

## DOCTOR MUFFET'S ISLAND

by Brian Stableford

**Brian Stableford's recent works include the novel *The New Faust at the Tragicomique* and the anthology *News from the Moon and Other French Scientific Romances*, both from Black Coat Press. Routledge published his mammoth reference book *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia* in 2006. One does not have to be familiar with the remarkable events that occurred in Brian's tale about "The Plurality of Worlds" (August 2006), to follow the further exploits of Francis Drake and his adventures on...**

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### 1

The island's only hill was so shallow that it would have posed no challenge at all had it been a Devon moor, nor was its vegetation unduly thorny, but the thin-boled trees were parasitized by so many sticky vines that it was difficult for Francis Drake and Martin Lyle to climb it, even with the aid of a machete.

The island seemed to have little in the way of animal life except for birds, of which there were many brightly colored kinds, which seemed quite unintimidated by their visitors. Whenever Drake was not fully occupied in clearing a path he attempted to watch the birds more attentively, but the only result of his cursory study was a conviction that a few of the larger parrots were studying him with equal intensity. It was easy to imagine that the endless avian chattering was conversation.

When Drake and his young cousin finally got to the top of the rise it was necessary for the boy to climb a coconut palm with the captain's best telescope clutched beneath his arm. Drake watched him anxiously, afraid for the instrument. It was one of John Dee's finest, designed with the aid of the theory of optics Dee and Tom Digges had worked out in happier days and constructed by a lens-grinder from Strasbourg, who had fled to Protestant England to escape the gathering storm of the continental wars of religion. In theory, it was a capital offense for anyone outside the Queen's Navy to possess a telescope, but Drake had long been an exception to that rule. The ethership fiasco had reduced his reputation as Queen Jane's favorite privateer, but he ought to be able to recover his prestige if his present expedition went well.

As soon as Martin had attained an adequate height, Drake demanded to know whether the large island of which he desperately wanted news was visible. Its real existence was a point he desperately needed to prove, for the benefit of his belief in his own sanity.

Martin uncapped the telescope's objective lens, and put it to his eye. "I can see two isles to the west, captain," he reported. "The nearer is tiny, no bigger than this one, but the other—*God's blood!*"

There had been a time when Drake's automatic reaction would have been to warn the boy against taking the Lord's name in vain, but they were in the middle of the mis-named Pacific Ocean now. Although Drake had prayed as fervently as he ever had in his life during the storms that had driven them back to Peru when they had first emerged from the Magellan Straits, cursing did not seem so dire a sin when the nearest church was a thousand miles away and papist.

"What is it, boy?" Drake asked, anxiously.

"It's a ship, captain," Martin reported. "She's heading straight toward us with full sail. She's bigger than the *Pelican*."

Drake did not trouble to remind his kinsman that the *Pelican* had now been the *Golden Hind* for more than fifty days. "Is she flying Spanish colors?" he asked, filled with sudden dread.

"The cross of Saint George!" Martin reported, excitedly. "She's English!"

Drake could not share his cousin's enthusiasm. The remainder of his crewmen would doubtless be as glad as Martin to discover Englishmen on the far side of the world, but to him it signified that he had been forestalled. He could not imagine by whom, but the fact was obvious—unless the red cross were a treacherous ploy, intended to deceive. That seemed unlikely, though. The Spanish ships plying the nascent navigation-paths west of the Americas were cargo vessels, not warships; they had no fear yet of pirates or privateers and no incentive to display false colors.

Although the *Hind* was anchored to the south of the islet, with no headland to shield her from view, there was no way that the captain of this mysterious vessel could tell what she was unless the man in his crow's-nest was equipped with a telescope at least as good as Drake's own. Even if the Spanish navy had such instruments, they would not have been given to explorers of this ocean. As good Romanists, the Spaniards were supposed to believe that the Pacific had no land in it at all, with the possible exception of Dante's mount of Purgatory. The existence of the Americas had already proved Cosmas' geography ludicrously false, but the Roman Church always let go of its mistakes by slow degrees.

"Has she gun-ports in her sides?" Drake demanded.

"Can't tell," Martin replied. "She's front-on, and all I can see for sure is her sails. But she's English, captain—English for sure."

"Come down now!" Drake commanded. The boy made haste to obey. Drake remembered as soon as he had spoken that he had not asked for details of the more distant island that Martin had seen—but there would be time enough for that when more urgent matters had been settled.

Drake did not wait for Martin's feet to touch the ground. He set off down the hill, cursing himself for not having cleared a better trail as they came up it. Running

was direly difficult, and it seemed to Drake that the vines had become positively malevolent, lying in ambush to catch his feet and trip him. To avoid any impression of panic, though, he waited until he did not have to yell at the top of his voice to order William Ashley, his second mate, to regather the landing-party and get the pinnace afloat.

The wind was blowing from the west, almost directly contrary to the course Drake had been endeavoring to follow. That was why he had consented to put in at such a unpromising island, which would surely have been inhabited had it nursed the free-standing pools and streams of fresh water he needed to replenish his casks. Given that the other ship was under full sail, and had been close enough for its colors to be identifiable at first sight, it would likely reach the island within the hour. It would be politic for the *Golden Hind* to be in deep water when she arrived, with sail enough aloft to out-maneuver her. Even if her colors were true, that could not guarantee that her crew were loyal subjects of Queen Jane. It was darkly rumored in Plymouth that the Elizabethans had enough ships and captains of their own to form a shadow navy of sorts, and that they had secret bases in the far-flung corners of the globe, from which they ceaselessly plotted rebellion. Drake thought such tales highly unlikely, but the appearance of the ship was so improbable in itself that he dared not discount any possibility.

Drake had no fear of being outgunned, let alone of being outsailed, by Spaniards, Elizabethans, or the Devil himself. The tightness in his chest and the nauseous feeling in his gut arose entirely from frustration, not from some God-given presentiment of disaster. As he made what haste he could to reach the strand with his dignity intact, all he could think about was the folly that had caused him to be seduced by Tom Digges and John Dee into volunteering for the crew of the *ethership* instead of making his present expedition three years before, in 1577. That three-year delay, it seemed, had cost him his priority. Even knowing the position of the island he had selected as his target—the sole advantage he had obtained from the *ethership's* disastrous voyage—had proved inadequate. Someone had got here ahead of him.

There was confusion on the beach as men hurried back toward the pinnace from every direction, bearing whatever natural booty they had been able to gather—coconuts, for the most part, with a few turtles and baskets of eggs laid by ground-nesting birds. There was need of a sharp mind and a commanding voice, but Drake was careful to give his orders in a level voice, rather than barking or howling them, forming the words with precision. No one asked him what the matter was; the crew did as they were told, as quickly and efficiently as they could. Once Martin had arrived in his wake, though, still carrying the precious telescope, the sailors were quick to seek better enlightenment from the boy.

The mate was the one man who guessed why Drake was so anxious in the face of seemingly good news. As soon as the pinnace was afloat and headed back to the *Golden Hind* Ashley made his way to Drake's side and murmured in his ear:

“How did they come here, captain? Who else knows what you know about the isle at seventeen?” He meant seventeen degrees south—the latitude that Walter Raleigh had estimated while he had hastily sketched a series of maps during the ethership’s initial ascent.

“Why, no one,” the captain replied, grimly. “Who would believe it, if anyone did, since I am mad, and everything that happened aboard the ethership was mere Devil-led delusion?”

Drake spoke sarcastically, as he had learned to do, but it was the truth. So far as he knew, no one else did know of the island’s existence, save for the *Golden Hind*’s officers—and none of them had been told until they had left the Magellan Straits. He had told no one in England—not even Tom Digges—while he tried in vain to convince the ethership’s master that their experiences within the moon and among the stars had most certainly not been a dream.

Only three of the *Queen Jane*’s five-man crew had survived the break-up of the ship, although the bodies of the other two had never been found, presumably having fallen into the Kentish marshes or the Thames estuary. Of those three, John Field had embellished his own experiences with such a surfeit of imagined devilry that no one in the world—with the possible exception of his master, Archbishop John Foxe—could have believed his testimony. Tom Digges, to Drake’s utter astonishment, had claimed that it had all been a hallucination caused by the intoxicating effects of the ether. The combination of those two testimonies, set against his own, had made Drake seem a monumental fool when he insisted that it had all been real, and that the Devil had not come into it at all. Drake had been forced to abandon that insistence, and by virtue of that abandonment, he had kept Walter Raleigh’s sketch-map a very close secret indeed. He had taken care not to show it to Master Dee, let alone to Northumberland or any other member of the Privy Council, reserving it for his own future use.

In truth, he could not know how trustworthy the map was. Had he not had his own duties to attend to while the ethership was in flight—he was the only true crewman aboard, save for Digges—he would certainly have made his own maps as best he could, or at least graven the sight of the world’s far side more securely into his memory, but he had had work to do. Raleigh had been trained in navigation and mathematics by Dee, just as Drake had, so his eye ought to have been trustworthy, but Raleigh had stuffed most of his drawings and scribblings into his own doublet before leaping to his death. Drake had only picked up a single sheet, dropped in the confusion, and he had no reliable way of knowing how good its scrawled estimates of latitude and longitude were, or whether the island really was the largest landmass in the vast Pacific east of the Austral continent and its companion isles.

If even he could not be sure of anything, what reliable information could any other shipmaster have had? If he had been beaten to his target by pure chance, it was a cruel blow. Had he set out in 1577 to explore the Pacific, as he had originally planned, he might have found the isle by chance himself.

Drake had to pause in his thoughts to bark further orders to the men aboard the *Golden Hind* as the pinnace came alongside. By the time the landing-party was back on board, with the pinnace lifted up and its meager cargo unloaded, the ship was already putting on sail and the anchor was ready to be raised. Drake snatched the telescope from his kinsman and began to climb the rigging himself to use it to best effect.

The vessels were coming together rapidly now, although the *Hind* was merely waiting, and Drake was able to take the other vessel's measure. She was bigger than the *Hind*, but not as well-crafted. She was moving swiftly, but that was because she was riding high in the water, evidently carrying very little cargo. The *Hind* was fully-laden, as she had had to be for an expedition into unknown waters, with landfalls likely to be very few and far between.

Martin had confirmed that there was another island beyond the tiny one he had seen. If the other captain was sailing without a full complement of necessary supplies, Drake reasoned, he must have come from that isle, and must have a secure base there—but there was no need for further speculation. Whether its lookout had a telescope or not, the master of the other ship had to know by now that the *Golden Hind* was heavily armed; even so, the vessel kept sailing dead ahead, intent on a rendezvous.

*Damn you!* Drake thought, bitterly. *Damn you to Hell, whoever you are!* He knew, though, that it was a thought he would have to keep to himself.

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## 2

“What vessel are you?” cried a voice from the prow of the other vessel. None of the men gathered there was wearing a naval uniform.

“The *Golden Hind*, out of Plymouth,” replied Edward Hammond, Drake's first mate. “Sir Francis Drake her master. What ship are you?”

If the other vessel had been away from home for several years, Drake thought, his name might still strike the right resonance, identifying the most glorious of all Queen Jane's privateers: the man who had mustered the Cimaroon army to attack the Spanish in Panama and Mexico, rather than the madman whose mind had been addled by contact with the interplanetary ether.

“The *Fortune*, out of Southampton,” was the ritual reply. “Sir Humphrey Gilbert her master.”

*Gilbert!* Drake repeated, silently. He had never met the man, but knew the name. Gilbert was not so much a mariner as a tradesman, but it was said that he had gone exploring—like many a pioneer before him—for the north-west passage. If so, he was half a world away from where he should be—and where he was very likely to have perished, if precedent signified anything. Until John Dee had built his ethership,

the only thing in the world more dangerous in than seeking the north-west passage to the Indies had been seeking the north-east passage thereto. The tropics were terrible regions for disease, drought, and piracy, but Drake had always preferred hazards of those sorts to the implacable enmity of limitless ice.

One thing of which Drake could be gladly certain, though, was that Sir Humphrey Gilbert was no enemy, for all that he must now be reckoned a successful rival in the navigation of the Pacific. When the invitation came for him to come aboard the *Fortune*, he agreed immediately. The pinnace was lowered again, after the inevitable delay caused by the necessity of bringing the two ships on to the same course, carrying just sail enough to match their progress. Drake took no one with him but half a dozen oarsmen. He climbed up to the *Fortune*'s deck alone.

