignored Kelley, which was not unusual – Cecil despised Kelley for a coiner and a necromancer. For his own part, Edward Kelley felt little love at the sight of Cecil's sour face and meticulously divided grey beard.

Upon a pewter plate lay a slab of bloody venison so rare, it must have barely kissed the fire. Elizabeth cut a piece from it and popped it into her mouth.

“We are gratified that you chose to accept our invitation to attend the hunt, Master Dee,”

she said while chewing.

“I am honoured, your Majesty,” Dee said, bowing deeply.

She drank wine from a pewter goblet and eyed him up and down.

“You came dressed for the forest. Good.”

Beneath his cloak Dee wore a simple grey doublet and long black breeches that gathered just above his knees, with high leather riding boots that covered most of his silk hose. The white ruff around his collar was the smallest that fashion would allow. In place of his customary scholar’s skull cap he had donned a soft hat of black felt. Kelley was similarly dressed, but all in black – perhaps the only taste he and William Cecil shared in common. Both Dee and Kelley wore swords at their belts, but Kelley also carried a long Scottish dirk at his other hip. The dirk was his favoured weapon, since it was superior to the sword for close-quarter fighting.

Dee noted that the Queen’s subdued green dress was uncommonly austere by her usual standards. Elizabeth welcomed the opportunity to set the trappings of the royal court aside, if only for a few days. To judge by what clothed her peacock-hued courtiers in the outer hall, few shared her longing for simplicity.

“Your letter indicated that you have some task for me to perform,” Dee prompted gently when she did not seem disposed to speak.

“Yes, quite right.” She wiped her lips on a cloth-of-gold napkin and dipped her fingers into a bowl of water, than shook them dry. A serving man ran forward with a towel. She gestured over her shoulder at Cecil, who made his way around the table.

“Something is killing the Queen’s game,” he said without preamble.

“Here, in Waltham Forest?”

“Where else,” Cecil said sourly. “The Queen wants you to investigate the cause and put an end to it.”

Dee stroked his long silver beard.

“But surely the Queen’s foresters would be better suited –” he began.

“They have tried, and they have failed,” Elizabeth said.

“Besides which, there are rumours of certain ... extraordinary details that may call upon your own unique talents,” Cecil said.

“What details?” Kelley demanded.

Cecil made as if to ignore the words, but when Dee raised his eyebrows, he answered.

“The game has not merely been killed. It is torn apart. Great stags torn limb from limb, sometimes torn into pieces.”

“Then you must look for some large beast. A bear perhaps, or wolves.”

“There are no wolves this close to London, Master Dee,” Elizabeth said wearily. “A bear would leave tracks, and the tracks my foresters report seeing were not those of a bear.”

Dee glanced at Kelley, who shrugged almost imperceptibly.

“You believe this to be the work of some devilish spirit?” he asked Cecil.

“What else can it be, but a thing of witchcraft?” Cecil said. “It appears and vanishes as if by magic. None have ever seen it, though some men claim to have heard its howl in the night. It kills the dogs that are sent after it.”

“It bites their heads off,” Elizabeth said deliberately, eyeing Dee. “It takes the carcasses and leaves the heads in the trail, for us to find. It is mocking us.”

“I have many talents, Majesty, but they scarcely run to woodcraft.”

“Do what you need to do,” she said with a small smile. “I place great faith in your wits, Master Dee. Ask your questions. Examine the ground. You will have occasion to see the places where these slaying occurred during the hunt tomorrow.”

“You are hunting in the place this creature has marked for its territory?” Kelley asked in surprise.

“The game is exhausted elsewhere, necromancer,” she answered coolly. Her opinion of Kelley was scarcely higher than Lord Burghley’s. “I must show the ambassador from the Imperial Court at Prague a good hunt, and apart from a scattering of scrawny rascals, the only fresh venery to be had lies in the newly opened reaches of the forest, where no hunting was before.”

“When was this part of the forest opened to the hunt?” Dee asked.

She looked at Cecil.

“Last year,” he said.

“When did the slaying of game commence?”

“Last year,” Cecil repeated. “Aye, we’ve thought of that, but if there is a connection, we cannot discover what it may be.”

The Queen chatted with Dee while she finished her wine. She inquired after the health of his wife, Jane, and his two children – she had a particular fondness for young Arthur Dee, his eldest. She asked Dee about the progress of his alchemical work, and he spoke in simplified terms of his studies to isolate the red powder of projection, by which base metals are transformed into gold. He was relieved that she chose not to bring up the subject of his ongoing conversations with the Enochian angels. He had intimated to Elizabeth on several occasions that he was in communication with angelic beings, and she had agreed that it was important work that must continue, but it was dangerous ground to speak about it openly. It skirted too close to the provisions of the Witchcraft Act, which prescribed various punishments for consorting with spirits.

The Queen’s dwarf, Mrs. Tomasen, came in from the outer chamber to say that the Earl of Leicester was demanding her presence for the next dance. Not for the first time, Dee wondered why the Queen continued to indulge the vanity of Robert Dudley, who had betrayed her trust with his second marriage. Perhaps she was lonely, he mused. A woman might be surrounded by flatterers yet still feel alone.

Elizabeth left the dining room, followed by William Cecil. Mrs. Tomasen came over and took Dee's hand in her companionable way. She was a frequent visitor at Mortlake. She and his wife Jane were close friends.

"Did you bring Jane and Johanna with you?" she demanded, looking up at him. Dee was a tall man, and she barely reached the level of his belt.

"Jane had to remain to care for the children, and Johanna stayed with her," Dee said.

Mrs. Tomasen made a sad face.

"That's a shame, it is. We have such merry times when we come here for the hunting."

She went to be with the Queen, leaving Dee and Kelley alone.

"The Queen mistakes me for a worker of wonders," Dee said with a shake of his head. "I fear this time I will disappoint her."

"What do you make of it all?" Kelley asked.

"Some kind of beast has been enraged by intrusions into its territory," Dee said. "That seems plain enough."

"What beast can rip apart a stag?" Kelley asked.

"A bear, perhaps," Dee mused. "What else can it be? There have been no wolf packs this close to London since the Old King's reign."

Kelley shook his head.

"Even wolves couldn't tear a stag to pieces, or bite off the head of a hound."

"We have some time before dark," Dee told him. "Go among the stables. Talk to the huntsmen and the Master of Hounds. Find out what was actually seen in the forest. These kind of stories have a way of expanding with each retelling, and the less the speaker knows, the greater the embellishment."

“What will you do?”

“I mean to walk into Chingford Village and have a talk with the chief forester. If anyone has a sensible notion of what has been going on, it will be him.”

Chingford was a modest little hamlet by any standard. The only structure of any significance was All Saint's Church on Merry Hill, the foundations of which to Dee's educated eye appeared to date from some part of the twelfth century. The rest was a rude scattering of thatched cottages, their yards fouled by hogs and chickens. Farmland of no particular worth surrounded the village. At the margins of the small and irregularly shaped fields loomed the dark wall of the forest, never far removed in any direction.

The generally unpromising impression of the place was not helped by the surly attitude of its inhabitants. Some villages were open and inviting toward strangers, others such as this one were closed. Dee noticed a dead rabbit hanging from a pole behind one cottage. The squint-eyed man who was dressing it for supper took the pole down and moved it behind a shed when he noticed Dee's eyes on him.

By persistent inquiry, Dee learned the location of the cottage where the chief forester lived. It was his sworn duty to protect the 'vert and venison' of Waltham Forest, which was a royal chase – that is, the game that was hunted, and the foliage that it browsed upon and within which it found cover. He was responsible for preventing unauthorized cutting of trees, farming, or building within the bounds of the forest, and poaching, which was always going on in spite of the severe punishments under the law for those caught in the act. A poacher ran the risk of finding himself sewn up inside a fresh deer skin, and set out in the forest as sport for the dog packs, although this extreme punishment was seldom meted out. The more usual sentence was hanging.

Dee found Werner Rutger behind his cottage, sharpening stakes with a hatchet. When he saw Dee he set down the tool and dusted the wood chips off his calloused hands.

“What may I do for ye, good sir?” he asked.

As Dee had suspected from his name, he was not a native Englishman, but his German accent was slight. Dee surmised that he had lived in this country almost all his life. The

forester was a broad man of middle height and powerful limbs. He wore only a loose linen undershirt and a pair of rough breeches above worn boots. His ragged sandy hair hung over his blue eyes.

“I have been appointed by the Queen to investigate the unlawful killing of game in Waltham Forest,” Dee told the man. “I would like you to tell me everything you know about the matter.”

“Everything I know?” Rutger raised his thick eyebrows. “That will take some time, sir.”

With a gesture, he invited Dee to take a place beside him on the stone step of the cottage. Dee brushed away the wood chips and sat, then listened to a recitation of the numerous incidents over the past year and more when the forester and his men had discovered mangled and dismembered deer and boars in the newly opened section of the forest.

“This happens only in the part of the forest newly opened for hunting?” Dee asked.

“Aye,” Rutger said.

“Is smaller game ever killed in this way? Foxes? Rabbits?”

“Nay, it be mostly deer, and sometimes a boar.” He hesitated. “We’ve lost horses as well.”

Dee gazed meditatively across the yard at a shed. The door hung open on its leather hinges. In the shadowed interior he saw several wire snares hanging from a peg.

“Could it be the work of poachers?”

Rutger followed Dee’s gaze. His blue eyes narrowed.

“Poachers don’t rip beasts apart and scatter them across the ground, they take them home to feed their families,” he said.

“Perhaps they might believe that if they frightened the royal hunting parties away, there would be more game for them,” Dee speculated.

“Try to frighten the Queen?” The forester barked a short laugh of scorn. “None of them are that addled of wits.”

“Even so,” Dee persisted, “could it be the work of poachers?”

“No.”

Dee studied the man curiously.

“How can you be so certain?”

Rutger stared at the horizon as though lost in memory. He raised a hand to brush a lock of hair from his eyes, and Dee noticed a slight tremble in his fingers. He realized the man was afraid, but was trying very hard not to show it. After a time, he spoke.

“In the spring, when the snow melted, me and my men took a wagon-load of planks into the new part of the chase to build a hut to keep our axes and spades out of the rain, and to stay the night when we had more than a day’s work to do. No fine house, mind, just four walls, a door and a roof. It’s long, hard work clearing brush and moving deadfalls to make horse paths. Anyway, we built the hut and left it. The next day when we came back, it was lying in splinters.”

“A sudden windstorm, perhaps?”

Rutger nodded to himself with a tight smile on his pale lips.

“I brought back one of the planks from the door.”

He stood and went to the shed. Dee waited on the step. In a moment he emerged with a board some five feet long and a foot wide. He carried it back across the yard and stood it up on its end before Dee.

“Wind, do you say?” Rutger muttered darkly. “Tell me, sir, what wind can do this?”

He turned the board so that its other side was visible to Dee. Halfway down its length, four diagonal scratches scoured the rough surface. Dee stood, his interest quickening. He put his finger into one of the scratches. It was almost half an inch deep. The plank

was of good English oak. He tried to span the four scratches with his fingers, but they were too wide for his hand. The most he could manage was three of them.

Rutger watched Dee closely, nodding in satisfaction.

“You see how it is,” he said. “No wind did this, nor no natural beast, neither.”

“A bear?”

“Pagh.” The forester spat on the ground. “No bear’s claws have that span.”

“What, then?” Dee looked at the other man keenly. It was plain Rutger had more to say.

“When I was a boy, I lived in the Hartz Mountains,” the forester said. “That was before my father brought me to this country. The old men of my village used to tell tales around the hunting fires about evil spirits that could take on the shapes of beasts, but bigger and stronger than any natural creature.”

Dee cast his mind over the storehouse of lore he had accumulated over the years.

“You mean werewolves?”

“Nay, the werewolf is a man changed to a beast. These are demons of hill and wood. They were never men.”

“How do such demons arise?”

“Some say they come when the ancient places of pagan worship, the stone circles and sacred groves, are violated. But others do say that they can be called up by sorcery.”

It did not occur to Dee to scoff. He had seen too many abominations against nature. Both men gazed for a time at the four scratches in the plank without speaking.

“Can you tell me where this hut was placed, so that I may find its ruin when I ride out with the royal hunt on the morrow?”