Gilbert was waiting for him, in company with two mates. One of the mates and fully half the crew bore far more resemblance to Patagonians or Peruvians than Europeans, although they were distinct in kind. Gilbert was stout and grey-haired, looking far more the tradesman than the mariner. He appeared to be at least fifty years old—a very ripe age for the latter vocation. He also appeared to be anxious and apprehensive, although he seemed sincerely joyful to see his visitor.

“I’m delighted to meet you, Captain Drake,” the old man said. “Your arrival is so timely that it’s surely a gift from God.”

“Timely?” Drake repeated. “How so?”

Gilbert’s answer was somewhat evasive. “It’s more than two years since we’ve had news from home,” the tradesman said. “We never expected to see another English ship in these parts—nor a Spaniard either, since Magellan failed to complete his own crossing.”

“Your astonishment must be less than my own,” Drake replied, carefully, “for I had no inkling that any Englishman had come here before me. If you were commissioned by the Queen or her Privy Council, I wish that they had warned me that others might have gone through the Straits of Magellan before me.”

“There was no one who could warn you, Captain,” Gilbert said. “Even had they known that you might come here instead of hunting Spanish gold in Peru.” Gilbert had obviously guessed that Drake had not been entirely honest in revealing his true plans to the authorizers of his own voyage.

“Have you founded a colony on the large island yonder?” Drake asked.

“I wouldn’t call it a colony,” Gilbert said, “but it’s long been our base.”

“And why are you so glad to see the *Golden Hind*?” Drake asked, bluntly. “Is your *base* under threat?”

“We’ve feared so in recent weeks,” Gilbert confessed. “The island provides abundant resources, in terms of water, food, and wood, but we’ve run short of

gunpowder—and the guns we have would be of little use were hostile tribesmen to attack us in force. The arrival of so many Englishmen, as fully armed as your ship seems to be, will surely reduce that probability dramatically. You'll accept our hospitality, I hope? The contrary wind will make it a slow passage, for we'll have to tack very broadly, but I think you'll find the destination congenial if you've run low on water and fresh food—as you must have done, there being no sizeable island between here and the Land of Fire.”

“I was blown back to the South American coast the first time I set out to make the ocean crossing,” Drake admitted. “We made landfalls in Chile, but the natives took us for Spaniards and reacted accordingly. We had to go as far as Peru before we found a Spanish port we could take, in order to make repairs and take on adequate supplies of water and food.”

“It's a bad coast,” Gilbert agreed. “No Cimaroons there with whom to make alliance. You've done exceedingly well, Captain Drake, to get this far—and you're fortunate to find us. Tahiti is large enough, and has more than a hundred satellite islands, but this ocean is very large indeed, and the cluster would be easy enough to miss.”

“Tahiti?” Drake queried.

“It's the native name for the isle. We were able to establish friendly relations when we first arrived, but matters have deteriorated somewhat since then. I hope that won't deter you from accepting our invitation to visit.”

“Of course not,” Drake said. “The invitation is most welcome, and if we can be of service ... might I recognize the names of anyone else included in your *we*?”

“Very likely. Some of our men might conceivably have sailed with you in the Caribbean, since we recruited seasoned ocean sailors, but you'll doubtless identify them in your own time. Among the patrons of the voyage, you'll certainly have heard of Thomas Muffet.”

“Muffet?” Drake echoed, amazed to hear the name. “Muffet the physician, who turned the Royal College upside-down? The silkworm man?”

“Indeed. A man not unlike yourself, in that he was somewhat underappreciated in his own land, although he's not a man of action: a physician, as you say, whose new ideas were not at all welcome when he returned home after his continental studies.”

“A Paracelsian,” Drake observed.

“In a broad sense, yes,” Gilbert agreed, “although the aspect of Paracelsus' creed that appealed to him most was its irreverence for received authority and its determination to make medical theory anew. As a friend of Tom Digges and John Dee, you must surely sympathize with the revolutionary thrust of the *new* New

Learning.”

Drake pursed his lips slightly at the mention of Digges’ name, but all he said aloud was: “Master Dee taught me navigation and figures, as he did for many an English captain, but I couldn’t presume to call him a friend—although you must surely have that privilege.”

“We knew one another quite well at one time,” Gilbert admitted, blandly, “but we drifted apart.”

Drake knew that there were rival camps within English learning, whose nuances he did not understand. Even Dee’s determination to build a national library had embroiled him in a surprisingly fervent rivalry with men like Stephen Batman; his more adventurous explorations in mathematics, alchemy, and astrology were regarded as intellectual follies even by some who did not think them frankly heretical. The revisionist alchemy that had underpinned Dee’s construction of the ethership would have been labeled Paracelsian by some, but Drake knew Tom Digges well enough to understand that its theory had far outstripped that of Paracelsus. Was it possible, he wondered, that Thomas Muffet had made similar advances in the medical field? But if so, why on earth would he have taken ship for the remotest reaches of the southern ocean? Unorthodox medical practice had never been a safe business in England, even before Foxe’s puritans gained such a stronghold within the established Church and the Royal College had obtained its monopolistic warrant, but men of that sort forced into exile could easily find safe havens on the continent.

When Drake made no reply to his observation, Gilbert said: “Will you stay on the *Fortune* while we make our way to my pleasant harbor, Captain Drake? I’ll be happy to supply you with a good meal.”

“I’d rather not dine well while my men are on short rations,” Drake told him, although he knew few ships’ masters who would have been so squeamish. “I’ll go back to the *Golden Hind* and follow you to your harbor. Once we’re all able to come ashore and enjoy a feast, I’ll be more than happy to join you, and to meet Doctor Muffet.”

“Splendid!” said Gilbert, enthusiastically. “It will give us all great pleasure to entertain guests, and to receive news of home. It will be a fine night, from every point of view!”

*Except, thought Drake, from the viewpoint of the man who hoped to be this isle’s discoverer, and who hoped to redeem his battered reputation by claiming it for England and Queen Jane.* It was not much consolation to him that the island Sir Humphrey Gilbert called Tahiti was exactly where he had expected to find an island—which is to say, exactly where poor Raleigh had marked it on the map he had sketched while the *Queen Jane* was orbiting the earth. In itself, that could not prove that everything else Drake had experienced in the course of the ethership’s journey had been real. It still remained a possibility—as he had to admit even to



himself—that his memories of being seized by the Selenite horde and dispatched by cosmic cannon to the center of the universe, where insects and sea-slugs ruled supreme over a hitherto-unimaginable Creation, were the produce of some remarkable delusion.

“Yes, Sir Humphrey,” he said to Gilbert. “I’m sure that my crewmen will rejoice in the opportunity.”

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### 3

When Drake saw that Humphrey Gilbert had three smaller ships anchored in the natural harbor where he had constructed his “base,” he realized that the expedition that had discovered Tahiti must have been large and well-planned. When he was able to judge the extent of the constructions that the Englishmen had erected around the bay he realized, too, that their settlement here was no temporary affair, intended merely as a barracks where men might be housed until they had made repairs and gathered provisions for a long journey home. This really was a colony—and one that had been built from the outset with a view to defense, for the Englishmen’s enclave was surrounded by a stout stockade, with sentry posts and loopholes for muskets.

Although there were several buildings within the central stockade that seemed big enough to serve as dormitories for a ship’s crew, there was also a surprisingly large number of smaller huts. From the *Golden Hind*’s anchorage, Drake could see with the aid of his telescope that the great majority of the Englishmen were lodged in the huts, many of them having apparently coupled themselves with women of the same kind as the men he had seen on the *Fortune*. It was evident that not all of the island’s tribesmen were hostile, but there was no way for Drake to estimate what the total population might be, or what proportion of that total could be counted friendly.

Drake was careful to divide his men into two parties, and to explain his reasons for doing so. “There’s some kind of trouble brewing outside that stockade, lads,” he told them, having assembled them on deck. “Gilbert has promised us a feast tonight, but he’s fearful, and was exceedingly glad to see an English ship so well-armed as the *Hind*. The men who remain on board tonight will eat as well as those who go ashore, and there’ll be plenty of opportunity to trade places, but the ship must be guarded very carefully, and its supplies of black powder kept safe. We’ll take no guns with us tonight, but I want every man who goes ashore to keep his eyes and ears open and his wits about him. Find out everything you can about the situation here. If we have to defend ourselves, or our fellows ashore, I need to know how many enemies we’re likely to face, and what sort.”

“Will you try to make friends with the natives, Captain?” Hammond asked, not so much for his own benefit as to give Drake the opportunity to inform his crew of a matter of policy.

“As ever, Ned,” Drake said. “It’s always best to make allies instead of enemies, if we can—and if we’re forced to face enemies in the end, it’s best to do so with allies by our side.”

When the shore party landed and moved through the settlement, Drake was struck by the extent and complexity of the marketplace that had been established within the stockade. He was not surprised to see that the Englishmen had established a forge and a glass manufactory as well as a carpentry shop, but he was astonished to see a brewery, a bath-house, and a candle-factory, and by the industry that was in process in all these places. Relations between the Englishmen and the natives appeared entirely harmonious on this side of the defensive wall, but he knew how unlikely it was that the wall was maintained merely to keep up appearances.

Gilbert did not hurry his guests as he led them through the town. He took pleasure in allowing Drake to savor his achievements. Gilbert’s own house was undoubtedly the most finely crafted in the settlement, but it was not the largest. When the outbuildings crowded around its larger neighbor were taken into account, Gilbert’s dwelling was somewhat overshadowed.

“That’s Doctor Muffet’s house,” Gilbert said, in response to Drake’s inquisitive stare. “The accessory buildings are his specimen-houses and his laboratory.”

All physicians, Drake knew, could be reckoned alchemists of a sort—Paracelsians more than most—but there were few who kept laboratories. On the other hand, a herbalist must surely be able to find all kinds of exotic specimens in a place as foreign as this, whose properties might warrant careful examination. Drake had had an opportunity while the *Hind* was laid up in Peru to appreciate the extent to which the local vegetation differed from what he had seen on his Caribbean adventures, let alone the forests and meadows of England. He recalled, as that thought crossed his mind, that Muffet was one of the few Europeans to have made a study of imported silkworm cocoons, and wondered if there might be more factories here than he had so far seen.

“The doctor and his daughter will join us for dinner, of course, and my chaplain, too,” Gilbert said. “How many of your officers will be joining us?”

“Mr. Hammond and Mr. Ashley, if that suits you, Sir Humphrey,” Drake said, “and my kinsman Martin Lyle, if that is also agreeable.”

“Of course,” Gilbert said, as he ushered Drake over the threshold of his house. It had only a single story, but its shallow-pitched roof had a number of storage attics. The ground floor had a dining-room that was almost a banqueting-hall, a reception-room, three bedrooms, and a kitchen, into which a cast-iron stove had been transferred from one of the smaller vessels in Gilbert’s fleet,

“I would be honored if you would accept my hospitality, Captain Drake,”

Gilbert said. "I'll find quarters for your mates with their peers among my own men, and for your crewmen with theirs. I think you'll all find the accommodations comfortable, after such a long time at sea. How long have you been voyaging, exactly?"

"It's thirteen months since we left England," Drake told him. "Thirty-seven days since we last spent a night ashore. Did you say just now that Doctor Muffet has his daughter with him?"

"I did," Gilbert confirmed, as he invited Drake to sit down on a wicker armchair and offered him a cup of fresh water. "A remarkable thing, I know, but he didn't want to leave her in England while he was away for several years. Her mother's dead. She was only four years old when we set out, but she's seven now. She wasn't the only child on the expedition, although the others had mothers to care for them."

Drake suppressed the exclamation that sprung immediately to his lips, but could not help making a more considered observation. "Then this *was* a colonial enterprise!" he said. "But how did you end up *here* instead of the Virginias?" He accepted the proffered cup of water, and found it extremely sweet by comparison with the dregs of the *Golden Hind's* barrels.

"No," Gilbert said, "it wasn't a colonial expedition in the sense that you mean. The Doctor's associates and servants brought their families with them, though."