“I can do better than that,” the forester said. “The Queen has graciously invited me to

join the hunt, to mark the opening of the new chase. I will point the way to the place.”

“I’m surprised you can find men who will venture into that part of the forest,” Dee said.

“None will go there alone, and none go unarmed.”

The sun had set behind the western hills, and the light begun to fail. Night came early in the autumn of the year. The air had lost its warmth. Perhaps that is why Dee shivered under his cloak. If the forester noticed, he made no comment.

“I thank you for your service,” Dee said to him. “You have told me much that is useful.”

He turned to leave.

“One more thing,” Rutger said behind him.

Dee stopped.

“Yes?”

“A fortnight or so past, one of my men went to put a paling along a stream where we do not want the deer to cross when they are unharboured. He never came back. We looked for him for four days.”

“He was killed?” Dee asked.

“He was nothing,” Rutger said emphatically. “He vanished from this world, without leaving so much as a footprint.”

The following morning before sunrise Edward Kelley presented himself at the kennels to the Master of Hounds, a man named Ham Sparrow who was as lean as a greyhound himself. His long and morose face had the leathery quality that faces acquire when they are seldom out of the wind and weather, but his blue eyes held a sparkle of good humour.

He looked Kelley up and down with a sceptical glance.

“Has you ever run with the hounds before, sir?” he asked in a thick Devon accent.

“I’ve run from some hounds,” Kelley said in his deep rumble. “Will that do?”

Sparrow grinned.

“It will do well enough for me, sir.”

The Master of Hounds led him to a kennel and took out a sleek bloodhound bitch who wagged her tail with excitement. She sniffed Kelley’s leg with interest, and then licked his hand when he offered it.

“This is Diana, my *lymer*,” Sparrow said proudly. “She’ll be doing our work for us this morning.”

“A fine looking hound,” Kelley said to be agreeable. He knew next to nothing about dogs.

“She is that, ain’t she, sir?”

Kelley nodded. He gazed across tree-lined grounds of the lodge through the open doors of the outbuilding that housed the kennels. The grass was white with frost. He thought he

saw a hint of shadow moving along the inside of the palisade, but he was not certain. If the spectral black dog that sometimes haunted his heels was there, it was keeping well away.

“You own dogs yourself, sir?” Sparrow asked.

“Only one,” Kelley muttered.

During a visit to his mother-in-law Kelley had been gifted, or cursed – he was not quite sure which it was – with a spirit familiar in the form of a black dog. Kelley usually saw it as a moving shadow, but most others could not see it at all. Its attendance on Kelley was capricious — sometimes it stayed close to him, and at other times it was not to be found.

“See how shiny her coat is? That’s eggs, sir. Best thing for a dog’s coat.”

“You wash her with eggs?” the alchemist asked, his mind elsewhere.

Sparrow nearly fell to the ground in a fit of laughter, which was shared by the young man who stood nearby, listening to their conversation. Kelley took the youth for Sparrow’s son by the clear blue colour of his eyes.

“Wash her with eggs! That a good one, sir. Wash her with eggs! I must tell that one to the wife.”

Kelley waited patiently for the man to wipe away his tears and set his morose mask back into place.

“Let me just wake up Diana’s nose, and we’ll be on our way,” Sparrow said.

He took a jug down from a shelf and pulled the cork with his teeth, then splashed a small amount of its contents onto his palm. The strong scent of vinegar filled the chill pre-dawn air. He held the hand under the dog’s nose. The effect was immediate. The dog began to tremble with excitement and make small whining noises. Sparrow gestured and the dog ran out into the yard. He and his son began to jog toward the gatehouse, and Kelley fell into pace behind. The men-at-arms saw their approach and opened wide the gate.

“There’s no shame if you can’t keep up,” Sparrow said over his shoulder. “Just try to go quiet with your step, and watch what we do. You do the same.”

They ran behind the dog at a trotting pace for more than a mile under the trees along paths that were well enough maintained to be called roads. The dog seemed to know where they were headed without being told. It was difficult to be sure beneath the canopy of trees, but to Kelley it seemed that the ground was rising slowly. The dog began to show serious interest in the scents on the grass. Several times she struck a trail, and Sparrow called her back after examining the grass with disapproval. The dog obediently left the scent trails and searched for others. The paths became less well kept, until they were barely to be discerned from the general ground cover. The trees grew more densely than they did nearer the lodge.

Kelley ignored the stitch in his side. He was damned if he would give Sparrow the satisfaction of seeing him give up the chase. The lean man and his son both seemed tireless. They were not even breathing hard. The bloodhound had begun to pant and loll its long tongue, but even she was fresher than Kelley. Hoar frost crunched in the moss under his boots. In a few hours the heat of day would cause it to vanish, but the shadows were still deep and dark beneath the trees.

The hound let out a bell-like note and dug excitedly at the grass. Sparrow pushed her away and his son held her back by her collar, while the lean man picked up something. He showed it triumphantly to Kelley, who wrinkled his nose in involuntary reaction. It was a piece of shit, still moist. Sparrow pressed it between his fingers and smelled it, then with a smile rolled it into a white rag and hid it away like a precious jewel in the small leather pack he wore at his belt.

“At least four points,” he told his son in a low voice. “Can’t be far.”

The hound resumed the scent trail, which led off the path and under the trees. Sparrow and his son moved noiseless through the clinging branches and tall bushes. Kelley held back the urge to curse. In spite of the coolness of the morning, he was sweating. He regretted wearing his cloak, but it could not be helped. He fought to keep from gasping his breaths.

A rabbit darted across their trail. The hound barely turned her head, but Sparrow stopped and stared at his son, who shook his head sadly.

“A rabbit is bad luck for the hunt,” Sparrow explained to Kelley in a low murmur as he resumed his trotting pace. “Now if it had been a fox or a raven, that would have been different, wouldn’t it?”

“Different how?” Kelley gasped.

“Them’s hunters, ain’t they? But a rabbit, he’s only game. He can’t hunt. Bad luck to see a rabbit.”

For another hour they moved stealthily through the trees. They did not sight the animal that had left the scent trail, but the Master of Hounds assured Kelley under his breath that he had a good notion about what it was and where it lay hidden. It was important not to startle it from its cover, or it would have to be sought all over again, and would be skittish and fearful. Let it think it was safely hidden, and it would still be there when the hunt arrived.

They were on their way back to the lodge, moving over different ground to shorten the distance they had to cover, when the hound let out a howl. It began to dance around and bark in the tall grass. Running up to it, Sparrow’s son tripped. He got up cursing, a look of terror on his face, which had gone completely white. Kelley smelled the reason before he saw it. The corpse lay face down in the grass, or at least, what was left of it.

The spine had been ripped out through the back of the torso, and the head was missing entirely. One leg was gone above the knee, and the other was missing its foot. Bits of red viscera lay scattered around, looking surprisingly fresh. Kelley realized that the cold fall weather had preserved the remains. Each night it had frozen, and during the day the shadows in which it rested kept it cool.

“It’s that forester that went missing two week ago. Got to be,” Sparrow told his son. “Look at those scratches.”

Kelley saw that the back of one of the thighs of the corpse had deep furrows running through the flesh, four of them. They had the look of claw marks.

“What animal made those?” he asked Sparrow, who stood holding his nose, or maybe just holding in his breakfast.

“You tell me, sir,” he said, shaking his head.

“Your Majesty, I urge you to cancel the hunt,” Dee pleaded.

“Nonsense,” she said. “The man’s corpse was bound to turn up eventually. It signifies nothing.”

She waved him away with an impatient gesture. With reluctance, Dee gave up his place on the flagstones before her breakfast table.

It was the morning assembly for the hunt. A fire crackled on the hearth in the enormous stone fireplace. Musicians played a light melody on their lutes and crumhorns. The stuffed heads of beasts that lined the rough timber walls of the great room seemed to listen to the music with fixed attention.

Elizabeth sat at the middle of the long banqueting table, with her courtiers arrayed on either side. Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, sat at her right hand, as always, his hair and beard immaculate even at this early hour, although they had transitioned from golden to grey over the past year or so, Dee noted. The ever-youthful Dudley was growing old. Such was the way of all flesh.

The diminutive Mrs. Tomasen on the Queen’s left hand concentrated on digging the yolk of an egg out of an egg cup with a slender spoon. The German delegation in their sombre black garments clustered together at one end of the table like a murder of crows, not eating, but speaking in their own language in low tones. As always, William Cecil hovered behind the Queen’s chair, ready to perform her will. In a bizarre way, the tableau called to Dee’s mind Da Vinci’s painting of the Last Supper.

The royal assembly had just listened to Ham Sparrow describe the finding and condition of the corpse of the forester. Sparrow had gone into detail about the mutilations inflicted on the corpse, which was presently being retrieved. Elizabeth had not been daunted.

Dee noticed Werner Rutger standing impassively at the side of the room with several of his foresters, arms folded across his deep chest, saying nothing by word or expression. Rutger met Dee's glance but gave no gesture of acknowledgement. He was dressed somewhat better than when Dee had talked to him the day before, but without ostentation, in durable garments of dun brown. The plainness of his clothing was in stark contrast to the gaudy colours and silks of the courtiers, particularly the iridescent slashed silk doublet of Dudley, which almost seemed illuminated from within by a rainbow.

Dee would have preferred to be wearing his usual scholar's robes and cap, but today he was to take part in the hunt, and that meant more horseback riding, so he had put back on his grey riding clothes. He hoped his wife's placid little spotted Spanish horse was up to the challenge.

He wandered over to Kelley and leaned his head close.

"She is unwilling to show weakness before the German ambassador."

"She's unwilling to show weakness before anyone," Kelley observed, which was perfectly true, Dee admitted to himself.

"Huntsman, what have you to offer us this fine morning?" Elizabeth asked in a bright voice as she forked scrambled egg into her mouth.

"A wondrous treasure, your Majesty," the master of the royal hunt replied. He was a slender man named La Croix, a Frenchman by birth with a pointed beard and a waxed moustache who seemed almost to prance rather than walk when he moved.

"Bring it forward."

The master of the hunt carried the folded rag he had taken from Sparrow on his outstretched hands as though it were a sacred wafer. He laid it reverently upon the table in front of the Queen's plate and slowly unwrapped it. An appreciative sigh arose from the courtiers and a spattering of applause when the *fewmets* were exposed.

"What is your judgement?" the Queen demanded.

“Majesty,” he said in a cultured French accent, “I judge it to be a great stag, perhaps even a hart.”

An excited murmur arose. The Queen’s raised hand cut it short.

“A hart? Are you sure of this?”

“It cannot be less than a stag of five points, and in my opinion it is not less, but greater.”

“Have you planned the course of the hunt?”

“We have.”

She sniffed through her prominent nose and looked from one side of the table to the other.

“Very well. I give you leave to set the relays of hounds into their places. We shall hunt *par force de chiens*, and my good ambassador shall have the privilege of the *mort*.”

The Baron Hasselberg bowed deeply.

Elizabeth waved her fingernails at the huntsman, who gathered up the deer droppings and backed away from the table with his head bowed.

“Before the hunt commences, I want you to ride back out to the place where the body of the forester was found and examine the ground with care,” Dee murmured to Kelley. “There may be a reason why it was left there. It was some distance from the paling he was working on.”

Kelley did not reply, but stepped away and unobtrusively removed himself from the feast chamber.

“Master Dee, come sit at the table and dine with us,” Elizabeth called across the floor.

A chair was placed on the side of the table opposite the Queen, and a plate and a goblet set before it. Servers filled the plate with the same strips of roasted bacon and scrambled hens’ eggs that Elizabeth herself was eating, and Dee’s goblet was filled to

the brim with red wine.

Dee seldom had much appetite in the mornings, but he began to savour pieces from the bacon with enthusiasm. The morning airs from the forest had made him hungry. Elizabeth leaned forward.

“Now that I have you closer, what is your true opinion about what killed the forester,” she said in a low voice that did not carry beyond Dudley and Mrs. Tomasen.

Dee glanced down the table at the German group. They were lost in their own affairs and paid him no heed.

“Unless it is an elaborate deception on the part of the foresters, I believe we face some unnatural thing, your Majesty,” Dee told her.

“Think you they are deceiving me?” she asked sharply.

“No, your Majesty, I think they are in fear of their lives.”

She sniffed.

“I won’t let some unnatural creature keep me out of my own forest. We will go with crossbows at the ready. If we chance to meet this monster, we shall see whether it relishes the tastes of cold steel in its innards.”

“You have included the chief forester in your hunting party?” Dee asked.

“It is an honour he has earned,” she said. “Think you I should invite his men as well?”

“As many as you may,” Dee said. “Indeed, perhaps your men-at-arms -”

Dudley’s bark of laughter cut short Dee’s words.

“Take soldiers along on a hunting party? In the Queen’s own forest? Really, Dee, sometimes you have the most absurd fancies.”

Lord Burghley had been listening over Elizabeth’s shoulder.

“The German ambassador would view it as timidity,” he murmured.

Elizabeth considered for a moment.

“You’re right, Cecil,” she said at last. “Master Dee, I do not dismiss your recommendations lightly.”

Lord Dudley grunted with derision. The Queen ignored him.

“But Burghley is correct. This is more than a hunt, it is an affair of state.”

“You did not see the marks of the thing’s claws,” Dee said.

“Old age has turned you into a woman,” Dudley told him with a sneer. “Think you I cannot defend her Majesty from a beast?”

Dee caught Mrs. Tomasen’s glance. The little woman smiled and rolled her eyes toward Dudley, then went back to her egg.

“I have never doubted your prowess with horse or sword, my Lord,” Dee said in an even tone. “But I fear this thing is not a beast you have hunted.”

Dudley shook his head.

“Old wives tales, nothing more. I have no truck with such superstitions.”

Dee held his tongue. Dudley was in many ways still a child. He had no patience for things beyond his understanding, and thought every problem could be solved by force of arms. Elizabeth was wiser, but she still loved her former master of horse, and was disinclined to contradict him, unless the subject was Dudley’s second marriage, of which the Queen had strongly disapproved. Dudley’s wife, Lettice, remained banished from the Royal Court by her decree, even though Elizabeth relied daily on Dudley’s counsel in all her affairs of state. Dudley, along with the ageless and reliable Burghley, and her spymaster, the elusive Walsingham, formed her triumvirate of advisors. Nothing Dee could ever say to her would change that. It was pointless for him to contradict Dudley.

“I very much hope you are correct, my Lord,” he told the Earl of Leicester with a small bow of his head, and finished his bacon and eggs.

“God’s blood, Cecil, you can’t mean to ride the hunt on that?”

Robert Dudley’s cultured voice fairly dripped with scorn.

“It is a mount that has never thrown me,” Cecil explained to the Queen, ignoring the Earl of Leicester. “At my age, that is a prime consideration, Majesty.”

Elizabeth suppressed her smile, but Dee saw it playing at the corners of her lips.

“Very prudent, Cecil. By all means, keep your mount.”

The Baron Burghley sat with immense dignity in his stately robes astride a mule that was so diminutive in stature, his boots almost brushed the grass. Mules were his customary means of travel, but even Dee had expected him to ride a horse in the hunt. The laughter of the Germans was loud on the morning air.

Shaking his head with disgust, Dudley cantered away to talk to La Croix. He handled his Frisian great horse with unparalleled skill and grace, Dee was forced to acknowledge to himself. Its shining coat was coal black, so that its muscular sides resembled flowing liquid pitch as it moved. Elizabeth sat side-saddle on her favourite gelding, an Isabella with a golden coat and a pale blond mane. It was a large horse, almost as large as Dudley’s, and many would have judged it too large for a woman, but the Queen relished long, fast gallops. She found palfreys too weak. She sat side-saddle, as had become her custom. When she was younger she had straddled her mounts like a man, but the need to cut a dignified, stately figure had put an end to that practice.

The party sat their gathered horses in preparation for their departure from the grounds of the Queen’s hunting lodge. Dee noted with approval that Dudley wore a crossbow slung on his back. So did several of the other noblemen, the huntsmen, and the chief forester, Werner Rutger, whose men carried long axes slung at their belts. Kelley had not

returned from his early morning ride to the site of the killing, nor had Dee really expected him back in time for the departure. He would no doubt join the hunting party in progress when he heard the horns.

Ham Sparrow and his son busied themselves putting the scent hounds into proper order on their long leashes. They consisted of beagles and bloodhounds, mingled together in the same pack for the sake of the harmonious music made by their voices. They were to be used to unharbour the deer from its cover, when its probable resting place was reached. It was impossible for La Croix to be certain where the deer lay hidden, but the keen noses of the hounds would soon find it.

“Lovely morning, sir,” Sparrow said, touching his cap to Dee.

Dee acknowledged that it was indeed a lovely autumn morning. The blue vault of the sky was almost cloudless, and there was scarce a trace of wind. The sun had begun to climb from the eastern horizon, casting long shadows of trees across the grass in the lodge enclosure. The scent of wood smoke from the fires that blazed in the hall and the adjoining kitchens gave the chill air a sharpness to the nose, but the sun’s rays had already burned off the frost from the fallen oak leaves. Each snort from a horse left a cloud of steam hanging around its rhythmically bobbing head. They perked their ears and rolled their eyes, flanks twitching with eagerness. Most had been ridden in the hunt many times, so they knew what was to come.

Elizabeth tightened the reins in her white-gloved hands, an expression of fierce delight on her hawk-like face. This was what she lived for. The master of the hunt sounded his horn, the men-at-arms threw open the gate, and more than a score of riders surged forward after the dogs.

Dee guided his wife’s spotted palfrey into step beside Cecil’s mule, which to no one’s surprise lagged to the rear of the party – although Dee noted that its little legs were surprisingly nimble.

“I hate the hunt,” Cecil confided to Dee.

“As do I,” Dee said, returning the confidence.

“With the German ambassador here, I could not risk staying away. Her Majesty may

need my advice. God forbid that she should have to rely on Leicester.” He eyed Dee. “For whom I have the greatest respect, of course.”

“Of course,” Dee murmured.

“Walsingham always gets out of these things,” Cecil said in disgust. “I don’t know how he manages it, but he always does.”

From their position at the rear, they were able to view the entire hunting party. Elizabeth rode in the van with Dudley somewhat in advance on her right and the master of the hunt at her left side. Not far behind La Croix rode a minstrel who guided his horse with his knees and strummed a lute while singing a merry hunting song. The clear tenor voice of the young man drifted back to Dee’s ears above the occasional bark of the hounds, who would not give forth their own full-throated song until put on the scent.

“What is that man doing?” Cecil asked.

He pointed at Werner Rutger, who rode beside the Baron Hasselberg. The two were engaged in animated conversation in the German language, although the actual words of their conversation were lost to Dee’s ears amid the other sounds of the party.

“He is German by birth,” Dee explained.

“Is he, indeed?”

“He’s probably talking of his homeland,” Dee continued.

They had ridden under the trees of the newly opened section of forest land for more than half a mile without the hounds picking up the scent of their prey. The hunt master called a brief halt so that the nobles could refresh themselves from their water bottles. Elizabeth unslung a small, leather-covered bottle from her saddle and upended it, drinking deeply while the Earl of Leicester held her Spanish horse. The minstrel struck up a new tune on his lute.

A crash in the forest to the side of the path turned all heads. It was followed by a kind of snorting grunt, deep in pitch, as from a large throat. Before any of the riders thought to react, a massive black form burst from the margin of the trees. Dee had only time to

recognize that it was a wild boar, larger than any he had ever before seen, before it was amid the horses. It seemed to charge directly at the Queen, but fate had put the minstrel between Elizabeth and the beast.

With a toss of its massive neck, the boar ripped open the belly of the minstrel's horse and sent it screaming and tumbling into a patch of brambles. Its sharp curved tusks tore open the musician's throat as he tried to rise from his knees. The lute shattered into fragments beneath the boar's cloven hoof at the same instant the young man gave up his life. Dee heard the thrum of crossbows. Arrows appeared in the boar's back and neck. One shaft pierced its left eye and elicited an enraged roar. Dudley, to his credit, drew the Queen's horse away at a gallop by the reins he still held in his hand. The forester Rutger and two of the huntsmen jumped down from their mounts with their swords drawn and attacked the wounded boar with furious strokes. The sweet stench of blood filled the morning air.

By the time Dee was able to get the terrified palfrey under his control and spur it forward, it was over. The battle has lasted such a brief time, the hounds had not even had a chance to join in, although they made up for their tardiness with bloodthirsty baying voices as they strained at their leashes. The boar lay dead on its side, its legs still reflexively quivering, the crossbow bolt standing straight up from its ruined eye socket. One of the huntsmen had suffered a gash in his forearm, but it did not appear serious.

The Baron Hasselberg dismounted awkwardly and slapped Rutger on the back, congratulating him on his quick reaction in their guttural native tongue. Dudley led the Queen's horse slowly back to the gathering. He only released the reins to Elizabeth when he was certain the danger had passed. She guided her nervous Isabella around the boar, an expression of satisfaction on her face.

"There is your creature, Master Dee," she said loudly for all to hear. "Not so unnatural after all, although I believe it is the largest I have ever seen."

Dee looked at the hooves of the boar, and remembered the four deep scratches in the oak plank. He caught Rutger's gaze. The forester shook his head. Both men knew that whatever had made those marks was not lying dead at their feet.

What had possessed the animal to charge so large a hunting party? Dee dismounted to

study its mouth and remaining eye while Cecil held the reins of his horse. He found no obvious signs of hydrophobia. A faint sound came from the trees where the boar had burst forth. It was almost like the quick patter of bare feet across grass. Dee peered into the green and brown shadows beneath the hanging boughs but saw no movement. Many of the leaves had fallen from the trees, but evergreen shrubs obscured his view.

“Whether or not we find the hart, we won’t go hungry,” Elizabeth said gaily.

Her wit drew appreciative laughter from her courtiers. It was louder and more prolonged than warranted due to the sudden shock of fear they had suffered.

“Your Majesty, surely you don’t mean to continue the hunt?” Dee said.

“Why not?” She smiled at the German ambassador. “The danger is no more. Huntsman, let the hunt continue.”

With some difficulty, Edward Kelley found the elevated ridge between the two small river valleys where the body of the forester had rested. The browning grass was still bent, and a faint odour of death lingered on the air. Dismounting, he tied his horse to the low bough of an elm. He was not adept at reading woodcraft, but it seemed to his keen eye that the corpse must have been dragged or half-carried to this spot up the slope from the riverside where the man had been at work, a considerable distance for any animal to move its prey without a reason. He straightened and cast his glance in a wider circle.

If the trees were cut down, he thought, the elevation would give an excellent prospect of the surrounding countryside. Even as it was, he could glimpse the distant horizon between their trunks thanks to the fall of leaves. They grew sparsely here, probably due to the poor quality of the sandy soil, which was so thin that large boulders poked their heads through its meagre cover. Not far from where the corpse had rested, the ground formed a kind of shallow bowl, the rim of which was a ridge of grass - covered till some four or five feet high and perhaps ten feet broad.

With a shock of recognition, he realized that he was standing within the boundary of an ancient fortification wall. He had seen similar earthen work at Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire, where the remains of a Saxon fort overlooked the village, but this was much older. He wondered if it dated back to the time of the Romans. From his boyhood schooling he remembered reading that the Roman Legions would never camp for the night without first building a defensive fortification around their encampment. It amused him to imagine that the pebbles beneath his boots had been tossed up on the blade of a Roman soldier's gladius.

Movement between the trees caught his eye. He watched the black shadow shift across the ground like a patch of sooty smoke blown on a light breeze, all the while ceaselessly changing its shape and sending out thin streamers that resembled black ribbons.

“Murder, why do you hound me? Go back to Mortlake.”

The familiar spirit paused when it heard its name spoken and took on a shape that more resembled that of a large black dog with the head of a wolf. It ran swiftly along the embankment wall of the old fort toward a tumbled pile of boulders amid an upthrusting of bedrock. There it stopped and remained in place, as though pointing to something in the tall grass.

Kelley walked across the depression of the ruined fort to where it stood. When he drew nearer, he saw what he first took to be an animal such as a badger or a fox. The figure moved its head, and he realized that it was a brown-skinned girl who wore animal pelts around her waist and shoulders. She cowered down, eyes on the black shadow that hovered over her. It was evident that she could see it as clearly as Kelley, which was unusual – most people could not see the shadow that pursued him. She must have the second sight, as he did.