A native servant brought in a huge basket of fruit, from which Gilbert invited Drake to take his pick. Drake was hesitating between the familiar and the unfamiliar when a movement in the doorway caught his eye. It was a blonde girl-child in a cornflower-blue dress. Drake had not seen her like for a very long time.

"Come in, Patience," said Gilbert. "Captain Drake was just asking about you. Is your father coming?"

"Ten minutes, he said," the girl replied, staring at Drake with a frankness that would have been educated out of a girl her age in England.

"Captain Drake is one of the most famous sailors in England," Gilbert told the girl. "There's no Englishman the Spaniards fear more, or the Cimaroons like better."

"What's a Cimaroon?" the girl asked.

Gilbert merely laughed, so Drake took it upon himself to explain. "A descendant of runaway slaves," he said. "The Spaniards and the Portuguese imported large numbers of Africans to work in their American colonies, but there's a whole continent into which the rebels among them may run away, and many do. Those that have settled among the Indians become embroiled in local tribal conflicts but they remain a hybrid race, distinctive enough for me to be able to unite them. I rallied them by means of the argument that England, as the great rival of their worst

enemy, was potentially their best friend. Sir Humphrey flatters me by calling me famous, though. Even in England, there are some who reckon me a dangerous pirate, ever likely to precipitate open warfare between England and Spain.”

“Is that why the queen sent you away in Master Dee’s ethership, and afterward called you mad?” the little girl asked, taking her frankness to a remarkable and rather distressing limit.

“Perhaps it is,” Drake replied, more honestly than he could have wished. He looked at Gilbert, and added: “It was polite of you not to mention that circumstance before. I had begun to wonder whether you knew it.”

“You’re among friends here,” Gilbert was quick to say. “We know that you were not mad.”

Drake’s astonishment increased by a further increment. “Do you, indeed?” he said. “You know better than I do, then.” What he was thinking, though, was that if Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Thomas Muffet knew that he was not mad, it could not have been chance that had brought them here. He had told Hammond that no one else could possibly know about the island whose position Walter Raleigh had marked, but that was not strictly true. Tom Digges might know, even though he claimed—or at least pretended—that everything he had experienced outside the earth had been a dream. John Field might know too—but the more important possibility was that John Dee might have had the information from Tom Digges. Dee was a hero to every master mariner in England, even those from whose acquaintance he had drifted apart, and if he had said to anyone that there was a sizeable island at approximately seventeen degrees south and somewhere near one hundred and fifty degrees west, they would have trusted him, even if they knew that he had read it in the stars.

“We’re very glad to see you here, Captain Drake,” Gilbert assured him, “whatever your commission may have been when you left home. If, perchance, you’re so far from home because you no longer feel entirely welcome there, you’d be very welcome to make a home here, temporarily or permanently.”

“Permanently!” Drake repeated, in surprise. “Do you intend to stay here permanently, then, though you refuse to call your settlement a colony and fear a native uprising?”

“Not I,” Gilbert replied, “but...”

“But there are some among us who might, if we’re granted leave,” said a new voice. Another person had appeared in the doorway through which the blonde-haired girl had come. “I’m Thomas Muffet, physician,” the newcomer continued. “I have a certain reputation for madness myself, among the Galenists of the Royal College, but I can assure you that I’m as sane as you are, Captain Drake.” He extended his hand to Drake, who shook it willingly.

“I know your name,” Drake said, “and I’m acquainted with wiser people than I who’d gladly swear to your sanity, including Philip Sidney and his sister.”

“Good friends,” Muffet said. “Have you news of them?”

Drake shook his head, and Gilbert put in: “Captain Drake has been away from England thirteen months.”

Muffet frowned. “Were you delayed?” he asked.

Gilbert was quick to speak again, saying: “The captain wasn’t commissioned to follow us, Doctor. I may be reading the situation wrongly, for I was hesitant to speak openly too soon, but I’d guess that he left home with the ostensible purpose of harassing the Spaniards and the Portuguese up and down the coasts of South America, and that his expedition to Tahiti was something of a private venture. I think he’s more than a little disappointed, as well as surprised, to find us here.” Gilbert had the grace to seem slightly discomfited as he spelled this out.

“You’re right,” Drake conceded, readily enough. “I had reason to believe that this island, and the others in its group, were here, but I was very wary of confessing those reasons to others in England.”

“You saw them from the ethership, of course,” said Muffet. “When your other testimony was so cruelly discounted, you dared not declare your intention of confirming what you had seen as a formal objective of your voyage. I understand—indeed, I understand perfectly, as you’ll know soon enough.”

“I hadn’t expected to be anticipated,” Drake said. “You must have acted very quickly indeed, to fit out an expedition on this scale within months—perhaps weeks—of the ethership’s destruction. I confess that I can’t understand what kind of game Master Dee is playing.”

“Dee?” said Muffet. “What has Dee...?” He stopped abruptly, perhaps in response to a signal from Gilbert that Drake had not been able to see.

Gilbert made haste to change the subject, perhaps to give Muffet some hint of the reason for his caution. “Captain Drake’s vessel, the *Golden Hind*, is uncommonly well-armed,” he said. “We’ll be grateful of that, Doctor, if relations with the islanders continue to deteriorate. If we can persuade him to stay for a while, his presence will surely make us secure. He might be invaluable to us in other ways too, given his reputation as a diplomat. If he can win over the Tahitians as he won over the Panamanian Cimaroons, we may yet achieve the state of harmony that was our first ambition. I don’t think his men will take it too hard if they have to rest up here for a while—they’ll find our little paradise very comfortable.”

Drake almost frowned then, perceiving a slight hint of threat in the tradesman’s final comment, but he dismissed the suspicion along with the expression. “If I can be of service to you,” he said, as smoothly as he could, “I’ll be

glad of the opportunity. I can stay for a month, at least.”

“I hope you’ll stay a great deal longer than that,” Muffet said, in spite of any gesture Gilbert might have made. “I can think of no one better to serve as our ambassador to England, when the time comes to explain to the queen and her council exactly what we’ve been doing here.”

“Indeed,” Drake said. “What *have* you been doing here, Doctor Muffet?”

“Nothing less than beginning a revolution in medicine, Captain Drake,” Muffet said. “After three thousand years of my forerunners groping in the dark, I believe I’ve found the key to the health, happiness, and future advancement of humankind.”

Doctor Muffet was obviously a Paracelsian in more ways than one; the founder of the school had been renowned for his immodesty. Drake could not help raising his eyebrows at the scope of the claim, but he refused to assume that Thomas Muffet was mad; he knew full well that the universe contained far stranger things than he had ever been able to imagine in his youth. “That’s excellent news,” he murmured. He took a fruit he did not know from the basket and peered at it. “Is this good for scurvy?” he asked.

“Not as specific as some,” Muffet said, “but you need have no fear of any symptoms of that sort while you are here. You’ll find that breadfruit quite palatable, I think, and much other local produce too. There’ll be roast pork for dinner; the local swine are delicate creatures by comparison with our wild boar, but they’re succulent. There’ll be fresh eggs, too. You’ll have time enough to sample new fish and fruit by the dozen, if not by the hundred.”

“May I have another cup of water?” Drake asked. “And might I ask you to send some casks of water and baskets of fruit out to the ship without delay, for the benefit of the watchmen who must remain aboard?”

“It’s already done,” said Muffet. “Patience, will you fetch the captain another cup of water, please.”

“Yes, father,” said the little girl, who seemed far meeker in the presence of her parent than she had before.

“If you have men sickening with scurvy, or anything else,” Muffet said, “you’d best bring them ashore as soon as it’s convenient. I’ll be glad to administer what treatments I can. I think you might be surprised by the efficacy of my medicines. Do you have any sickness yourself?”

“Nothing that a warm bath wouldn’t cure,” Drake said.

“I’ll have the servants prepare one,” Gilbert was quick to say. “I can have your clothes washed too, and I’ll send for a barber.”

“That’s very kind,” Drake said. “Will there still be time for me to see your

laboratory before dinner, Doctor Muffet?”

Yet again, Gilbert did not seem overly enthusiastic about that prospect, but the doctor smiled, as if he had been paid a great compliment. “Certainly,” he said. “We’ll make such time as we may need. I think you’ll find my work exciting, Captain Drake—in fact, I’m certain of it.”

Drake could not help wondering exactly what the source of that certainty was. It was one thing, he thought, for a man like Muffet not to credit the rumor that he was as mad as a March hare, but quite another for him to be enthusiastic to display his wondrous wares to a man who was—setting all issues of patriotism and derring-do aside—most famous of all for the prodigious quality of his thievery.

\* \* \* \*

#### 4

Doctor Muffet’s laboratory was not what Drake expected, but as he had hardly known what to expect, there was no surprise in that. The only workshop he had ever seen that might be entitled to such a name was Tom Digges’ establishment in Greenwich, and that had been more like a jeweler’s manufactory than an alchemist’s lair.

Muffet, as a physician, was fully entitled to be more interested in potions and powders, and there were plenty of those on display, along with the alembics and mortars necessary to their preparation. What Drake had not expected to see, though, was the great assortment of live creatures mustered in the doctor’s outhouses, in all manner of cages and glass vivaria. He had thought the islet he had visited that morning abundantly stocked with parrots and other kinds of birds, but Tahiti itself must have a dozen native species for every one he had seen there, and Muffet appeared to have captured representatives of a substantial fraction of them. It was the large and brightly colored birds that caught Drake’s attention first—especially the ones that were not caged, which flew toward them when Muffet, Drake, and Patience stepped across the threshold of the first laboratory.

Patience put up her arm to provide a perch for one of the parrots: a blue and yellow macaw, which seemed even larger than it was in juxtaposition with the slender girl. “Hello, Agamemnon,” she said, gaily.

“Hello, Patience,” the bird replied.

Drake laughed. He had seen a dozen trained birds in the Caribbean, especially among the Cimaroons, although no man in his own crew had ever tried to tame one.

“Is all well?” Patience asked, taking care to enunciate the words clearly.

“All’s well!” the bird squawked—and two or three of its companions repeated the phrase, almost in unison; “All’s well!”

“Remarkable!” said Drake—but he was already beginning to look past the

birds as the macaw left its makeshift perch for a sturdier one mounted beneath the outbuilding's slanted roof. As he advanced further into the room he saw that the first vivarium he came to was occupied by a company of small lizards—but they could not hold Drake's eye for long, when he perceived that the next one was tenanted by half a dozen spiders. They seemed like giants, until he looked at the next vivarium, which held two specimens of even greater dimension.

It was then that he began to look around more rapidly, in frank alarm, as he realized that among more than fifty glass vessels and twenty wicker cages contained in the room—which only constituted a third of Muffet's research establishment—at least forty contained spiders.

Drake had seen large spiders before, in Panama and Peru, but not like the ones that Thomas Muffet had accumulated in his various enclosures. Their bodies ranged in size from the dimensions of a man's closed fist to the full capacity of a man's head, and the length and sturdiness of their legs increased in proportion. Most were colored in shades of brown, sometimes striped with red, but a few were golden yellow and more elaborately patterned with black and blue.

Patience, who had observed Drake's reflexive reaction, was quick to say: "Don't be afraid, Captain. They're very friendly, although the Indians are terrified of them." She was not merely parroting Thomas Muffet's reassurances, for it was obvious to Drake that the little girl was completely comfortable with the spiders. She moved from vivarium to vivarium and cage to cage, extending her tiny hands toward their various inhabitants without showing the slightest sign of fear or repugnance. Indeed, she was more than willing to take the lids off glass-fronted boxes or unhook the latches of cages to reach into them, allowing specimens that she could not possibly have held in her tiny hands to climb her arms and sit upon her shoulders.

"Hello, Achilles," she said to one, and "Hello, Hector," to another.

For a split second, Drake almost expected Achilles to say hello in his turn, and Hector to declare that all was well.

Drake had always reckoned himself a brave man, but when Patience extended one of these huge spiders toward him, offering to let him accommodate it on the sleeve of his jerkin, he shook his head in flat refusal.

"You'll get used to them, Captain," Patience assured him. "They never bite unless they feel threatened."

"I'd heard that there was no Englishman more interested in insects than yourself," Drake murmured to Thomas Muffet, making an effort to keep his voice perfectly calm. "I hadn't realized that the interest in question was so closely connected with your medical endeavors."

"Spiders are arachnids, not insects," Muffet told him. "They're entirely distinct, not merely in the number of their limbs and the articulation of their bodies,



but in their modes of nourishment. All spiders are predators, but they're only able to consume their food in liquid form. They have no larval stages, as insects have, and the silk they produce has very different properties and uses. The so-called silkworm produces fiber to make the cocoon in which it awaits metamorphosis into its adult form—fruitlessly, when human cultivators intervene—but spidersilk is a versatile construction material used to build cable-like strands, complex webs and exotic funnels. We humans may think all crawling creatures much alike, but from their own viewpoint there's as much difference between insects and spiders as there is between insects and men."

That struck a chord in Drake's mind. Although he had not been present when the incident took place, he had been told that Walter Raleigh had been attacked by a spider on the moon. Digges had mentioned in relating the incident that the multitude of insects and molluscs, which made up the populace of the stars, seemed to look upon spiders with the same horror and repulsion that many humans did.

"Is that creature not poisonous?" Drake asked, unable to prevent his unease becoming manifest as he watched a particularly repulsive specimen crawl out of a capacious cage and along Patience's welcoming arm.

"Not dangerously so," Muffet said. "It's true that many hunting spiders use venom to paralyze their prey, and that humans sometimes react badly to such injections, but in functional terms, spider venom is no more akin to the crude stings of wasps or the toxins secreted by snakes than the species themselves are. Most natural venoms are defensive weapons, but spider secretions need to be a great deal more versatile than that. They have not merely to immobilize their prey but to transform the various flesh of many different species to prepare it for ingestion in liquid form. It's a kind of alchemy of the flesh, whose potential extends far beyond mere murder and digestion."

The monster was sitting on Patience's head now. She moved her head slowly from side to side, her eyes taking on a quizzical expression much like those worn by the parrots that were studying Drake and the spiders, equally warily, from the safety of their perches. Drake felt a sudden and rather absurd sense of fellow-feeling with the birds—who must, he supposed, have had plenty of time to get used to the company of their fellow guests, but seemed not to have taken the trouble to become very closely acquainted.

"Are you saying that some spider secretions might have curative value?" Drake asked.

"There's no *might* about it," Muffet replied, serenely. "Is that so surprising? There are a thousand plant species whose juices have curative value, as well as a much lesser number that are deadly poisons. Galenists and Paracelsians alike use leeches to draw blood. Like the chemical realm whose treasures were exposed by Paracelsus, the animal kingdom is a vast untapped resource of medical science, which might produce abundant rewards even if one were compelled to explore it

blindly, with no other method than trial and error.”

Drake knew little enough about Paracelsian medicine, but there had been controversy in abundance when Muffet had initially been refused entry into the Royal College of Physicians, and every educated man in England—not excluding playwrights, choristers, and marine officers—had heard something of the manner in which Paracelsus had determined the propriety of his new chemical cures by means of occult analogies. All occult scientists—alchemists most of all—were holists, who considered that the universe was host to many secret patterns of analogy and influence. If such patterns could be identified linking human illnesses to the new chemical substances that were inflating the traditional lists of metals, salts, and essences, similar patterns could presumably be found linking the same illnesses to different animal species and substances. Drake inferred that Muffet was on the track of some such guiding pattern.

“They say in the Caribbean and Panama,” Drake observed, drawn into a tangential train of thought, “that the natives were perfectly healthy until the Spanish came, importing diseases that became terrible plagues. The Cimaroons gave elaborate testimony of their ravages—but I’m told that there are rumors of a different sort in every port in Europe, which say that sailors returning from the Americas brought back plagues of their own.”

“Including the one for which Paracelsus pioneered the mercury treatment,” Muffet said. “We’ve had an opportunity to see something similar ourselves. The Tahitians appear to have been relatively free of disease before we arrived, living an idyllic existence in a land whose bounty is more closely akin to the Garden of Eden than anything else on earth—but, after our arrival, sicknesses began to spread. Some among the tribesmen are inclined to blame us for that, although our own people were as healthy as anyone could expect when we arrived here. I’ve had a good deal of success in treating the sicknesses, and I’m developing new cures at a rapid rate, but the Tahitians’ gratitude is understandably dilute. They have much the same attitude to spiders as Englishmen have, and the good example my daughter sets has no more effect on them than it has on you—for I can see that her familiarity in handling my allies adds to the discomfort of your attitude rather than soothes it.”

Drake was, indeed, very glad to see Patience divest herself of the huge spider that she had been entertaining for the past ten minutes and replace it gently in a cage whose latch seemed quite secure. He found that his enthusiasm to see Doctor Muffet’s laboratory had waned considerably since he had crossed its threshold, and that an insistent desire had slowly accumulated within him to leave and not come back. “I’m sorry,” he said to Muffet. “This is very strange to me, and there’s a great deal to take aboard.”

“Of course,” the doctor said, suavely. “I believe that dinner must be ready by now. Shall we rejoin Sir Humphrey? We have plenty of time, do we not?”

*Do we?* Drake wondered. He had not yet had time to think about remaking his

plans, now that his ambition to be the first European to reach these islands had been thwarted. He had no idea where he ought to go next, or when—but the Austral continent still lay to the west, and two islands in close proximity, each larger than Tahiti. They, at least, might still be awaiting a first visitation by ocean-borne adventurers.

As they went back into Gilbert's house, however, Drake was struck by another thought. "I can understand why you didn't go to the Caribbean or Brazil in search of exotic spiders," he said, "if those which live in England are too small to be of much use to you—the Spanish and the Portuguese would not be good neighbors, no matter how peaceful your intentions. But how did you know that there would be material to suit your purposes here? Even though you knew about the island's existence, you might have found it utterly devoid of spiderkind."

"Spiders are very efficient travelers," Muffet told him. "They're far more widely distributed than you can probably imagine—and in the tropics, they very often grow to generous proportions, as do the insects that provide their primary prey."

"What other kinds of prey do they hunt?" Drake asked, since the question seemed to have been left dangling, and because all sailors had heard travelers' tales about giant spiders that preyed on humankind.

"The largest species can trap small birds and mice," Muffet told him. There was a slight hint of amusement in his voice, which testified to his familiarity with the same travelers' tales. "Nothing bigger—so far as I know."

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## 5

The feast proved too much for Drake's stomach, although he could not help over-eating after such long privation. If he had confined himself to drinking water—as he knew full well that he ought to do—he would probably have kept his appetite in better check, but he was readily persuaded to try some palm wine. Once mild intoxication had taken hold he became too self-indulgent—though not as self-indulgent as the crewmen who were eating in the open air, around a group of cooking-fires, amid a crowd that included numerous young Tahitian women.

As he watched his men through the wide window of Gilbert's dining-room, it occurred to Drake that the natives might have more reasons than their new-found vulnerability to fevers to have taken a dislike to the invaders of their island, but the combination of drunkenness and the gripe soon drove all such serious thoughts from his mind.

In response to polite requests, Drake and Hammond told tales of their adventures in Panama, in which all their fellow guests seemed very interested. No one took the risk of asking him about the far more dramatic adventure he had experienced after the ethership's ascent, even though they had already told him that

they did not agree with those who thought the experience delusional. Drake was grateful for that, although he was aware of the apparent inconsistency. Ashley—who had not sailed with Drake before this present expedition—willingly took on the burden of recounting their recent capture of the Peruvian port, and waxing lyrical about the treachery of the natives of Chile.

Patience Muffet, who was sitting next to Drake, asked him whether he had encountered any monsters like those described in myths and travelers' tales. She seemed sincerely interested.

"The tales that mariners bring back home of terrible islands inhabited by cunning monsters, head-hunting savages, and avid cannibals are mostly lies intended to amuse," Drake told her. "I've never encountered cannibals, or savages who make human sacrifice of all unwary visitors to huge monsters they worship as pagan gods. There's no need, mind, for such fancies as that to express the danger of a seaman's trade; it's a fortunate ship that returns home from an ocean crossing with more than half its crew alive and well. Disease and deprivation claim more lives than violence. The world isn't as hospitable to humankind as we could wish, alas."

"Why do people bring home such terrifying tales, if there's no truth in them?" the girl asked, in a manner whose maturity belied her frail appearance. "Why make the world out to be worse than it is?"

"Travelers exaggerate," Drake said. "In making the world seem stranger, they seek to increase their own apparent importance and bravery."

"The world is a sore trial to humans because we're doing penance for original sin," Gilbert's chaplain put in, having been eavesdropping on their conversation from the other side of the table. He seemed to disapprove of Patience's curiosity—or, at least, of her choice of an instructor.

"If that's so," Drake opined, with reckless honesty, "we're paying very dear for a trivial error. Dante claimed that there was no land in all this ocean but the mount of Purgatory, but you've proved him wrong, haven't you? Another strike against papism!"

The chaplain was not a Puritan of John Field's stripe but a broad churchman. "It might be," the chaplain opined, "that Dante guessed wrongly about the shape and extent of Purgatory."

"You'll find that Tahiti isn't Paradise, Captain Drake," Patience Muffet said, "but it isn't Purgatory either." The judgment seemed bizarrely ominous, from the mouth of such a young child.

"No," Drake agreed. "It's just an island, where there are neither head-hunters nor cannibals nor pagan savages. Even the monsters are friendly, and your father is hopeful that their bites might work benign miracles."

This time it was Muffet who interrupted to say: “There’s nothing miraculous about it, Captain Drake. It’s merely science.”

He would undoubtedly have gone on, but Gilbert put a hand on his arm. “Tomorrow, doctor,” he said. “Tonight, let’s rejoice in a fortunate meeting of friends and countrymen.” He raised his cup as if to signify a compact.

Drake raised his own readily enough, knowing that he had already drunk too much to pay proper attention to, or make proper sense of, any discourse on the technicalities of alchemical medicine.

The feast continued in a hearty mood; even the chaplain relented in the expression of his disapproval.

Drake had no idea what time it was when he took himself off to bed, but darkness had fallen some time before. His hosts would willingly have carried on drinking and chatting for at least another hour, and the party outdoors went on for some while longer, the cooking-fires having been fed further wood in order to serve as central sources of illumination, but the captain was exhausted.

He fell asleep while there was still a great deal of noise and flickering light outside. That did not assist his troubled sleep, which was shallow and dream-filled from the very start. By the time his belly finally settled, however, silence had fallen and the fires had burned down to a sullen red glow that seemed impotent to penetrate the darkness of the tropic night. His stomach’s quiescence was, alas, soon displaced as the center of his internal attention by the development of a fierce headache.

There was a nightlight by his bed, so Drake did not have to blunder around in search of the water-jug, but he felt very clumsy as he groped for it. He drank deeply, but that only served to increase the magnitude of yet another problem.

He got up again, wishing that he had paid more attention to the exact position of the latrine that was situated some distance behind the house, not far from the fence, when he had used it in earlier in daylight. He did not bother to put on his jerkin, but he was careful to pull on his boots, not knowing what dangerous creatures might be swarming on the ground behind the house.

He made his way outside, and was glad to find that there was light enough to enable him to find the raised rim of the latrine-pit without overmuch trouble. He still felt rather unsteady on his feet; when his immediate discomfort had been relieved, he moved away from the stinking trench to lean against the bole of a tall palm, intending to gather himself together before he returned to his bed. He looked up at the sky, although he did not expect to find any sense of stability or promise of peace in its celestial majesty.

The southern stars always seemed sparse to him by comparison with those that crowded northern skies, but the weakness of their light was offset by a bright

full moon, whose pock-marked silver face was now a stark reminder of the extent and strangeness of the universe. Drake stared at it for a minute or more, resentfully. Digges, he knew, had been promised that the earth would be let alone, but that did not mean that compound eyes were not staring down at the world of men, nor that the multitudinous insect species who thronged the satellite's cavernous interior might not send tiny cousins to the surface to make observations on their behalf.

He looked away deliberately, unwilling to offer himself up as a passive lunatic. The tall wooden fence, some fifteen paces away from his present position, made it impossible for him to see more of the forest than the tops of its trees. The island's birds were mostly silent now, but there was wind enough to sustain a considerable whisper in the foliage, so the wilderness of the island's interior seemed loud and insistent in its presence.