Her long black hair lay tangled across the fox fur tied over her shoulders like a cape. Her feet were bare, as were her breasts.

The alchemist sniffed the air and wrinkled his nose. She had a distinct odour that was not pleasant. He waved Murder back with his hand and gestured for the girl to stand up. She rose from her cover in a crouch, trembling with fear, her brown eyes wide. From her stature she could not have been more than eight or nine years old, although her breasts were uncommonly well developed for so young a child.

Kelley swore an oath when he saw what lay in the grass at her feet. He realized that the foul stench had not come from the girl, but from the severed head of the forester. It rested beside one of her ankles, its eyes missing and most of the flesh around its mouth gone. The sight of the bloody, rotting head, which had evidently been gnawed, stripped the illusion of innocence from the child. He realized that her face was not in the least child-like, but lined and mature like that of a woman. Spots of blood clung to the corners of her mouth.

“What’s your name, girl?” he demanded gruffly.

She spoke in a language that sounded something like Latin, but it was so corrupted and slurred that Kelley could not understand it. Then she spat on the ground at his feet.

Before he could speak again, she bolted. Kelley saw that she ran toward the tumbled

boulders, which had many dark cracks and crannies between them. He would never have caught her before she reached them had the black hound not interposed itself. She tripped across its partly solid form and fell sprawling in the grass. Before she could scramble back to her bare feet, Kelley had her by the waist. She fought fiercely, all the while uttering a string of words he took to be curses, but her strength was no match for his. He carried her back to his horse and bound her hands and feet with leather thongs, then tied her face down across its rump behind his saddle.

When he was assured that she could not wriggle free and escape, he returned to the boulders and climbed amid them. As he had suspected, there were caves between the massive stones. All the openings were too narrow for his chest and shoulders, but the child – no, the dwarf, he corrected himself – could have slid through. He found a pebble and dropped it into the largest opening. It bounced from stone to stone in the darkness, echoing for half a dozen heartbeats before at last it fell silent. The cave was deep.

The alchemist bent his ear close to the opening. From deep within the earth he heard what sounded like the distant howl of the wind. It was so faint, he wondered if he were merely imagining it, yet for some reason the sound chilled his blood. With more haste than grace, he withdrew himself from the great stones and returned to his horse.

Murder sat, or rather floated, some distance away, a shifting mass of sooty smoke, guarding against the girl's escape. The horse sensed the familiar's presence behind it and tugged at its reins nervously, rolling its eyes. The girl merely glared up at his approach.

“Good dog,” Kelley murmured.

A pair of red eyes flashed momentarily in the midst of the black cloud. It rose and drifted away.

“Where did you come from, I wonder?” he said, staring at the diminutive form tied across the rump of his horse.

She spoke a rapid string of words, but again, he could not understand them. He thought she said *mortis* several times, or a word much like it. The Latin word for death. With sudden insight he realized the wild girl was telling him that he was going to die.

One of the huntsmen was sent back to the lodge, to return later with a cart and men to transport the carcass of the boar, as well as that of the unfortunate minstrel and his horse.

“His head will look uncommon handsome mounted in the hall,” Elizabeth told the Earl of Leicester as she gazed down from her saddle at the boar in admiration.

“Indeed it shall,” he agreed.

“I suppose the eye can be fixed?” she demanded of Dee, who hovered nearby on his palfrey.

“They use glass eyes when mounting heads, Majesty,” Dee said dryly.

Inwardly, he was displeased by the disregard shown for the young man’s death, but it was not his place to censure the royal court.

The master of the hunt called the party to order on his horn and they rode onward. It was not long before the hounds picked up the scent of their prey. They began to make the music of the pack, barking loudly and straining against their leashes. At Ham Sparrow’s command, the men handling the dogs unleashed them, and the hunt was on.

Dee made no effort to stay in the van, but fell back beside Cecil, whose mule struggled valiantly to keep up with longer legs of the horses. There were no fences or hedges in the forest to be jumped, and the foresters had cleared riding paths and opened the way through the denser covers, so the progress of the hunt was unimpeded. It flowed like a single living being over ridges, across streams, along gullies and between the trees, stirring up whirlwinds of golden oak leaves by its passage.

The stag had been unharboured. Dee caught a glimpse of its brown back as it flew away

through a thicket. The chase was on. The huntsmen's horns rang out on the late morning air as though conversing amongst themselves in some pagan tongue of brass. He wondered if Kelley were near enough to hear them.

For miles they pursued the stag ever deeper into the new part of the forest. The ancient trees beneath which their horses flew had never felt the woodsman's axe. They towered like the pillars of a great cathedral, and seemed to hold up the very sky itself. The relay of hounds was changed, and changed again at the stations which had been set before the start of the chase.

In the early afternoon Elizabeth declared a pause, and in a grassy clearing her servants laid out the picnics that they had prepared. Dee welcomed the chance to get out of the saddle. The bones beneath his buttocks ached. To judge by the stiffness with which William Cecil dismounted his mule, the royal treasurer was in no better form. By contrast, the Queen leapt lightly from the saddle of her Isabella. Neither she nor her golden mount appeared tired. Her eyes flashed with the sheer joy of being alive. There was nothing she relished more than a long gallop. She arranged her skirts and sat upon the embroidered cloth that had been laid over the grass for her pleasure.

Dudley sat beside her, somewhat awkwardly, Dee noted – he was not as flexible as he had been in his youth. The German ambassador joined her with his secretary, who carried a portable writing desk strapped to his shoulders, so that it hung in front of his chest and could be folded down for use. Elizabeth gestured across the clearing for Cecil and Dee to join her. Servants laid out plates and goblets and supplied them with food and wine. The ground was cool against Dee's thigh through the heavy cloth, but not uncomfortably so. An oak leaf fluttered down from the tree above them and landed on the sliced roast beef on his plate. He fastidiously flicked it aside.

The Queen and the Baron Hasselberg began to discuss a treaty dealing with the disposition of part of the Netherlands. At intervals Lord Burghley ventured his opinion. Elizabeth's mood was business-like, and the Earl of Leicester said little. He maintained a bored expression as he nibbled his sliced beef and buttered scones, but Dee saw that he was out of his depth. The serious German secretary recorded the conversation with pen and paper on his portable desk, using a form of shorthand that allowed him to keep up with the rapidly spoken words.

This was the main purpose of the hunt, Dee thought to himself. He listened with half an

ear. The details of the treaty were of scant interest to him. It was a mark of the Queen's approval that he had been invited to join this inner circle of state. That mattered far more to him than the treaty. He made the effort to pay attention to what was being said, in case Elizabeth asked him for his opinion. Not for the first time, he admired her powers of reasoning and the facility with which she organized her thoughts. The ambassador seemed intimidated. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed nervously. This was his first occasion to witness the Queen's penetrating mind at work and he scarcely knew how to deal with it.

A murmur of voices drew Dee's attention. He turned his head in time to see Edward Kelley swing down from his mount, and realized that something was tied behind his saddle – something that moved.

The Queen stopped speaking. Every eye in the hunting party was on Kelley as he lifted the small form from his horse and carried it under his arm to the Queen's group. Unceremoniously, he threw the diminutive brown female figure onto the cloth, but Dee noted that he kept his hand around the leather thong that tied her wrists together.

“What is this, necromancer?” the Queen snapped. “Explain yourself, sirrah!”

She was clearly annoyed at having her treaty conference interrupted.

“I found this where the forester's body lay. It is a wild woman, ma'am, not a child. What is more, it is a ghoul.”

They listened while the alchemist related the details of his encounter. When he described the caves between the boulders, Elizabeth's interest quickened.

“Think you this ghoul lived beneath the rocks?”

“I saw no other sign of a dwelling,” Kelley said.

“A troglodyte,” Cecil mused. “Is such a thing possible in England, so near to London?”

“There is said to be a clan of wild men living in Scotland that dwell in some hidden cavern, and sustain themselves on human flesh,” Dee offered.

“An old wives’ tale,” scoffed Dudley.

Baron Hasselberg said something wonderingly in German to his secretary, who shook his head. Dee caught the phrase “fairy changeling.”

“Are there more like her?” the Queen demanded of Kelley.

“I found only this one,” he said gruffly.

The brown eyes of the dwarf-woman rolled from face to face as they spoke about her. They were bright with intelligence, but Dee saw that she did not understand what was being said.

“She’s so tiny,” Dudley murmured, his gaze lingering on the little woman’s breasts. “No taller than Mrs. Tomasen, but so much more graceful in form.”

The Queen arched an eyebrow at the Earl of Leicester, who realized he had drawn attention to himself and blushed.

“Can she speak?” she asked Kelley.

“She can curse,” he said. “Though I know not in what language.”

He turned to John Dee.

“It sounded to me like Latin, but more barbarous than any I have ever heard spoke before.”

Dee said a few words in Latin. The eyes of the wild woman snapped to his face. She answered with a string of rapid utterances that left the rest of the listeners bewildered. Dee replayed her words in his mind. Gradually, they began to make sense. Her accent was so strange, the Latin was almost unintelligible, but it was indeed Latin.

“She demands that we immediately release her,” Dee translated for Elizabeth.

“Does she indeed?” The Queen blinked her heavy eyelids. Dee was reminded of the eyes of a hawk. “Ask her if she knows who I am.”

Dee spoke. The tiny woman shrugged her naked shoulders under her fur cape. He went on to explain that Elizabeth was the sovereign ruler of this realm, with absolute power of life and death over every living thing within its bounds. The woman did not seem overly impressed. She began to speak in a measured way, staring at Elizabeth.

“She says her father is the leader of the True People. She says that the True People were here before our forefathers, and will be here when our descendants have passed away.” He looked at the Queen. “She says that your servants have transgressed the sacred places, and have taken the game from the True People. For this unpardonable sin, we must all die.”

“Impertinent little monster,” Dudley murmured.

Dee was still listening to the woman.

“The priests of the True People have worked a great magic. They have summoned –” he paused, uncertain how to translate the archaic Latin word “– they have summoned the Ravener, who will kill us all. The Ravener walks beneath the trees. The Ravener hides in the shadows unseen.”

He stopped speaking abruptly.

“She said something more,” the Queen observed.

“Yes she did,” Dee admitted.

“Well?”

He looked from one face to another, aware that the entire hunting party had gathered around and was listening.

“She said that none of us would leave this forest alive.”

“Your Majesty, I beg you to reconsider.”

Elizabeth laughed, but there was no softness in her tone.

“Call off the hunt because of the idle threats of some dwarfish madwoman? I think not.”

“The charge of the boar into the midst of the hunting party was not by chance,” he said.

“You have spent too much time on abstruse studies. You see artifice everywhere.”

Dee told her of hearing the sound of many small, bare feet running across the grass immediately after the attack of the beast.

“I thought my ears were playing tricks, but now I wonder if there are more like the wild thing Edward captured.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips in thought, then shrugged.

“Speak no more about it, Master Dee. The hunt continues.”

They stood together beside the Queen’s magnificent horse. It tossed its head restlessly. The rest of the party was still gathered around Kelley’s diminutive captive.

“What is to be done with her?” Dee asked.

“She can come with us. We will bring her back to the lodge and question her at greater length after the hunt.”

When the chase resumed, it was late in the afternoon. The incident with the boar and the advent of Kelley’s captive had each resulted in delays. In spite of this handicap, the

hounds easily resumed the scent trail. The weary stag had not run far before pausing to rest. When the hunting party passed the final relay, it was the sight hounds that ran on their long legs before the horses, silent and deadly. Dee caught glimpses of the fleeing stag through the trees ahead of the grim pack, which consisted of greyhounds and wolfhounds, and one great lurcher with a rust coat that must have been a cross between a wolfhound and a mastiff.

The stag was brought to bay before an ancient oak on the crest of a hill. The slanting rays of the western sun transformed its spreading canopy into a golden heaven. Gasps of delight arose from the party. La Croix had been correct in his surmise at the assembly – it was not a stag, but a hart. The exhausted beast backed against the rough bark of the trunk, its head lowered and its spread of antlers, each showing six points, levelled against the snapping and growling hounds. They kept their distance. Even though the tongue lolled from the mouth of the hart and its legs wobbled from its effort to remain standing, it was still dangerous.