When he felt more composed, Drake turned to go back to Gilbert's house. Just as he turned his head, though, he saw something move from the corner of his eye. It was very close to the wall of the stockade, almost totally enclosed in shadow; had it remained still he could not possibly have seen it, but the fact and quality of the movement were just about discernible. As soon as he stared at it attentively, though, the movement stopped, leaving him with nothing but the impression of something the size of a man, whose movement was not at all manlike.

Drake could not help the idea of a giant spider—a *true* giant—springing forth from his imagination. Instinctively, he froze, cursing himself for his reflexive terror. He stared hard into the shadows, but he could not make out any shape within the darkness. He tried to force himself to take a step toward it, purely and simply to prove that he had command over his limbs, but his legs would not move.

When he tried to take a step in the other direction, toward the house, he found it far easier—but in taking that step, he turned his head again, and caught a hint of movement from the corner of his eye for a second time. He froze again, and looked back—and then he felt something brush against his calf, above the rim of his boot.

He was immediately seized by the idea that something had already crawled up his boot, unheeded, and was now ascending his leg. Again, he could not help but imagine a spider, albeit a much smaller one than the one he had imagined moving in the shadows.

He dared not reach down with his bare hands. Instead, he shook his leg furiously, hoping to dislodge the creature he supposed to be there. He knew, even as he did it, that it was the wrong thing to do. If there *was* a spider on his leg, the last thing in the world he ought to do was agitate it.

It *was* the wrong thing to do; he felt the sting that told him so—but that only made his agitation more frenzied. He would have called for help had he not been so utterly ashamed of himself—but the one thing he dreaded more, at that moment, than being killed by a spider-bite, was the possibility that he might be wrong: that the

whole incident, including the bite, was a product of his imagination. He could not countenance the thought that he might be found hallucinating, especially if the hallucination involved a giant invertebrate.

He felt a second bite, and a third. He was possessed by the thought that there must be more than one spider, and that there might be an entire tide of spiders flowing around his feet. Still he did not dare reach down with his hands. Still he kicked madly in his panic, while trying all the while to stay silent.

Drake began to feel numb in his lower limbs, and dizzy in his fevered brain, and felt that he was losing contact with reality in more ways than one. Then, he did begin to hallucinate.

He dreamed that he had suddenly acquired the ability to see into the shadows, and to distinguish what was there. He did not see man-sized spiders but spiderlike men: three of them, clad like the Tahitian indigenes in loincloths and feathered head-dresses. They were far darker in complexion than the Tahitians, though, and far hairier, with faces that were not human faces at all but monstrous arachnid faces, staring at him and waiting for him to fall.

He dared not look down to see whether he was, indeed, being devoured from beneath by a flood of spiders. He could not look down—but he could fall down, and he felt himself doing so.

As he tumbled, the three spider-faces worn by the violators of the stockade drew closer. He told himself that they must be masks, but then lost the thread of his dreams and thoughts alike.

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## 6

Drake woke up with a start, and found himself fighting to open his eyes against the glare of bright sunlight. Eventually, he managed it. He was on the ground, not lying where he had fallen, but rather in dense undergrowth, which mostly consisted of fern-like fronds and broad prickly leaves. He was lying in a shallow ditch, which might have been a watercourse in the rainy season; it snaked away through the vegetation in two directions.

He raised his head cautiously, but the foliage was too dense to allow him to see more than a few feet without standing up. He paused before doing that, in order to collect himself and decide what to do next. Since his eyes told him so little about where he was, he made an effort to listen carefully, but all he could hear was the clamor of a brisk wind rustling the branches of the trees, mingled with the calls of strange birds and various humming and clicking sounds that were presumably made by unfamiliar insects.

He tried to rise to his feet, but his legs were still numb and he had to pause in an awkward sitting position. He reached down to rub his thighs. He was wearing

hose, but there were tears in the thin cloth above the rims of both his boots, and bloodstains. The flesh beneath was itching, and the sensation flared into pain as he brushed the wounds with his fingertips. He had apparently been bitten four times, around and above his knees. He continued rubbing his legs, and felt the flesh respond to the urging. He breathed a sigh of relief as he took further stock of himself, and concluded that any damage done had been temporary.

When he stood up he was able to look over the densest vegetation, but he could only see a few yards further than before, although the forest was not as dense as some he had experienced. To judge by the height of the sun, it had to be nearer noon than dawn.

*I must make haste*, Drake thought, glad to be able to organize a coherent sentence. *The settlement was on the south-eastern coast of the island, so it ought to lie...*

He was interrupted in mid-decision when he suddenly found himself gripped from behind and pulled back down to a sitting position. When he twisted his neck to look over his shoulder he found himself staring into the face of a man.

Drake was so glad to see that the man did not have the face of a spider that three seconds passed before he realized that the other *did* have skin much darker than the natives he had seen in Gilbert's compound, and that he had considerably more body hair. He was, moreover, exceptionally barrel-chested and muscular. He did not seem to belong to the same race as other Tahitians. He was not alone; there were at least three others, all crouching down and huddling around. They were breathing hard; he inferred that they had hurried back to him following some alarm.

Drake opened his mouth to speak, but a hand was urgently plastered over it. Another hand reached out to part the vegetation obscuring their position, and a stabbing finger bid him look in that direction. He could just make out the feathery head-dresses of a party of lighter-skinned men making their way along a course that ran more or less parallel the dry stream-bed. He could also see the tips of spears and bows carried by the lighter-skinned Tahitians; they were moving smoothly and silently, as any hunting-party would.

When the other party had vanished, Drake's captors allowed him to stand up again. He tried a soft-voiced greeting in English first, on the assumption that any islanders living in close proximity to the settlement, whatever their physical type, were highly likely to have learned a little. When that overture met with blank incomprehension, he made an elaborate mime of displaying his obvious lack of arms and declaring his peaceful inclinations. He had grown accustomed to the elements of sign language, having always been exceptional among his own people for his enthusiasm to meet exotic specimens of humanity and make alliances with them.

The dumb-show elicited no more reaction than his speech. He was now able to count the number of his captors as seven, but none of them was armed and they



did not seem to mean him any harm, Indeed, it was possible that they had protected him by preventing him from attracting the attention of the lighter-skinned islanders. Before looking back at the man who had dragged him down and muffled his mouth, who seemed to be the leader of the party, Drake made a tour of the group with curious eyes. The expressions on their staring faces seemed far more curious than ominous, but Drake had the impression that if he were to try to leave the company he would be restrained.

“You’re not local, are you?” he guessed. “Neither servants nor traders. So what do you want with me?” He took care to speak in a soft and amicable tone.

There was no verbal reply, but the first man he had seen gestured with his hand. It was an invitation rather than a command, but Drake did not take the trouble to wonder what the consequences might be of a refusal. He bowed, and immediately went in the direction indicated by the invitation. So far as he could judge, that course would take him in the opposite direction to the settlement, but it could not be helped. The leader of the party fell into step with him, walking by his side, while the others arranged themselves in single file behind.

The trail they followed was not straight, but it was clear enough to permit swift progress until they were diverted on to a narrower sidetrack, where they made slower headway. The leader of the party had to go in front of Drake to guide him. After that, they changed direction so frequently that their course was more reminiscent of a ship tacking into the wind than any journey overland that Drake had ever taken. When they had been moving for two hours they stopped to drink from a stream. Drake realized that they must be carefully avoiding contact with other islanders. Although he had caught the odor of cooking-fires more than once, he had not seen a single human habitation.

“You know that I’m a stranger here, don’t you?” Drake said to the leader, without any expectation of receiving a reply. “You know that I came aboard the *Golden Hind*. Do you know that I’m her master, or were you merely intent on picking one of us at random?” Voicing the questions helped him to settle in his own mind what the answers might be—but he knew that there was no point in seeking enlightenment by that means as to where the dark men might be taking him, or why.

Eventually, their course became straighter again, and by late morning they did come into a village, where his captors paused to hold discussions with the inhabitants. These were lighter-skinned people who resembled the islanders he had seen in the settlement, not his present companions, but they did not seem to be hostile to his captors. There was no argument, and scant evidence of overmuch curiosity regarding his presence, although some of the villagers studied him surreptitiously while pretending to ignore him.

“Is there anyone here who speaks English?” Drake asked, plaintively, issuing another general appeal. If anyone did, they were not prepared to admit it.

The march resumed. Drake presumed that they were heading ever-deeper into the island's interior, getting further away from the settlement. He spared time from contemplation of his own predicament to wonder what Gilbert would think when he found that his honored guest had vanished—and, for that matter, what Hammond and Ashley would think when they found themselves devoid of a captain.

They went through two more villages before noon, and a third not long after. Drake was offered fruit to eat and water to drink, but he ate sparingly. The expedition had become tedious now, and he began to wish that it might be over—or, at least, that he might be able to ask when it might be over.

There did not seem to be nearly so many birds hereabouts as there had been on the small islet where Martin had climbed the coconut palm—perhaps because the birds here were much more inclined to steer clear of humans, for reasons to which the natives' feathered head-dresses offered more than adequate testimony. There were, however, large parrots visible in the crowns of the trees, which paused to watch the party of travelers as they passed by rather than taking immediate flight—except for one, which was actively following them. At first Drake thought that he must be mistaken about that, but once he began to keep the bird within view, it soon became obvious that he was right. The bird was definitely tracking them. Drake could not tell whether his companions were aware of the fact or not, but if they were it did not worry them.

For the first time, it occurred to Drake to wonder why the *Fortune* had set off from Gilbert's harbor, heading directly for the island where the *Hind* had dropped anchor, before anyone could possibly have caught sight of her. Was it possible, he wondered, that news of her arrival there had been carried from one island to another by a bird? He had not paid much attention to the birds in Muffet's laboratory, even though Patience had talked to one of them, once his attention had been claimed by the spiders. Now he began to wonder whether he had been distracted from something significant, and cursed himself for his carelessness.

Travelers' tales featuring intelligent birds were by no means as common as those involving giant spiders, but they were not unknown. Perhaps, Drake thought, there was more truth in such tales than he had ever been able to credit. Given that the caverns of the moon were host to vast throngs of philosophical insects, the notion of whole nations of talking birds no longer seemed as silly as it would have done in his days as the scourge of the Carib Sea.

For at least six hours he had not seen a single spider, but that changed quite suddenly when the terrain underwent a marked change of aspect. They had been going up-slope for some time and the forest had thinned out considerably—not because trees had been deliberately cleared, as they had around the villages, but because the trees that grew on this higher ground had massive superficial root-systems than monopolized the soil for some distance around, permitting no competitors. These roots formed complex networks of ridges and deep grooves, and were host to elaborate populations of fern-like plants, mosses, brightly colored

fungi, and swarms of insects. Here, for the first time since his strange awakening, Drake was able to see spiders prowling in broad daylight, though none were as large as the ugliest specimens in Muffet's collection. He saw webs, too, although they were not like the webs spun by garden spiders in England; they were built on the ground and extended in mazy tunnels and strange spirals.

The walls of these tunnels were sufficiently substantial that they might almost have served as the sleeves of garments, but they were slightly translucent, so that it was sometimes possible to see dark shapes confined within them, which might have been the spiders themselves, or the corpses of the kinds of animal prey that Muffet had mentioned: small birds and mice. Despite his booted feet, Drake took great care not to step on any spiders. The natives seemed far less careful, although they went barefoot.

The terrain changed again as the party finally went over the crest of the shallow hill they had been climbing, and came down more precipitously into a valley whose vegetation was quite distinct from any they had yet traversed. There were no palm trees here, although there were trees that bore fruits that Drake had never seen before; they did not grow as tall as palms, but their foliage was more prolific. Many of the bushes bore huge flowers, of very various colors, and the air was alive with the buzz of insects. Drake had been badly bitten in the swamplands of Panama, and he was initially apprehensive of the swarms of flies, but they did not seem inclined to molest him.

The going became much harder once they had descended into the valley, but there was a trail of sorts, which Drake's guide followed unhesitatingly, and the seaman followed without too much difficulty. There seemed to be no villages here, and Drake had persuaded himself that it was merely a margin to be crossed when he suddenly emerged into a clearing where there was a group of huts. He knew immediately that some European hand had been involved in their design and construction, although he did not recognize the half-human figure that came out of one of the huts to meet them as a European.

The man seemed, at first glance, to be similar in type to Drake's companions; his skin had the same dark coloring, although it seemed somewhat coarser in texture, and it was also very hairy. Like them he was ugly, in a straightforwardly human fashion, although his features seemed more considerably distorted. His forehead was bulbous and his jaw unusually narrow. He was not dressed as the natives were, though; he had canvas trousers, a cotton chemise, and a broad-brimmed hat. Clothed as he was, it was easy to determine that he had the same exceptional development of the torso and thighs.

It might have been the narrowness of the jaw that imparted a flute-like quality and a slight lisp to the voice that said: "It's good to see you, Francis, old friend. I had a presentiment that you would come—and it seems that you've arrived in the nick of time."

“Old friend?” the astonished Drake repeated. “I’d surely remember if I’d ever seen a man like you before, let alone numbered one among my friends.”

“I’ve changed more than a little since you saw me last,” the other admitted. “Perhaps I’m being presumptuous, though, in addressing you as *friend* rather than *shipmate*. It was three years ago that you saw me last, as the calendar counts, but it was in another life as well as another world.”

“God’s blood!” Drake exclaimed, not knowing exactly how he had jumped to the conclusion. “You’re Walter Raleigh!”

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7

“I knew that Gilbert would be discreet,” the much-changed Raleigh remarked, “but I thought Muffet might have found an opportunity to say something. I told him long ago that you were mariner enough to have taken full note of what you saw from the ethership’s portholes. Given that you’d already looked on the Pacific from Panama, I suspected that you’d come exploring if you could.”

“If you reached the ground safely when the ethership broke up,” Drake said, angrily, “why didn’t you return to London? I was in dire need of your testimony to support the story I told. Had you been there to support my testimony, it would have been manifest that it was poor Digges, not I, who was deluded about the nature of our adventure.”

“You may be giving our fellow Englishmen too much credit for credulity,” Raleigh replied. “I didn’t know what would happen to you, and I regret that it did, but I had more urgent things to do. In truth, I wasn’t entirely displeased when news reached me of the trick that the ethereal had played on Tom Digges. There are good reasons for maintaining secrecy in regard to the work that Muffet and I must do—for some years, at least. You, though, are one of the few men who might understand. I really am glad to see you, Francis, for there’s no man on earth who might make us a better ally, and we’re direly in need of one just now. I know that the celestial spiders didn’t bring you here, but since you *are* here, they must have Providence on their side.”

“Did celestial spiders bring *you* here?” Drake asked.

“Yes,” Raleigh replied unequivocally. “Walk with me, and I’ll show you what you need to see while I tell you what you ought to know. We’ve no shortage of hapless instruments, but to have another free man in our innermost company will be an immense advantage.”

As he spoke, Raleigh beckoned Drake to follow him deeper into the valley, then made a signal to the leader of the company that had brought Drake from the settlement. The natives were as silent now as they had been since Drake first saw them, and they made no audible response to the signal, but merely retreated to the

huts surrounding Raleigh's.

Drake was in a mulish mood now, though, and he stayed where he was. "You sent those men to kidnap me," he said, darkly, "and you sent some monster with them to render me unconscious. Why?"

"It was the simplest way to bring you here quickly—perhaps the only way. Had my emissaries come openly, the rebel islanders would have been alerted, and Gilbert would have done his best to keep you inside the stockade. He may think of you merely as heaven-sent reinforcements for the defense of his petty fort, but he might be hatching other schemes. Muffet still has confidence in him, but I cannot. Gilbert's plans might be agreeable to me, in the right circumstances—but that depends on you, and on the Tahitians' response to your arrival."

"The islanders seemed friendly enough last night," Drake observed.

"Everyone is friendly while gathering intelligence," Raleigh said. "It's possible that your arrival will inhibit the natives from attacking the settlement, but it's also possible that it will increase their sense of urgency. If they imagine that more ships are likely to arrive in future, bringing more guns..."

"We must talk to them," Drake was quick to say. "We must reassure them that we can co-exist peacefully."

"We did that when we first came," Raleigh told him, bluntly. "The islanders believed us, and all went well ... but many of the islanders now consider that our promises were false, and they know that there's dissent among the ranks of Gilbert's men. Sailors are a superstitious breed; many of them can't understand what we're doing here, or why, any better than the natives. You will—if you'll allow me to show you. Will you come?"

This time, Drake consented to go where the strangely transformed Raleigh led him. By the time they had taken a dozen steps the huts were out of sight again, screened by the luxuriant bushes. The air was still abuzz with insects, though, drawn to the gigantic blooms that dressed the bushes in such awesome profusion. Their nectar-collection was not un-hazardous, though; now that Drake had become accustomed to the rich confusion of colors he was able to make out predatory spiders lurking in the foliage of the bushes, ready to seize prey that settled in the alluring blossoms.

"Beautiful, are they not?" Raleigh said, as he followed the direction of Drake's gaze. Drake knew that he was not referring to the flowers.

The trail they followed was neither wide nor straight, but the mossy ground was gentle underfoot, and Drake was able to stroll in perfect comfort.

"So the spider-bite you suffered on the moon was no superficial scratch," he deduced, "and our insect hosts were wrong to believe that they had countered its

effects.”

“The colonists of the moon’s interior think themselves extremely wise and capable,” Raleigh said, “and the fleshcores that rest in perfect peace within the shells of planetary crusts in the central regions of the sidereal system are even more given to self-satisfaction. They consider themselves rulers of the galaxy and the forefront of evolution’s thrust, but they’re blind to all manner of other possibilities. They know relatively little about the remoter regions of the galactic arms, let alone the vast realm of the ethereals. They know almost nothing about the imperium of spiderkind.”

“You’re some kind of chimera now, I suppose?” Drake guessed. “The spider must have laid eggs inside your body, which took possession of your flesh much as the ethereal took possession of poor Digges’ intelligence, albeit in a slower manner.”

Raleigh laughed. “You see that I’m changed,” he said, “but you mistake the reason. No, I’m not possessed by one of Field’s ingenious extraterrestrial demons. The spider laid no eggs within my flesh. The spiders that rode down to earth with me traveled as passengers on the ethership, just as we humans did. They played their part in saving all of us, slowing the leak with spidersilk long enough for us to reach an altitude at which the parachutes could save our lives. Had it not been for them, you’d likely be dead, although you never suspected their presence. They had to be discreet, you see, for they had been spies within the moon for many years, always in hiding from the insects. They took a considerable risk, in order to make use of an unexpected opportunity to descend to the surface of the Earth. They would have come eventually, of course, but they knew that the ethership’s journey would provoke a response from the selenite host, and they had to be bold. They’re few in number, and their work is patient by nature—my own optimization has been a slow process, and not painless—but they needed to act, lest an unprecedented opportunity be lost.”

“Optimization?” Drake queried. “Is that what has happened to you, Walter? And to the men who brought me here, I presume? They’re not a different race at all—merely islanders who’ve been bitten by celestial spiders.” It occurred to Drake, as he said this, that he too had been bitten, four times over, by spiders whose origin and nature he could not specify—but he reassured himself with the thought that Muffet appeared to be as tightly bound in this conspiracy as Raleigh, without him or his daughter having been transformed.

“Sentient spider species are despised fugitives within the fleshcores’ galactic empire,” Raleigh told him, “as humans and other vertebrate intelligences are bound to become, if the insects and their masters have their way. The celestial spiders have survived and flourished regardless, their evolutionary impetus enhanced by the necessity of their eternal struggle. They’re our natural allies, Francis—far more so than the ethereals, whose penchant for trickery and treachery is obvious in what they did to Digges. The celestial spiders haven’t attempted any deception since they had to make their first move under extremely difficult circumstances. They’ve been honest with me, and with Muffet—with Gilbert too, although he’s never been able to

overcome his instinctive revulsion. That instinct is a direly unfortunate thing, although we humans—some of us, at any rate—seem better able to overcome it than the insect races that comprise the dominant galactic civilization.”

“If God engraved a fear of spiders in our instinct,” Drake observed, “there might be a reason for it.” As he spoke he had his eye on an unusually brightly colored specimen that was not in hiding, but hanging from a thick thread from the branch of a tree, apparently ready to drop from above on some unsuspecting prey.

“That kind of fear is not God’s work,” Raleigh told him. “It’s a phantom of the imagination. The intelligence of Earthly spiders, like that of Earthly insects, remains undeveloped, while that of vertebrates has flourished, by virtue of some unfathomable quirk of local circumstance—but the celestial spiders are rivals of a powerful enemy of humankind, and will be exceedingly valuable allies in times to come. I’d have thought that the man reputed to have turned the Cimaroons into a fledgling nation ready to aid the English against the empire-building Spaniards might understand that.”

“You mistake me, Walter,” Drake told him. “I never set out to be a diehard enemy of the Spaniards. I wouldn’t have attacked them so violently in Panama had I not been so cruelly betrayed at St. John de Ulua. I’m a peaceful man, who would far rather deal honorably with everyone.”

“But that’s exactly what Digges attempted to do with the insects and the fleshcores,” Raleigh pointed out. “They promised him safety and honorable dealing, but they sabotaged the ethership, intending to kill us all.”

“Did they?” Drake countered. “I don’t know that.”

“But you do know that the ethereal—the vaporous creature that Digges breathed in—betrayed him by persuading him that our experience was all a dream. It betrayed *you*, Francis, in making you seem a fool.”

“And you didn’t?” Drake retorted. “I was convinced that you were dead, for I couldn’t believe that you would have deserted me when I needed your testimony to establish my sanity. If I hadn’t had your map...” He did not break off because he regretted the revelation that it was Raleigh’s sharp eyes rather than his own that had guided him to Tahiti, but because he had caught his first glimpse of the wonders that Raleigh must have brought him here to see.

They had come into another clearing, where the ground was damp around the rim of a little pool, whose surface was strewn with lily-pads. On slightly drier ground, cushioned with moss, a dozen Tahitian natives, of the kind Raleigh called “optimized”—six of whom were female—were lying fully extended, seemingly asleep, with their arms extended. Each human body was marked with between five and ten of what Drake thought at first were dark red tumorous growths.

After a minute or so, he realized that the objects were not growths at all, but

stout leeches and massive ticks, each the size of a clenched fist, every one of which must have drawn a generous cupful of blood from its host. He was able to watch sated parasites withdraw, slowly and sluggishly as they completed their feasts, and roll on to the ground—but whether they intended to scuttle or squirm away thereafter, he could not tell, for as soon as they fell they were seized and carried off by huge spiders, which bore them away into the shelter of the surrounding bushes.

The bushes and trees on the far side of the pool were lavishly supplied with spidersilk structures, including webs, domes, and tunnels, intricately distributed between the undergrowth and the crowns of the trees. Drake was immediately struck by the notion that here was an entire city spun from spidersilk, extending as far as the eye could see. The structures became much more voluminous and mazy as they extended into the distance, drowning the greens of the forest in a vast extent of shimmering white.

The spiders collecting the bloodsucking parasites were not as huge as the largest specimens Muffet had shown him, but very nearly so. If the increasing size of the tunnels that extended away from the pool's edge was a reliable indication, Drake thought, there must be true giants at the heart of the labyrinth.

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## 8

“Are your celestial spiders in that silken maze?” Drake asked, croaking slightly because his mouth was dry.

“Yes,” Raleigh said, “but the products of earthly Creation are far more numerous. The celestial spiders are not the largest, by any means—earthly spiders have more scope for physical optimization than I supposed at first. Although our project is still in its infancy, it's making rapid and spectacular progress. Ours is a world with more exotic potential than our friends have ever found before; it will take them centuries to discover what might be achieved here in Tahiti, let alone the entire surface of the globe—but you and I might live long enough to see it, if we and they are granted time enough to complete our experiments.”

Drake had returned his attention to the languid islanders and their patient parasites. “And if we were to live for centuries,” he said, grimly, “how much blood would we have to produce to feed your celestial spiders?”