The riders of the hunt closed on the hart in a semicircle. Passing under the leaves of the oak was like entering a cathedral when the sunlight illuminates its windows of stained glass. The very air seemed to glow golden.

“Baron Hasselberg, you have the honour of the *mort*,” Elizabeth said in a clear voice.

The long-nosed German ambassador guided his horse forward. He appeared nervous. Dee wondered if he had ever killed a deer by his own hand. Dismounting, he stepped amid the snapping dogs and drew his sword. The hart rolled its eye at his approach. The ambassador raised his sword, hesitated, half-lowered it.

“Strike,” La Croix shouted.

The hart thrust itself forward a step and with a sweep of its antlers knocked the arm of the German aside. His sword left his hand and went tumbling through the air. A splash of blood sprayed in a crescent from his forearm through the rent in his sleeve. The ambassador cried out in pain. His aides left their horses and ran forward to draw him to safety.

The master of the hunt looked at the Queen for guidance. It was an awkward moment. Elizabeth’s face might as well have been set in stone. She slid from her saddle and went

to La Croix.

“Give me your sword,” she said without a glance at the cringing Hasselberg, who cradled his bloody arm to his breast while his men tried to staunch the flow of blood. The Frenchman silently passed down to her his short sword, which was scarcely longer than the dirk Kelley wore at his side. She approached the hart with care. It lunged at her, but the lurcher leapt in front of the Queen and forced it back with furiously snapping jaws. Elizabeth laid her hand on the head of the great dog. It growled and writhed its lips away from its fangs but suffered the touch. She waited patiently.

When the hart swung its rack away from her to fend off a rush of the hounds, she stepped forward and slashed its throat. Blood fountained across the grass. The hart dropped to its knees, its eyes glazed, and was dead before it struck the ground.

One of the Queen’s serving men came forward with a napkin. She wiped the blade of the sword clean. Not a drop of the hart’s blood stained her riding dress or her white leather glove. The master of the hunt returned the sword to its sheath. He put his horn to his lips and sounded the *mort*.

Dudley approached the Queen on foot across the grass.

“Well struck, Majesty,” he said with genuine appreciation.

She handed him her own hunting knife.

“The honour of the assay is yours, Leicester.”

He accepted the knife and bowed formally from the waist. With the help of Rutger and one of his foresters, he turned the animal over onto its back, and deftly made the exploratory incision down its belly so that its fat and muscle was displayed along either side of the cut. He made a show of probing the cut with his fingers.

“A fine, fat beast, well fit for the table, Majesty,” he declared loudly for the benefit of all.

The hunting party applauded and murmured their appreciation at his graceful performance.

The Queen went to Werner Rutger, who had taken back the reins of his horse from one of the foresters. The wild woman sat upon in front of his saddle, her ankles bound by a strap of leather beneath the horse's chest, and her wrists tied behind her back.

“Forester, you are responsible for opening this part of the chase to the hunt. To you I give the honour of the quartering.”

Rutger blinked in surprise before bowing deeply. The quartering of the kill was a ritual reserved for those of noble blood. He was a commoner. Dee observed the expressions of fierce pride on the faces of the other foresters, and on those of the huntsmen as well. Even Ham Sparrow nodded his head.

“No wonder the Queen is loved,” he murmured to Kelley, who stood near. All the party had dismounted.

Rutger was an expert at quartering game. He cut the body of the hart open and spilled its organs, then divided it into parts. These he gave to various noblemen in the party, at Elizabeth's silent prompting. Cecil and Dee received cuts of venison. Kelley, being of common blood, went without. Baron Hasselberg was given the choicest section. He bowed to the Queen as his man accepted it, and she acknowledged the bow with a graceful nod of her plumed riding hat. He had disgraced himself by his failure to deliver the *mort*, but affairs of state were more important than the proprieties of the hunt.

The final part of any royal hunt, but one that could not be omitted, was the *curée*, in which the hounds were rewarded for their work with pieces of the internal organs and intestines of the kill. First to receive a piece of meat was the *lymer* who had initiated the quest. The bloodhound bitch had been placed in the final relay solely for this purpose. The enormous lurcher bolted his piece without chewing and licked the blood from his mouth. In this way the ritual of the hunt was brought full circle, as it had been for centuries.

It was not long after departing from the baying place that they heard the drawn-out howl of some great beast. It ended in a coughing growl. The sound echoed from the trees and ridges, making it impossible to determine whether it came from behind or in front of the party.

The riders stopped as with one mind and stared at each other. The wild woman on the bow of Rutger's saddle spoke a few quiet words in the silence.

"What did she say?" the Queen demanded of Dee.

"She said 'The Ravener is coming' your Majesty." Dee told her.

The wild woman glanced from Dee's face to that of the Queen and she smiled.

Baron Hasselberg said something in German. Dee caught only the word "Cerberus," the name of the three-headed hound that guards the gates of Hades in Greek mythology. That howl did not come from the throat of any hound, he thought.

"Make haste," Elizabeth told La Croix. "We'll cover as much distance as we can before we lose the light."

"Are we going to be lost in this infernal forest?" Cecil asked Dee.

They had taken a place together at the rear of the hunting party, as before. Kelley rode somewhat further ahead, his eyes on the wild woman.

"The huntsmen know these woods too well to become lost," Dee assured him with more confidence than he felt himself.

Twilight fell over the forest. All colours muted to greys, and the gaps between the trees

were lost in shadow. Without the sunlight, the chill in the air was more noticeable. They rode through a narrowing of the roughly-cut horse path, where the boughs pressed close on either side, forcing them to go two by two. A crackling arose from the brush on their right. It sounded near to Dee's ears, but the gathering darkness made it impossible to see its source. The hounds being led behind the horses on their leashes by Ham Sparrow, with the aid of his son and another man, began to bark and growl in warning.

"It paces us," Cecil murmured.

The Queen uttered a low command to the master of the hunt.

"Unleash the hounds," La Croix called back to Ham Sparrow.

Sparrow set the sight hounds free and with a gesture sent them running among the trees, the rust-coated lurcher in the lead. He kept his *lymer* at his side, even though she strained her shortened leash and whined to join the pack.

A furious barking arose together with a deeper rumble that could only have come from the chest of a much larger beast.

"They have him," the Earl of Leicester declared.

The grin slipped from his face when the barks changed to yelps and piteous whining, punctuated by the sounds of crackling brush. All the faces of the hunting party were grim as these noises diminished, growing fewer until there was silence – all the faces save one. The wild woman smiled into the shadows of the forest with an expression of satisfaction.

"What's going on?" Dudley asked La Croix. "Have the hounds killed the beast?"

For answer, a large body flew out from the trees and struck glancingly off the glistening black flank of Dudley's great horse, making the animal rear in terror. With consummate skill, he controlled his mount. Dee searched the grass for the thing that had struck the horse, and saw the body of the lurcher lying beside the path. It had been ripped open from its throat to its groin, and its bloody intestines were strung across the grass like newly-made sausage.

The howl came, so close and so deep in pitch that it shook the heart inside Dee's chest.

"Ride," Elizabeth commanded.

The party set off at a disorganized gallop with Sparrow and his men running behind. They continued at full pace for several minutes. Before it became a panicked rout, the Queen raised her gloved hand and the huntsmen managed to slow the horses of the nobles to a walk.

Dee and Cecil were some distance behind the others, with Sparrow and his men running close after them. The little mule simply could not keep up with horses at full gallop, and Dee had elected to remain beside the lord treasurer. By the time they joined the others, the Queen was in deep conference with the huntsmen and the foresters.

"If we ride hard through the darkness, we may get lost or separated," La Croix said.

"The houndsmen could not keep up," Rutger pointed out.

"I doubt my lord treasurer's mule could keep up, either," Elizabeth said, glancing back at Cecil.

"It is better to face this thing than to flee from it," the master of the hunt advised her. "We have crossbows and swords. It would not dare attack us in the open. I say we make a fire and build a barrier around it to act as a cover."

"In a few hours soldiers will be dispatched from the lodge to search for us," Dudley observed.

"Very well." Elizabeth looked around through the gathering gloom. "Will this place do?"

La Croix studied the clearing.

"It is as good a place as any we will find, Majesty."

"Do it, then."

Baron Hasselberg was engaged in a hissing argument with the other members of the German party. He reined his horse away from them with a muffled curse and confronted the Queen.

“I must p-p-protest,” he said in his stuttering English. “It would be m-madness to wait here for that m-monster to find us. I am riding back to the hunting lodge, and I would advise –”

“Silence, sirrah!” Elizabeth roared.

The ambassador’s mouth hung open, his words cut off in his throat.

“You have already disgraced yourself once, by failing to execute the *mort*. Would you do it a second time? Would you want it said that the representative of the Emperor Rudolph flees from danger?”

Hasselberg shut his mouth with a snap but did not venture a reply.

“You will do as you are told, sirrah,” the Queen said and turned away from him in dismissal.

“So much for diplomacy,” Cecil sighed into Dee’s ear.

The entire party was set gathering wood and branches. The axes of the foresters rang out through the twilight stillness. They cut young saplings for poles and set them in the soft sod of the clearing to act as a framework, then wove oak boughs between them to give them support and to form a flimsy wall. It would never stop a large beast, Dee observed, but it might slow it down long enough to put a dozen crossbow bolts into it. A bonfire was made in the centre of the enclosure and a good supply of wood gathered for it. The wood was green but the autumn had been dry, and it would burn, although it sputtered and crackled like Lucifer.

The circular enclosure was not large enough for the horses, and in any case it was decided that they should be left unobstructed should it become necessary to flee in haste. They were tied outside the barrier facing in toward fire, in such a way that their reins could be torn loose in an instant by their riders. Privately, Dee wondered about the wisdom of this. Should the horses be needed, their eyes would be night blind from

exposure to the light of the fire. Then again, it would be foolhardy to tie them beneath the trees.

“This reminds me of the ruin of that Roman camp,” Kelley said to Dee as the two men stood with their backs to the blazing bonfire, gazing over the low wall of brush into the darkness.

“I wonder if the Roman legionnaires faced this beast,” Dee murmured.

“You think it is that old?”

“I think it is unnatural. Who can say how old it is, or how old her people may be,” Dee said, gesturing at the wild woman who sat by the fire, her wrists and ankles bound.

“You think she is telling the truth about her clan?”

“I heard the sound of their footfalls in the forest.” Dee said. “Anyway, how could she survive alone, with that thing roaming around?”

“Why is she so small?”

“She must be a dwarf of some kind,” Dee mused. “Or mayhap all her people are small.”

Another thought came to his mind, but before he could speak of it, a man’s scream in the darkness drew them running from the mouth of the enclosure. A forester staggered into the range of the firelight, holding his left arm out before him. Dee led him into the enclosure and held his arm out, examining it. An arrow projected from his hand, the fletching near the back. It had passed almost all the way through. The arrow was diminutive in size, and the blood-stained tip was made of chipped flint.

“Elf shot,” Rutger murmured.

“What was that, forester?” the Queen demanded.

“We find these arrowheads on the ground, Majesty,” he explained. “They are said by the oldsters of my village to be fairy weapons, shot by the good folk at those they wish to harm.”

“More nonsense,” Dudley snorted.

“Can you remove it?” The Queen demanded.

Dee nodded. The task fell naturally to him because he was the nearest thing to a physician in the party.

“La Croix, call everyone back into the paddock,” she told her huntsman.

He blew the prearranged series of blasts on his horn. The members of the party filed in through the opening with their arms laden with brush and wood. The gap in the paling was closed behind them.

Dee had Kelley hold the forester’s arm still, and broke off the arrow just below its fletching. He was pleased to see that the shaft did not splinter. With a single yank he drew it all the way through the man’s hand, then staunched the gush of blood with a cloth he had placed at the ready. The forester bore it with admirable fortitude.

“What’s your name?” Dee asked him.

“Hugh,” the man said, his face white but resolute.

“You did well,” Dee told him with an encouraging smile.

“I left my axe,” he said with a shake of his blond head.

From the darkness of the trees came the bone-shaking roar of the beast the wild woman called the Ravener. This time it issued from in front of them on the path, in the direction of the lodge.

“The thing has cut off our retreat,” Kelley observed.

Another sound arose from the forest – the steady, rhythmic thud of a drum.

Elizabeth cocked her head, listening.

“My soldiers?” she asked the Earl of Leicester.

He listened in silence for a time, then shook his head.

“That is not any drum I have ever heard.”

Every few minutes, a tiny arrow came from the trees and flashed across the firelight in a streak of grey. The hunting party found it necessary to keep their heads down. The arrows were not aimed at the horses, although they would have been an easy target. It suggested to Dee that whoever was loosing the arrows wanted the horses for their own use.

There was nothing to aim at with their crossbow bolts. Beyond the firelight, the darkness was absolute. Somewhere in the sky a hunter's moon was rising, but with the coming of the night, clouds had gathered on the western horizon and rolled across the stars like a black curtain. So far they had not dropped any rain. Dee thanked heaven for small mercies.

The drumbeat was constant. Now and then it was punctuated by a shrill cry, half like that from a bird and half like that from a human throat. After its deep howl, the unseen Ravener had remained silent. None of the party dared to voice the hope that it had left them.

"Why doesn't this Ravener kill the savages?" Kelley asked as he sat on the ground beside his friend, staring moodily into the fire.

The question had not occurred to Dee. Now that he considered it, the answer was obvious.

"They control the beast in some manner," he said.

Kelley glared murderously across the flames at the wild woman, who met his eyes with sullen hatred.

"You mean her people summoned this thing to kill us?"

Dee nodded.

“Do you think they know we have her?”

“They must, by now.”

She had not tried to cry out, or to escape. Perhaps she did not think either was necessary. She sat with full composure, and in spite of her bonds and her diminutive stature, there was something almost regal about her, an air of assurance and authority that only arises from a lifetime of being obeyed. Dee noted that though the furs she wore might be rough by the standards of the royal court, they were cunningly trimmed with beads and leather lashings that showed considerable skill. He studied the arrowhead of the arrow he had extracted from the forester. It, too, showed considerable skill in the making.

“Why would they make the beast kill their own game?” Kelley asked.

“They may have hoped that it would frighten us away, or at least render this part of the forest unfit for hunting.”

Dee gazed around the enclosure. The Queen had termed it a paddock. He wondered if they were sheep who had been rounded up for the slaughter. The huntsmen and foresters guarded the artificial hedge with their crossbows, backed by some of the noblemen, but most of the party had only swords and daggers. There was little they could do until an attempt was made to breach the defences – it would have been suicide to venture beyond the wall into the darkness.

The Queen sat on her picnic cloth to protect her dress from the dew-laden grass, which had started to freeze beyond the reach of the fire’s warmth. Beside her sat Dudley, Cecil, La Croix, and several of the noblemen. The German delegation had taken themselves apart and murmured in their own language with their heads close. He saw Sparrow’s favourite bloodhound bitch watching him with her intelligent brown eyes from where she lay stretched beside the fire, but the dog did not raise her nose from her forepaws. She was the only hound that remained – all the others had been slaughtered by the monster.

“Is your black dog with us?” he asked Kelley, lowering his voice so that no one would

overhear.

“The last I saw of it was when I captured the woman,” Kelley told him.

The alchemist’s familiar spirit was capricious and unreliable. In any case, Dee thought, it would only defend the man it had been bound to by witchcraft. The rest of the hunting party need not look for help from it. Dee doubted the black dog had the power to protect even the alchemist from the Ravener, as the woman had named it, should the thing choose to seek his life. From whatever pit it had been called, it had the smell of an ancient magic about it.

Dee became aware of a shuffling in the grass beyond the brushwork fence. It approached along the horse path from the direction of the lodge.

“The soldiers have come,” one of the huntsmen said from the fence, his voice lilting with renewed hope.

A ragged cheer arose from the weary hunting party. Everyone not on guard moved in the direction of the sound, still keeping their heads lowered to avoid arrows. Dee went with the rest and peered between the branches of the fence along the path. The light of the bonfire did not extend far – the fence of the enclosure blocked most of it. He heard a kind of snuffling sound. A hound, perhaps. He glanced at the *lymer*. The dog had not left the fire. She cowered behind the blaze, her lean body shaking with terror. His eyes wandered to the wild woman, who sat watching him with a smile on her lips.

“It is not the soldiers,” he said loudly enough for everyone to hear.

The night air split with the howl of the Ravener. It came from no more than a dozen feet beyond the woven barrier. Something flashed against the dark sky. Dee heard a thump. The firelight suddenly flared brighter behind him, and in the glow he glimpsed through the woven branches of the paling a hulking outline. As quickly as the light came, it died, leaving him uncertain of what he had seen. He knew only that it was enormous, as big as a large horse but much broader at the shoulder.

Furious barking from the hound drew his attention to the fire. Someone cursed. A severed human head lay amid the embers. With a detached part of his awareness, Dee realized it must have been the hair and beard burning off the head that had caused the

fire to flare up. The face of the head began to blacken, but not before he recognized it as one of the soldiers who manned the gatehouse at the lodge. Sickness came into his belly, and he fought to hold down his gorge.

Again the thing outside howled its challenge. Another thump sounded on the grass, and two more. Four heads in all.

“Crossbows, to the fence,” the Earl of Leicester commanded. “Fire at will. Kill the beast before it flees.”

All the men armed with crossbows let their bolts fly in the direction he pointed. A grunting and snuffling thing moved through the grass to the right of the path and entered under the trees. From all sides a shrill mocking cry arose from dozens of human throats, and the drum thudded furiously.

“Was the monster struck?” the Queen demanded.

“It’s too dark,” Dudley said. “There is no way to know.”

“Get that thing out of the flames,” Cecil said gruffly to the terrified royal servants.

The serving men used sticks to poke the blackened head off the embers, then piled on more logs. After a few minutes the flames leapt higher.

“There will be no rescue from the lodge,” Dee told the Queen.

She nodded grimly, and turned one of the heads with the toe of her boot. Dee saw that it was another of the man-at-arms who had guarded the gatehouse.

“We must assume that the beast killed them all,” he said.

“This is m-m-madness!” Baron Hasselberg stuttered in English. “I will not s-s-stay here to be m-m-murdered.”

He turned to his secretary.

“Fetch my horse,” he said in German.

The young man hugged his writing desk to his chest and stared wide-eyed at where the horses were tied, but he did not move from his place.

“Where are the horses?” he asked in his own language.

Dudley emitted a string of curses and ran to the opposite side of the enclosure, risking death by standing at his full height to peer over the fence. Dee had no need to follow him. It was plain to see that the horses were gone, all of them. Even Cecil’s mule had been taken while the entire party concerned itself with the Ravener on the far side of the enclosure.

Apart from the men guarding the fence, the hunting party huddled around the bonfire, their red-limed faces grim. From the outer darkness, the maddening drum beat continued.

“Our situation is precarious,” the Earl of Leicester told the Queen. “The horses are gone, we know not where. We suffer assault from both sides by bow, and the beast stalks the forest. We can expect no additional aid from the lodge before morning. Our crossbow bolts are few in number, and our supply of firewood may not last the night.”

“Why hasn’t the beast attacked us?” Elizabeth asked.

“It may be afraid of the fire,” Cecil suggested.

Kelley grunted with derision.

“It knows we have the woman, as do the other members of her clan,” Dee suggested. “They must think her our hostage.”

“It was good fortune you captured her, necromancer,” the Queen said across the flames to Kelley. “Else, like as not, we would all be dead.”

“We c-c-can threaten to kill the little woman,” Baron Hasselberg said in English. “If we h-hold a knife to her throat, the others may c-c-call off their unnatural c-c-creature and let us flee the forest.”

Dee shook his head at the Queen.

“To do so would earn the undying hatred of her people.”

“What of it?” Dudley snapped. “I will hunt them down in their dens like badgers.”

“What will you do when they send the beast after you in the night?” Kelley asked him.

“Let it be sent. I fear neither man nor beast.”

“No one doubts your courage, good Leicester,” the Queen reassured him.

“There may be another way,” Dee said.

“What is that, Master Dee?”

“Give her people what they want, Majesty.”

“Do you know what they want?” Cecil asked.

“That seems evident,” Dee said. “The killing of game began when this new section of the forest was opened to the hunt. They want the forest closed and the hunt to stop.”

“Waltham Forest is mine, not theirs,” the Queen snapped.

“They may have been here for a very long time, your Majesty. The Latin this one speaks is from the age of the Caesars.”

“Think you they have any connection with the old Roman fortifications?”

Dee shrugged. “Why else would she speak the Latin tongue?”

“All those centuries? It is scarce to be believed,” Cecil said.

The Queen sat in silence for several minutes, staring into the dying fire. The wood was nearly exhausted. At intervals they heard the crackle of a massive body press itself through the undergrowth, as the beast restlessly circled the clearing beyond the fireglow.

“Very well,” the Queen said at last with obvious reluctance. “We will bargain for our freedom. Talk to the dwarfish woman, Master Dee. You seem to be the only one who can understand the barbarous Latin she speaks. Tell her that in future I will forbid all hunting in this part of the forest, and will return it to its former unkept state, if her people call off their Ravener and allow us to leave this place unhindered.”

The wild woman had been watching them through her tangle of black hair, her head lowered. Her dark eyes flicked from the Queen's face to Dee's, and what she saw there provoked an expression of triumph. He sat on the grass next to her and repeated the Queen's message in her own tongue, contriving as best he could to simulate her accent and broken grammar. She nodded her understanding.

"Tell her we want our horses back," Dudley interjected.

Dee looked at the Queen, who nodded. He repeated Leicester's demand. The wild woman's upper lip curled in scorn, revealing her sharp teeth which were almost like those of a cat. Dee realized that they had been broken or ground to points.

"Why should we agree to anything when we can kill you all and take what we wish?"

"If we die, you die," Dee pointed out.

She shrugged her shoulders under her fox-fur cape to show her indifference to this fate.

"Be clear as to what is being offered your people," he added. "If you allow the hunting party to leave the forest, you shall be unmolested henceforth in this place, but if you attempt to hinder us, men of war will return and slay your clan to the last man, woman and child."

"You would never find us," she boasted.

"What of the rocks beside the ancient place of war?" he asked. "If burning oil were poured into the gaps between those rocks, what then?"

This gave her pause. Her dusky face became serious in thought.

"I must talk to my father and the elders," she said. "I will give them your terms, and tell them what you have threatened."

Dee hesitated. Now was the time for a show of good faith, but could they dare trust the honour of this savage? Then again, what choice did they have? If she intended to betray them, she could as easily do it later as sooner.

He stood and drew out his dagger. Her eyes narrowed but she did not attempt to shrink away. Going behind her, he cut the thong that bound her wrists together, and then cut free her ankles.

“What are you doing?” Dudley protested.

He started to rise but the Queen laid a restraining hand on his arm, and he resumed his place beside her.

The wild woman gained her feet slowly, rubbing the red circles around her wrists and gazing up at Dee through her tangle of hair. He was a tall man – her head came scarcely past his belt.

“Go and talk to your father and the elders of your people,” he told her in Latin. “Return with their answer.”

She turned her back on the fire and started toward the gap in the hedge.

“B-but, you c-c-cannot let her go,” Baron Hasselberg cried. “She is our only s-s-security.”

He jumped to his feet and darted at the woman. Kelley was there before he reached her. The flailing ambassador might as well have been a child in his powerful arms. The wild woman did not even turn her head.

“Open the wall for her,” Dee called out to the startled huntsman at the gate. The man hesitated and looked to the Queen, who repeated Dee’s order. He bowed and dragged the woven panel of branches that served as the door away from the gap. The little woman walked serenely past him and out of the paddock without a sidelong glance.

A cry of triumph went up from many throats in the forest as she emerged from the opening in the wall. Dee marvelled that she had no fear of the beast. In some way he could not begin to imagine, her clan must have absolute command over it. He motioned at the huntsman, who hurried to reseal the gap.

Kelley shoved the cursing German ambassador away from him with contempt. The man fell to the grass, and was helped up by his secretary and Werner Rutger, who prevented

him from drawing his sword. They consoled the Baron's bruised feelings in his own language.

"Now what happens?" Kelley grunted.

"We wait," Dee murmured, returning to the fire.

The drum fell silent. The murmur of conversation withered and died within the enclosure. Everyone strained to hear what they could not see beyond the wall.