“You misunderstand what is happening here,” Raleigh said. “The celestial spiders have neither any need nor any appetite for human blood, although they consider it a privilege to share the alchemical potential of our flesh, as we should consider it a privilege to share the alchemical potential of theirs. Arachnids are exoskeletal creatures, like insects and molluscs, but they're very different in other ways. The blood that you see being taken here is destined to nourish earthly spiders, not extraterrestrial ones, and it's transmitted by vectors in order to protect its donors from excessive traffic in the elixirs of life.”



While Drake watched, one of the male “donors” rose to his feet, having shed all his visitors. He seemed steady enough on his feet, but his eyes were dull. He did not look at Drake before walking into the bushes and being lost to sight.

“Your optimized friends aren’t very talkative,” Drake observed.

“They still converse with one another, and with their former brethren, in their own tongue,” Raleigh said. “They have had no need to learn English to communicate with me; we have other methods. Spiders are voiceless, of course, nor do they have the kinds of sensitive palps that the selenite insects used to converse with Tom Digges, but they have very efficient modes of communication, which humans can learn—optimized humans, at least. When we first returned to earth, my celestial companions had no alternative but to use me a trifle brutally, but they were as discreet as they could be. Once they were able to set me free, they did. I can converse with them now as one free individual to another.”

Drake felt free to doubt that—and, indeed, to doubt that Raleigh was anything more than a mere puppet, set out to seduce co-operation from him as cooperation had clearly been seduced from Thomas Muffet. He had to begin walking again, though, because Raleigh was on the move once more, skirting the pond as he went on into the valley.

They moved between the spidersilk structures easily at first, because those clinging to the ground were low-lying and those constructed in the crowns of bushes and trees were limited to the foliage, but their own relative status as giants was rapidly diminished as the arachnid city grew in dimension. The silken structures soon loomed up to chest- and head-height, and they moved into a translucent labyrinth that confused Drake’s eyes completely.

“Did Muffet talk to you about his work?” Raleigh asked, as they plunged into the heart of this bizarre environment.

“He showed me his laboratories,” Drake replied. “He told me that various sorts of spider venom have curative powers, and that he’s attempting to refine them, with the ultimate intention of returning to England equipped with a miraculous pharmacopeia. I assume that he’ll do everything possible to demonstrate the efficacy of his cures before revealing their source.”

“That’s one aspect of our plan,” Raleigh agreed, “and one of our reasons for doing our work in such a remote location. There were too many spies in England for there to be any possibility of working there.”

“When you say *spies*,” Drake said, “I take it that you’re not referring to Elizabethans, Frenchmen, or Italians? You mean agents of the lunar insects and their fleshcore masters.”

“Yes,” said Raleigh. “Ethereals too, in all likelihood, although they find the surface of the Earth just as uncomfortable as exoskeletalists accustomed to working in

environments where affinity is far less powerful. Earthly insects and spiders are limited in size by a number of environmental factors, you see—especially the load-bearing capacity of their limbs and the difficulty of distributing vital spirit to their tissues.”

“What vital spirit?” Drake asked.

“The vital spirit that’s contained in air and ether, deprived of which living organisms must die. It is the fuel that feeds the fire of life. Organisms heavily burdened by affinity, as we are, require beating hearts and a sturdy network of vessels carrying blood, which absorbs vital spirit in the lungs and releases it throughout the body. Earthly invertebrates are tiny because, by some freak of chance, their ancestors never developed the appropriate combination of load-bearing limbs and internal circulatory systems. Physical optimization requires ingenious compensation in these and other respects. Relatively few intelligent extraterrestrials can operate comfortably on the surface of a planet like the earth—but the purposes of espionage are, in any case, best served by tinier agents. Communication is a problem, of course, but there are means.

“Humans were under observation before, but since our intrepid band of companions broke through the envelope of the atmosphere, interest in surface affairs has increased very markedly. It now extends beyond mere measurement of our technical works to attempts to comprehend our culture, religion, and politics. England, especially, is under intensive study, and her rival European nations too. Tahiti is safely remote, but I dare not offer the same guarantee in respect of China or Peru. Tell me, Francis, how many people in England knew that you were coming here when you set off from Plymouth?”

“None,” Drake admitted. “Being widely considered a madman, I thought it politic to keep the exact details of my plan to myself at first. I didn’t confide them to my officers until we reached South America,”

“That’s good news,” Raleigh said. “I’m glad to find your reasoning so closely in tune with ours—it makes me even more confident that you’ll understand what we are doing, when everything has been properly explained. You’ll see that the celestial spiders are honest, and that you mustn’t let irrational instinctive anxieties blind you to their benevolence.”

Drake suppressed a shudder caused by movements glimpsed behind the walls of spidersilk that now surrounded them. Some of the vague shapes he glimpsed through their translucent walls seemed as large as sheep—larger, at any rate, than wolves. He had not yet met any such creature face-to-face, but their reluctance to come out into the open, while lurking like shadows behind such frail walls, only made them seem more menacing. It did not seem to Drake that his fears were dismissible as “irrational instinctive anxieties”; it seemed perfectly rational to doubt that the extraterrestrial spiders were benevolent in their intentions, and to suspect that Raleigh and Muffet were their dupes rather than their collaborators.

“I can’t guarantee, of course, that there are no subtle spies lurking unsuspected in my holds,” Drake said. “You and Muffet have evidently succeeded in optimizing birds as well as spiders, and use them to gather intelligence. The *Golden Hind* has the usual complement of weevils and flies, any one of which might have descended from the moon. I have no idea how one of your so-called ethereals might be able to conceal itself.”

“It’s not improbable that you have insect spies aboard,” Raleigh admitted. “You’re probably being monitored as closely as Tom Digges—but we have servants who could clean your ship of that kind of presence. As for ethereal observers, we have little more reliable knowledge of their capabilities than you do. All we know for sure is that the ethereals have internecine struggles of their own to contend with, which distract them from the affairs of solid creatures and make it unlikely that they’ll interfere with us. In that respect, at least, the celestial spiders have more in common with fleshcore society than ours; their vast empire is fundamentally harmonious. Prepare yourself, Francis—we’re about to...”

He did not break off his sentence, but the sound of his next few words was drowned by a loud explosion, which Drake initially mistook for cannon-fire. It was followed by a cacophony of other sounds and bizarre manifestations. Flaming missiles of various sorts flew through the air, seemingly converging on their position from several different directions. Some were circular bundles, some were spears—but all of them were wrapped in combustible materials that must have been soaked in some kind of flammable fluid, for they were all burning excitedly.

The spidersilk making up the structures comprising the vast nest was no more vulnerable to fire than seasoned wood, but nor was it any more fireproof. Where the tunnel walls caught fire they began to burn. Some of the fires sputtered out, but others caught hold, fanned by the steady wind.

“The fools!” Raleigh gasped, when he had recovered from his initial astonishment. “The stupid, reckless fools!” Then he grabbed Drake by the arm, and began pulling him toward a curtain-like gathering of white fabric that was presumably an entrance into the network of the tunnels. “Run!” he commanded. “Run for your life!”

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## 9

Drake had no more than a second to make his decision, and it was instinct rather than reason that guided him. He wrenched his arm free from Raleigh’s grip, turned on his heel and ran for his life, heading back the way they had come rather than following the route he had been urged to take by his former crewmate.

Raleigh howled an objection, but Drake had established a lead of six or seven paces before the dark-skinned man set off in pursuit.

The air was already filling with acrid smoke, and there were more fires ahead

of him than there were behind, but Drake was not intimidated by that. He could not have retraced his steps from memory, but he had only to run between the walls of spidersilk while the way was clear. Alas, the way was not clear for long, and he had to cut across one of the tunnels, through a gap cleared by fire. It would have been easy enough to accomplish had he been unobstructed, but, as he moved between the flaming edges, a spider the size of a mastiff came hurtling out of the tunnel, similarly intent on escaping. It made no attempt to bite him, and probably did what it could to avoid him, but a glancing collision was inevitable.

The spider's limbs probably suffered more damage than Drake, but the creature was only briefly interrupted in its flight, while Drake stumbled and sprawled on the ground—and when he got up, he had fragments of sticky spidersilk clinging to his arms, shoulders, and face. In order to protect his eyes from the trailing threads he closed them—and then tried to open them by the merest crack so that he could see where he was going.

He was still running as fast as he could, and was able to see that he had now won clear of the head-high tunnels into a region where most were no higher than his waist. Many seemed to be collapsing even where they had not been ripped or singed, and he was able to hurdle two that sprawled across his path. He tried to do the same with a third, but could not clear it, and, when his booted feet plunged through the fragment, its glue-like strands wrapped themselves around his ankles and calves. He stumbled again, and this time fell upon a white carpet, which caught his arms as his feet had earlier been trapped.

As he struggled to free himself, Drake saw a huge black spider scuttling toward him, and felt certain that he was about to be bitten—but the monster ran straight over him without pausing. He began to pick himself up and pull himself free, but he turned as he heard a shout and saw Walter Raleigh behind him, amid a billowing cloud of white smoke, standing some ten or twelve yards away, gesticulating urgently.

“This way, you fool!” Raleigh yelled.

Drake could not have obeyed the instruction had he wanted to, for his feet were still impeded by the clinging spidersilk. He was about to signal his refusal, though, when a spear hurtled out of the smoke. This one was unencumbered by any burning material, and its sharpened wooden point struck Raleigh in the torso, apparently passing between his ribs,

Drake ducked low, expecting the weapon to be the first of a shower, and brought up his arms to shield his head. No other spears passed over him, though. Instead, it was a seeming tide of living flesh—bronze flesh, not dark brown or sunburned white—that seethed out of the surrounding bushes, and a dozen grasping hands reached out to seize him and pluck him from the ground, dragging him away from the web that had trapped him.

It required more than a minute for Drake to realize that he was not in imminent danger of death, and that the men who had seized him were intent on carrying him away alive. Once he was sure of that, he wondered whether his new captors might have mounted their attack in order to rescue him from what they imagined to be deadly peril—but that seemed too optimistic an analysis.

As soon as the men carrying him set him on his feet again—which they did not do until they were clear of the valley that Raleigh and the celestial spiders had adopted as their home—Drake tried to thank them, but they were not immediately interested in conversation. One said: “Follow! Hurry!” If that was not the limit of his English, he was not presently disposed to say any more.

Having little alternative, if only because there were as many islanders behind him as before him, Drake followed the man who had spoken, and hurried as rapidly as his captors. He had lost his bearings completely, and did not know which way he was being taken. The sun was too close to its zenith for him to make an accurate judgment of their heading.

By the time their headlong flight slowed to a walk there were a dozen Tahitians with Drake, forming a virtual phalanx around him as they strode over the ground, so rapidly that he could hardly keep pace. Breathless as he was, he tried again to talk to them, but their only reply was to impress the urgency of the situation upon him with gestures. It was obvious by now that they meant him no immediate harm, but it seemed more likely that they had seized him as a hostage than that they had merely sought to rescue him. Even if that were so, he thought, he was probably better off than he had been in the heart of the arachnid city.

When his captors brought him out of the forest into the largest native village he had yet seen—the first to be surrounded by a defense of sorts, and to show signs of concerted agricultural endeavor within and without that boundary—he saw that there were men waiting to receive him. They were all natives, but several were wearing linen shirts and trows. He was less pleased to observe that two were in possession of muskets, and several more of machetes.

He was received with some formality—ceremony, even. The leader of the party that was waiting for him made an elaborate show of welcome even before he said: “You are Captain Drake.”

“I am,” Drake confirmed, and waited politely for the other to reveal his own name.

“I am Ruhapali,” the islander told him, gravely. “I speak for many tribes.”

“I’m honored to meet you,” Drake assured him. “What do you want with me?”

“My people saved you,” Ruhapali stated, making an obvious bid for the moral high ground.

“I’m grateful,” Drake said. He did not say that the islanders had also imperiled him by attacking the spiders, because he was not sure exactly what the islanders were claiming to have saved him from. He had no idea what might have happened to him had Raleigh actually been able to introduce him to the celestial spiders, although he suspected that the process of his “optimization” might have been initiated without much delay.