It could be worse, Dee mused as he stared into the dying embers of the fire and listened to the forest. Thus far, only the minstrel had been killed of the hunting party. If they got through this night with no more than the loss of the dogs and a single commoner, the Queen would consider it fortunate indeed. Although, there were those who might not share her opinion, he thought, shifting his gaze to the four severed heads that were piled near the wall, one of them blackened beyond recognition.

The soft whinny of a horse drew his attention outward. The Earl of Leicester leapt to his feet with a curse. A murmur of wonder arose. Dee stood stiffly – he had been sitting on the damp grass for too long.

The horses were back in their place at the outside of the hedge wall. They had been returned with such stealth that none of the men guarding the wall had noticed in the dim glow from the dying fire.

“This is a good sign,” Dee told Kelley, who stood beside him with his sword in his hand.

A whistle, like the cry of a bird, sounded outside the gate. All eyes turned to the Queen, who stood with the Earl of Leicester on her right and the Baron Burghley on her left.

“Open the gate,” she ordered.

“Huntsmen, ready your crossbows,” Dudley said between clenched teeth.

When the gate was drawn aside, the wild woman entered as serenely as she had left, followed by an older and a younger man. Neither of them stood four feet tall. They were

clothed around the loins and over the shoulders in furs, but otherwise naked. The older man had grey hair, a ragged grey beard, and wore a necklace of bear claws. He used a staff surmounted by an animal skull and a tuft of black feathers as a walking aid. Dee observed that he limped on his left leg, which was scarred down the thigh, the whiteness of the jagged scar contrasting strongly with the darker skin.

The younger beardless man cast nervous glances from side to side, but if the elder was afraid he gave no indication of it. The three stopped before the embers of the fire and the woman spoke.

“This is my father, leader of my people, and my brother, the first of the hunt,” Dee translated her words. “The elders of the True People have agreed to let you leave the forest, if you pledge on the sky and on the earth never to hunt here again.”

The Queen raised an eyebrow at Dee. She stepped forward and lifted her hands to the heavens.

“I pledge on the sky that henceforth, I shall hunt no more in this place, nor shall any other of my people hunt here, and the same I pledge on the earth.” She lowered her hands toward the ground.

Dee translated her words. The older man grunted and nodded approval. He motioned for his son to come forward, and drew from a sheath at his own waist a stone knife. This he passed to his son, who carried it on his open palms to the Queen.

Elizabeth glanced at her advisors, then accepted the knife. The young man started to turn away.

“Wait.”

He stopped at her tone, although he did not understand her command. She drew from the sheath at her belt her own dagger and handed its jewelled-hilt to the young savage, who took it wonderingly. The guard and pommel were solid gold and the shining blade was inlaid with a tracery of gold wire. Emeralds and rubies glittered in its ivory hilt. It was worth the price of a small estate. The youth carried it reverently back to his father, who grunted and slid it into his sheath.

“One other thing you must do,” the woman said, and Dee translated.

Elizabeth blinked her heavy-lidded eyes and waited.

“You must give us the man who has led hunters into our forest to snare our game and net our fish.”

The Queen frowned at Dee.

“I know not what she means, your Majesty,” he said in apology.

He asked the woman to explain herself, and listened with a sombre expression.

“They want the man who brought hunters from the camp – I presume she means the village of Chingford, your Majesty – and who showed them where to set their snares and where to place their nets.”

The bearded elder frowned and pointed. Dee realized that he was pointing at Werner Rutger. The stocky forester wore a grim expression but he said nothing.

“Good forester, why does he point at you?” the Queen asked.

Rutger made no answer.

“He took the meat from our mouths,” the wild woman said in Latin, with Dee translating her words almost as she uttered them. “He led men to steal our rabbits and our fish, and to snare our birds.”

The Queen again turned her eyes to Rutger.

“Explain yourself, sirrah!”

“What she says is true,” he replied.

“You led poachers into the Queen’s forest?” La Croix demanded incredulously.

“The crops failed, and the people in my village were starving. The children were so

thin, their ribs showed through their sides. It was a part of the forest closed to the hunt – what harm was there in taking a little game?”

Dee remembered the rabbit he had seen being dressed beside a cottage in the village, and the furtive way the man dressing it had carried it out of his sight.

“You know the penalty for poaching?” Cecil said gruffly.

“Aye, death,” Rutger said.

“Give the man to us, and we will call back the Ravener and let you leave the forest,” the wild woman said through Dee, who translated her words.

Elizabeth bowed her head in thought. Moments passed in silence with all eyes fixed on her bleak face. At last the Baron Hasselberg could bear it no longer.

“You must g-give this m-m-man to the savages,” he told the Queen. “By his own t-tongue he is a c-c-common poacher. Why do you hesitate?”

Rutger stared at the ambassador but said nothing in his own defence.

“I agree, my Queen,” Dudley said. “The man’s life is forfeit by his own confession. What difference if his life ends by your executioner’s noose or by the knives of these savages?”

Elizabeth smiled and nodded her head toward the bearded savage.

“I will not give one of my own subjects into the hands of ghouls,” she said, still nodding affably. “Do not translate my words to them, Master Dee.”

“What shall I say, your Majesty?” he asked in an equally pleasant tone.

“Anything you like. Use your imagination.”

She raised her hands and turned toward the gathered members of the hunting party as though to address them.

“When I give the command, make haste to your horses. Let nothing deter you. The beast has been withdrawn some distance, or we would have heard it moving in the trees. No doubt it was called away to let us emerge from the paddock unharmed, and so we shall – all of us, including you, good forester. Not a word of complaint, Baron Hasselberg, or I will slit your throat myself with this stone knife. I rule in this place, not you and certainly not a troop of half-naked monkeys.”

As she spoke, Dee concocted a flowery address in barbaric Latin that spoke of friendship between the two peoples, and of the sacred right of the little folk to keep their forest in perpetuity. He felt like a hypocrite, but the three savages seemed to find what he said agreeable.

“You men,” Elizabeth said to two of her huntsmen, “take our good forester by the arms and escort him through the gate. The rest of you, follow after him.”

She gestured toward Rutger as he was led through the gate and bowed her head at the bearded elder, who nodded, his dark eyes glittering behind the smile on his face.

“Crossbows at the ready,” Dudley murmured to the huntsmen and foresters.

They emerged from the enclosure. Their eyes had adjusted to the darkness as the fire died, and during the hours they had waited the scudding clouds had become thin and ragged in the heavens, allowing the light of the almost full moon to touch the leaves on the trees and the blades of grass in the clearing with silver edges. As Dee studied the trees, the moonlight brightened. Where he had seen only shadows, he was suddenly able to distinguish a score or more of figures arrayed at the edge of the clearing, bows drawn in their hands and levelled at hunting party. All of them were of dwarfish stature.

At the command of the bearded elder, several of the small men came forward into the open to receive Rutger.

“Move toward your horses,” Dudley said in a mild, low voice.

The bearded leader of the savages noticed the drift toward the horses and spoke a few sharp words, waving his hand.

“He wants you to move away from the horses,” Dee translated.

The Queen smiled and nodded her head several times at the little man. She stroked the neck of her golden mount.

“Tell him we want to make sure that the horses have not been injured,” she told Dee.

Dee translated this into barbaric Latin. The elder scowled and shook his head. He spoke too swiftly for Dee to understand, and half a dozen of the savages started across the clearing toward the horses.

“Kill as many as you can with your first volley,” the Queen said in a conversational tone. “Now!”

The metal strings of the crossbows sang their death song. The savages who had ventured into the open were cut down like autumn wheat beneath the scythe. The wild woman thrust her father to one side and took a bolt through her neck. Her father and brother howled in anguish. They grasped her arms and dragged her toward the trees. The moon passed back behind its curtain of cloud and the clearing slowly began to dim.

“To horse!” Dudley cried.

He helped the Queen into her saddle, though she needed little help. She had been riding since the age of five years. Dee saw in the gloom that Cecil was having trouble mounting his mule. He held the bridle of the animal until the portly treasurer was able to climb into his saddle.

“Many thanks,” Cecil cried as he wheeled the nimble-footed creature around and set it darting after the hunting party.

Dee threw himself onto his palfrey and saw from the corner of his eye that Kelley had already taken horse. A small arrow passed his cheek near enough that he felt it brush his beard. Several of the party had not reached their horses. The two huntsmen who had escorted Rutger at the front of the party had both fallen with arrows in their bodies. The forester caught the reins of a terrified riderless mount as it ran past him and swung himself into its saddle. He spurred the horse forward with his knees.

The German ambassador had fallen and struggled to rise to his feet, an arrow projecting from his right thigh. Dee realized that it must have been his horse that Rutger had taken.

He hesitated. The palfrey was not strong enough to carry two even if he could get Hasselberg on her back.

A howl came through the trees that froze Dee's blood and momentarily paralysed him.

"He's already dead," Kelley shouted to Dee as he galloped past.

The Baron had fallen to his knees once more, clawing at an arrow that projected from his face. As Dee watched in horror, two more shafts appeared in the German's torso, and he fell forward.

Dee kicked the palfrey in the flanks and almost unhorsed himself, so sudden was its bolt into motion. The cry of the Ravener had terrified the horse as much as the man. As Dee left the clearing, he cast a glance over his shoulder. Something large and black moved against the background of trees. It was bigger than any horse, and loped after them with an awkward yet terrible swiftness.

The mad ride through the forest had a nightmare quality. The master of the hunt, La Croix, went first, followed by Dudley on his massive Frisian great horse, and the Queen close beside him. Those in the van could not spur their mounts because they were forced to pick out the narrow path and avoid the looming trunks of trees in the variable darkness. This held the party more tightly together than would have been the case had those in the lead been able to push their horses to full gallop.

The moon came and went in the starless sky, never shedding her full light, but at times dimly glimpsed through veils of thinning clouds. When Dee glanced up, her blurred silver orb seemed to dash furiously through the clouds as though pursued. The sparkling whiteness of the frost-covered grass helped to show the path, which wound through the shadowed trees like a pale ribbon.

The thing that pursued them was not quite quick enough to overtake the horses, but neither did it fall far behind. At intervals it would rush forward with great swiftness on its loping gait until it almost snapped at their heels, but never near enough to see clearly on the twisting forest path. Each time Dee cast a glance over his shoulder, he glimpsed no more than its moving shadow. The panting in its throat could be heard above the thud of hooves on the frozen forest floor. Soon the horses began to gasp as well. Their initial terror had given them wings, but they tired quickly.

Cecil began to lag behind the rest. It was only to be expected – Dee was surprised that his mule had managed to keep up with the horses for so long. He drew back the reins on the palfrey and checked its pace until it fell into step beside the mule.

“You can’t help me,” Cecil shouted. “Save yourself.”

Dee knew the older man spoke the truth. Even if he had time to transfer Cecil to his own mount, the little palfrey would be slowed more than the mule. She had a brave heart but was not strong enough to bear the weight of two riders for any distance. Yet Dee found

that he could not abandon the lord treasurer.

“Courage, Cecil,” Dee shouted back.

The old man gave Dee a look that said he was mad, but there was gratitude in his expression as well.

A third horse began to lag behind the rest of the hunting party. Dee recognized Rutger’s back and wondered why the forester had slowed his pace. Then he saw the arrow that projected from behind the ear of the forester’s borrowed mount. A stream of glistening blood, black under the moonlight, extended down the horse’s neck. Its flanks were white with the rime of its sweat and it gasped for air at each broken step. It was nearly finished – only terror kept it moving forward.

Rutger met Dee’s eye but did not attempt to speak. His broad, bearded face resolute, he reached to his belt and drew forth his long-handled axe from its sling. With the other hand he reined back his horse.

The weary animal stumbled and fell. Dee twisted around in his saddle. He saw Rutger standing beside the horse, which lay on its side struggling to get up. His axe was held high. He faced the darkness of the path. A vast black shape bounded through the trees and reared over him, and then Dee’s vision was obscured by branches of the oaks that pressed on either side of the path. The scream of the horse reached their ears, thin and high in pitch, like the scream of a woman, but from the man there came no sound.

They had lost sight of the hunting party. It was fortunate that the moon chose to show her face, or Dee would not have been able to follow the path. As it was, the moonlight made the frosted grass gleam like beaten pewter. The tracks of the hunting party were clearly visible.

The palfrey trembled and gasped between his knees. It began to lag behind the mule, which although slower, had the greater endurance. Rutger’s brave but futile stand had gained them no more than a few moments. The monster had paused just long enough to slay the forester and his horse. Dee heard its deep panting breaths close on his horse’s heels, and he almost imagined he could feel their heat on his neck.

The path began to widen into a roadway, and Dee realized that they must be drawing

near the royal hunting lodge. It was lighter in the sky as well. The first faint glow of morning began to pale the eastern horizon.

“Are we going to reach the lodge?” Cecil gasped over his shoulder at Dee.

Dee stared at him for an instant but found no words. The beast would have them in less than a hundred yards. He could hear the click of its claws against stones in the sod. So close to sanctuary, but they would die within sight of the gatehouse. He wondered if the rest of the hunting party, which by now must be safe within the lodge, would array themselves along the palisade to watch them torn limb from limb.

The trees opened into an expanse of meadow. Something loomed ahead against the pale eastern sky. The Great Standing of the Old King. He wondered if they could dash up its stairs to the second level, then rejected the notion. There was no time to dismount before the Ravener fell upon them. It was at his very back. He did not dare to turn his head lest his exhausted palfrey stumble.

Something moved along the highest level of the timber structure. He recognized the silhouettes of men, and at the same time realized that horses were gathered beneath the standing.

“Loose your bolts!”

The cry came from above, and immediately it was answered by the thrum of crossbow strings released from their locks. The startled howl of the beast split the air next to Dee’s very ear.

Dee realized the beast has ceased its pursuit. He rode under the standing and wheeled his palfrey, which was on the brink of collapse from exhaustion. Kelley flashed him a fierce grin from his saddle, teeth white in the pre-dawn glow, his upraised sword gleaming.

“Took you long enough,” he said.

“Forward!”

The cry came from the Earl of Leicester, who spurred his sable great horse from under

the timbers of the standing. Kelley and a dozen other riders went with him brandishing raised swords and axes in their hands. A second volley of crossbow bolts sang forth through the gloom, and a second howl of rage arose from the throat of the beast. Dee wondered if this was the first time the creature had ever been hurt.

It reared up on its hind legs like a bear and spread wide its forelimbs in challenge, its curved claws like sickles against the dawn light. Dudley caused his horse to rear up and strike with its metal-shod fore-hooves at the creature's face. He drew its head down and aside before the beast could slash with its paws. A dozen steel crossbow bolts bristled from its hide. A third volley sang forth from the standing, and more bolts appeared. Kelley slashed at its underside with his sword and wheeled his horse away.

It was like a game of bear-baiting, Dee realized, but played with men instead of dogs. It was a game the English knew well.

Furious barking came from the direction of the lodge. Armed men poured through the open gate. Dee recognized Ham Sparrow, running toward the standing after a pack of his hounds as he urged them on in his distinctive Devon accent.

The beast tried to retreat but the riders drove it back toward the standing with their swords, and with the sheer weight of their maddened mounts. Dee saw a man flicked out of his saddle like a doll by a glancing backhand slash of the monster's forearm. He was dead before he struck the grass, his neck broken.

The steel crossbow bolts began to tell their tale of blood in the black sides of the creature. The hunting crossbows were not as powerful as war crossbows, but one bolt alone from them was enough to bring down a stag. Dee counted fifteen bolts in the thing's rippling flesh as it whirled and snapped at them with its teeth. Its quickness was astonishing for so heavy an animal.

A bolt struck it in the back of the head, and it staggered as though hit by a heavy maul. A long, groaning bellow issued from its throat. It rolled its head on its neck and glared at its tormentors. The Earl of Leicester spurred his horse forward and slashed at its face with his sword. The blade caught it high in the throat. Blood gushed forth in a thick fountain. The beast staggered two steps, and dropped to the ground, its hulk still quivering.

A ragged cheer went up from the standing as the growling hounds tore into the tough hide of the creature. In a grotesque way the frantic worrying of the dogs reminded Dee of piglets competing for the teats of a sow. When Sparrow was certain the beast was quite dead, he drew the hounds away with hand gestures and short words of command, and took them back under his control.

Elizabeth descended the stair of the standing, flanked by her attendants. She was the only woman present, but seemed completely at ease surrounded by men. She passed the crossbow she had cradled in her arm to one of her servants and approached William Cecil with a stern expression.

“The next time we ride together, you will be on a horse, by God,” she told him.

Cecil bowed and remained silent. But when the Queen turned away, Dee saw him reach out and pat his mule affectionately on the neck.

Elizabeth approached Dee and took his hand.

“We thank you for watching over the life of our foolish lord treasurer, Master Dee,” she said with a smile. “I would hate to lose the old fool. I’ve grown used to him.”

Dee considered pointing out that he could not have left Cecil behind on his exhausted palfrey even had he wished, but prudence held his tongue.

“Show the beast to me,” she commanded the Earl of Leicester.

With the help of a forester and one of the soldiers from the lodge, Dudley managed to twist the head of the creature so that its face was visible in the pale dawn light. It had an elongated muzzle something like that of a bear, but its head was round and its ears rose upward in points with tufts of fur on their tips. There was something disturbingly human

about its sightlessly staring dead eyes.

“What manner of beast is it?” the Queen asked Dee.

“I have never seen its like,” he admitted. “It is neither bear nor ape.”

“It is not a natural thing,” La Croix murmured as he gazed down at it. “It is of the Devil.”

“From whence did it come?” Dudley asked Dee.

“Mayhap the troglodytes bred it in their caves,” Dee said.

He did not elaborate. The human-like shape of the thing’s skull and the latent intelligence in its eyes suggested to him an abominable practice that could only have been achieved through the use of blackest sorcery. Some hybrid creatures, such as Cecil’s mule, were wholesome, but others were not.

“Do you think they have any more of its kind?” the Queen asked grimly.

Dee shrugged his shoulders.

“It would be foolish to assume otherwise, Majesty.”

“I will root them out of their holes and harry them down like rats,” Dudley vowed. “The arrogance – to dictate terms to the sovereign of this realm.”

“Do nothing without my permission,” the Queen told him. “I must think on this matter with care.”

She drew Dee aside.

“We will hold conference on this matter,” she told him in a low voice, bending her head close to his.

“It would be wise, Majesty,” Dee agreed. Sorcery was not to be trifled with.

“Now tell me, what became of our forester? We lost sight of him in the chase.”

Dee described Rutger’s final defiant stand against the beast. The Queen nodded.

“I am glad it ended as it did. My heart would have been heavy to order his death, as I was bound to do by the nature of his crime. It is better this way.”

“Will you continue to hunt the new tract of forest?” he asked.

She pursed her lower lip in thought, eyes on the beast.

“I think not. No need to stir the hornet’s nest until the fire is ready for it.”

Kelley approached, an expression of satisfaction on his dark features. The Queen regarded him with an unreadable expression in her heavy-lidded eyes.

“What do you suppose its flesh tastes like?” he said.

A bark of laughter escaped her lips before she was able to control herself. She drew the stone knife given to her by the bearded savage and tossed it at Kelley, who caught it deftly by the hilt.

“Cut us good large roast, necromancer, and we shall see.”

GLOSSARY OF ELIZABETHAN TERMS

Aqua fortis: Literally 'strong water', this is the term used by alchemists for nitric acid.

Assay: During a royal hunt, when the prey has been killed, one of the hunting party is given the honour of examining its flesh to determine its worth. This examination is known as the 'assay'.

Black Dog: The myth of a spectral black hound is Celtic in its origins, and ancient, but enduring. Sightings of black dogs with glowing eyes are still reported in England today.

Breeches: Sometimes called upper hose, these were puffed shorts that covered the hips and buttocks of men, and were worn below the doublet.

Chase: Part of the forest where wild game is hunted.

Cob: A general term for a small but sturdy horse.

Coiner: A maker of coins from debased alloys. The Elizabethan equivalent of a counterfeiter.

Crumhorn: A long and slender woodwind instrument with a curved end that makes a reedy whine somewhat similar to that of a drone on the bagpipes.

Curée: The final ritual act of the royal hunt, in which the hounds are rewarded with pieces of the innards of the slain prey.

Cutpurse: The Elizabethan equivalent of a pickpocket. The purse was a leather bag worn dangling from the belt by the drawstrings that closed its mouth. It was stolen by cutting these strings with a knife.

Dirk: A long knife without a guard, used as a general purpose weapon and tool in the Scottish Highlands.

Doublet: The garment worn by men on the torso. It resembled a tight-wasted jacket and was often elaborately cut, pleated, slashed, and decorated with embroidery, pearls and precious stones.

Elixir: The elixir of alchemy was fabled to confer eternal life.

Fairy Mounds: The fairies were commonly supposed to dwell beneath rounded hills or mounds, in which there was a magic door that opened to allow them to enter or exit, and then disappeared.

Fewmets: Deer droppings.

Gavotte: An energetic dance that developed in France.

Hart: A male red deer with at least five points, or tines, on each of its antlers.

Hose: This is a general term for any tight leg covering. Elizabeth hose was worn by both men and women, and consisted of a long stocking on each leg.

Isabella: A Spanish horse with a golden coat and a pale blond mane and tail.

Lurcher: A fierce and intelligent mongrel dog, used as a sight hound to hunt large animals.

Lymer: A scent hound with an especially keen nose, used to locate the game just before the start of a royal hunt.

Mandragora: The mandrake, a root with medicinal properties that was believed to possess occult potency due to its resemblance to the human form.

Mort: The kill, a formal part of the royal hunt, when the deer was slain by cutting its throat.

Nonsuch: A word applied to something wondrous and without an equal. There was a Nonsuch House on London Bridge, and also a Nonsuch Palace in Surrey built by Henry VIII.

Palfrey: A class of horse with a very smooth gait, favoured by female riders for this reason.

Papist: A derogatory term for a Roman Catholic, denoting one who believes in the divine authority of the Pope. It was applied both to Catholic priests and to lay Catholics.

Par force de chiens: Literally, 'by force of dogs' a method of hunting in which the

quarry was chased by hunters on horseback using packs of hounds.

Pike: An extremely long spear with a metal spearhead. Pikes were more than ten feet in length.

Rapier: This sword had a long, thin blade slightly curved at the end. In Dee's time the blade of a rapier was broad enough that it could be used as both a stabbing and a slashing weapon. In later periods the blade became thinner, and it was used solely for stabbing, like the modern foil.

Rascal: A small, malnourished deer.

Red powder: Alchemical preparation which, when properly used, was thought to be capable of transforming base metals into gold.

Ruff: Worn by both men and woman, the ruff was a broad collar of starched white fabric, corrugated to give it stiffness and thickness. It usually went all the way around the neck, so that the head seemed to sit upon it as if upon a platter.

Sack: A sweet fortified red wine consumed during Elizabethan times, imported from Spain.

Saye: Type of cloth that consisted of silk threads interwoven with wool. Saye was iridescent due to its silk content, and changed its color as it was viewed from different angles.

Skrying: Crystal gazing, which was a popular practice among Elizabethans.

Shewstone: A crystal ball, or showstone, for skrying. It usually took the form of a small globe of rock crystal, but Dee also owned a small hand mirror of polished obsidian.

Sirrah: A term of contempt and derision, a deliberate distortion of the honourable address 'sir'.

Skullcap: A tight cap associated with university scholars that covered the top of the head and ears.

Slashed: Sleeves were often “slashed” to lend them a more dramatic appearance. This was a false cut in the fabric lined with a fabric of a strongly contrasting color, which showed itself when the sleeve was moved.

Snaphance: An early form of the flintlock pistol, it replaced the heavier and more cumbersome wheel-lock. It was quicker to fire and more reliable.

Starlings: The boat-shaped protective supports for the piers of London Bridge. They were formed by driving great elm piles into the soft river mud in the outline of an oval that was pointed at both ends, and then filling the interior space with rubble. The streamlined shape of the starlings allowed the water of the River Thames to flow between them more easily.

Suffume: To fume or smoke the air with incense.

Tabor: An Elizabethan drum carried in the hand. It was small, flat, and made a sharp rapping noise that was used to keep the beat of music.

Tinderbox: A small metal box containing a piece of steel, a piece of flint stone to strike against the steel to makes sparks, and dry tinder for the sparks to set on fire.

Unharbour: To drive wild game from its cover.

White tincture: A stage in the alchemical process leading to the production of the philosopher's stone.

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