“You must go away from here,” Ruhapali said, coming to the point. “Your ship, and the others too. You must all go. We will kill the spiders. We do not want to kill your people. We will take you to your ship, but you must give us guns. We will give you food and fresh water, but you must give us guns. Then you must go. All of you.”

The last thing that Drake wanted was to involve himself in a war, especially one in which he did not know how many sides there might be, and who might rally to what banner. “Have your people attacked the settlement?” he asked.

“No,” Ruhapali told him. “Your people are not our enemies—not all. Many will be glad to go. You have seen the reason.”

Drake knew that most, if not all, of the *Golden Hind*’s crew would probably agree with that judgment, if he told them what he had discovered. He had seen enough to be almost certain in his own mind that he did not want to stay on the island—but he could not be certain that he had seen enough to make a fully-reasoned decision. “Your warriors killed Walter Raleigh,” he observed, playing for time while he tried to clear his mind and formulate a plan. “Do you know Raleigh? The white man who became dark—just as some of your own people have become dark?”

“The man who brought the master-spiders,” the Tahitian chieftain said. “If he lives, he must go. Better that he dies. The doctor too—but if he goes, that is your business.”

“I understand,” Drake told him. “What about those among your own people who have been transformed? Is *that* your business?”

“Yes,” Ruhapali told him. “We will take you to your ship now. Your people will give us guns.”

Drake was not about to start bargaining as to how many guns he might be worth. He nodded his head, to signify that he was content to be taken to his ship. He believed that he understood what was happening here, although he had only met Humphrey Gilbert a little more than twenty-four hours ago. The islanders’ discomfort regarding their various exotic visitors must have been growing apace for some time, as they observed what was happening in the valley where the celestial spiders had taken up residence. They could understand readily enough that there would be more and more dark men as time went by, and they presumably feared—rightly or wrongly—that their entire population might eventually be absorbed into the converts’ ranks.

Thus far, they had been biding their time, but the arrival of the *Golden Hind* had spurred them to precipitate action. They must have been afraid that Drake and his crew might have been persuaded to reinforce the spiders' allies—in which case, the prospects of any future rebellion succeeding would be considerably more remote.

Drake could imagine with what avidity the native servants had eavesdropped on conversations the night before—not just the tales that Hammond and Ashley had told at Gilbert's table, but the boasts of his crewmen to the crewmen of the *Fortune* and her fellows. The islanders probably had no notion of the quantity and quality of Drake's firepower, but they obviously knew the value of guns, even in a war against giant spiders.

Ruhapali had said that many of the settlers would be glad to go, and Drake did not doubt it, no matter how little they knew about the celestial spiders. Muffet and Raleigh, rather than Humphrey Gilbert, were presumably the masters of the little colony, but their authority must have been undermined by their hirelings' gradual realization of the true purpose of their adventure. Like Drake, Gilbert's men would inevitably have leapt to the conclusion that Muffet and Raleigh might be mere instruments of the celestial spiders, having been bribed with promises of cures for all manner of human diseases, from the rheum to the plague—and the curse of aging too, if Raleigh's bluster about living for centuries could be trusted.

Even if their instinctive revulsion could be set aside, mariners were a cynical and superstitious breed; Gilbert's seamen would have found it direly difficult to believe in the benevolence of spiders, and they might find it far easier to suspect that a physician like Muffet and a petty aristocrat like Raleigh had sold their souls to the Devil. Raleigh seemed entirely convinced that the kind of "optimization" that he had undergone was a gift worth bringing to the whole of humankind, but its stigmata would inevitably seem diabolical to many people—a number by no means restricted to puritans of John Field's stripe.

Drake had no way of knowing whether Field's account of the ethership's journey had been taken more seriously than his own, but John Foxe was the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose declarations on spiritual matters carried enormous weight in England. It might, therefore, be extremely hazardous for any Englishman to side with Raleigh and Muffet in this matter, even if reason did turn out to favor their alliance.

Ruhapali had turned to his fellows after Drake's consenting nod, in order to talk to them in their own language, but the discussion did not last long before he turned back to Drake and said: "You will tell your people they must go. We will give you what you need. You will give us what we need. Then we will kill the spiders."

Again, Drake nodded his head, although he did not consider the gesture to constitute a binding agreement.

It occurred to him, though, as they set off on the march again, that if the celestial spiders really did need to be killed, and their schemes aborted, then the sensible strategy might be for the *Golden Hind*'s crew to ally themselves with the Tahitians—just as Drake and another crew had once allied themselves with the Cimaroons, in order to carry through a mission in which either company would have failed had they attempted it without the other.

\* \* \* \*

## 10

Ruhapali and four other chiefs set out to accompany Drake, with an escort of thirty warriors. The first stage of their journey turned out to be longer than he had hoped, but not as long as he had feared. They reached a village on the coast in mid-afternoon, without having been harassed by any dark men or spiders—or, for that matter, followed by any over-attentive birds.

There were a dozen large canoes drawn up on the beach, but they did not take to the water immediately. Ruhapali had first to enter into negotiations with the village chieftain, who was evidently not party to his council of war.

Drake was grateful for the pause, for it gave him time to slake his hunger and thirst and to rest his weary feet. The village children clustered round him, laughing and staring. They must have seen other Europeans, but perhaps not at such close range. He entertained them as best he could with smiles and gestures. Arrangements were eventually made for the use of one of the canoes; Drake boarded it, along with eleven other men, including Ruhapali and three other tribal chiefs.

The fully-laden canoe was not as fast as Drake's pinnace, even when the pinnace carried no sail, because the paddles plied by the islanders were less efficient than English oars. The water was tranquil, though, and the men were experienced.

Again, the journey was longer than Drake could have hoped, and the sun was touching the horizon when the masts of the *Golden Hind* and Humphrey Gilbert's four ships finally came in view, although the moon was rising by way of small compensation. Soon thereafter, Drake saw that there were forty more canoes waiting in the vicinity of the harbor mouth, apparently ready to mount an attack if the order were given.

Were such a meager and disadvantaged force to attack the *Hind* in daylight, the result would be a massacre, but Drake was well aware that a night attack might be a different matter. In any case, he and his crew could not win a war of attrition fought over weeks or months against the entire population of an island of this size.

Ruhapali was careful to approach the *Golden Hind* from the seaward side, and discreetly. The canoe's approach was quickly observed by the ship's watchman, who had plenty of time to see that Drake was in the canoe and not in any distress before Ruhapali ordered the paddlers to ease down, some thirty yards from the ship's stern.



“Speak to them,” Ruhapali commanded.

“Mr. Hammond!” Drake called, seeing the mate come to the stern. “These men have rescued me from danger and brought me home. They mean no harm, and no one is to act against them.”

“I’m exceedingly glad to see you, sir,” Hammond called back. “There was panic ashore when you were nowhere to be found—more among Gilbert’s men than your own, since we’ve grown used to trusting you in such situations. I see that you’ve been making friends, as is your habit. Will you all come aboard?”

“No,” Ruhapali said to Drake, in a low voice. “You must give us guns. Then we will go. We will bring food and water. You will give us more guns.”

“No, Ruhapali,” Drake said, in his turn. “You will let me go aboard my ship. It will be best if you come too, although that is your choice. Then we will summon Humphrey Gilbert and Thomas Muffet, and we will talk. I mean you no harm, but I must hear what they have to say before I decide what to do. The best thing of all would be for everyone here to agree what is to be done, but we cannot achieve that if you make threats now. Come aboard my ship, and I will mediate between you and Gilbert. If Gilbert is persuaded to leave, Muffet will have no choice but to go with him. If you supply us with what we need to make the voyage, we will trade guns—but until then, we must keep them for our own defense.”

Ruhapali did not like these terms, but he had to consider them carefully—and he decided in the end that the alternative would be worse, given that it would win him no weapons and might make him some awkward enemies. He agreed to Drake’s terms, and boarded the *Golden Hind* with its captain, while the canoe and his fellow chiefs waited alongside.

“How many men have we aboard, Ned?” Drake asked, as soon as the two of them were on the deck.

“Only two dozen,” Hammond told him, “but everything’s secure. Shall I send boats to the shore to bring the others back?”

“Aye,” Drake said. “Send the small rowboat with a single oarsman. He’s to tell Mr. Ashley to send the pinnace back, with another dozen men aboard. Tell him to bring Sir Humphrey Gilbert, and Doctor Muffet too, if he’s willing. It’s a polite invitation, mind—call it a tour of inspection. If they want to know where I’ve been, or how it comes about that I’m back on board the *Hind*, your man has no idea—do you understand?”

“He won’t have to tell a lie,” Hammond observed. “Will you tell me what’s going on, captain?”

“Yes I will, Ned—but not right now. Have we taken enough supplies on board to offer hospitality to our guest?”

Hammond ran his eyes over the Tahitian chief. “We’ve water, fruit, and a little bread that was baked ashore,” he said.

“Good,” Drake said. He raised his voice to say: “This man is our friend, and we must offer him the privileges of an honored guest.”

The rowboat set off immediately, and the pinnacle was not long in setting off on its return journey; Drake’s men were experienced enough to keep it ever-ready to take to the water at a moment’s notice. Even in the fading twilight, Drake needed no telescope to see that Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Thomas Muffet had both accepted his invitation with alacrity, but he did not know what to read into the fact that Muffet had decided to bring his daughter with him.

“Before our men come aboard,” Drake whispered to Hammond, “I want them to be as sure as they can be that they’re not harboring any spiders about their person. I want the order given to everyone that any man who sees a spider on the ship from this moment on must kill it immediately, if he can.”

Hammond looked at him curiously, but nodded his head to signify that these instructions would be followed exactly.

When Gilbert and Muffet came aboard, Drake went to greet them effusively—not forgetting Patience—and immediately asked whether Ruhapali was known to them.

“We know Ruhapali very well,” Gilbert said, warily. “Was it to visit Ruhapali, then, that you left the compound, Captain Drake? I wish you had let us know that you were going, for we’ve been desperately anxious about you. We heard an explosion in the interior of the island, and there seem to be fires burning there.”

“I’ve had quite an adventure,” Drake said, equably. “Had I not known that I’m a madman, ever-prone to the most extraordinary delusions, I might be rather alarmed by what I’ve seen—but this is an island in the Pacific Ocean, after all, and not the interior of the moon or the hub of the Milky Way.” He tried to measure the quality of the glance that Gilbert and Muffet exchanged, but it was not easy.

“We’re very glad to find you safe, Sir Francis,” Muffet said, “and in such good humor.”

“Ruhapali and I need to talk to you below decks, in the cabin,” Drake said. “Will you do me the courtesy of accompanying us?”

“Of course,” said Muffet swiftly, almost as if he feared that Gilbert might raise some objection. The doctor immediately turned to Hammond and said: “May I entrust my daughter to your care, Mr. Hammond?”

“Aye, sir,” Hammond answered.

The four men went below. As soon as a candle had been lit to illuminate the

cabin and the door had been shut behind them, Drake said: “As you must have guessed, gentlemen, the islanders have attacked Raleigh’s valley. Raleigh was struck in the torso by a spear, and may have been killed. The tribesmen are determined to destroy the creatures Raleigh calls celestial spiders and the other creatures they have transformed. Ruhapali offers us the chance to depart in safety, but he refuses to answer for our safety if we will not go. Given what I’ve seen today, I can understand his fears and his determination, and I’m half-inclined to accept his offer—but I told him that I must hear your side of the story first. What’s your opinion, Sir Humphrey?”

Gilbert was evidently ready to reply, but he did not get the chance. “This is absurd,” Muffet said, pre-emptively. “Ruhapali, you are making a terrible mistake. We’ve relied on your own people to persuade you of the wisdom and virtue of our scheme, but they’ve evidently failed. You must listen to us now, and stop your assault on the valley as soon as you can. You must allow us time to complete our work, so that its benefits will become fully manifest.”

“You must go,” Ruhapali replied, adamantly.

“Perhaps, Dr. Muffet,” Drake said, smoothly, “we might be better placed to settle the matter if you would explain to us exactly what the purpose of your work is. I suppose that appearances might be deceptive, but I’ve seen men transformed by spider-bites, who lie down to let monstrous parasites suck their blood and carry it away into a spider’s-nest the size of a town, apparently at the command and behest of invaders from another world—and it seems to me that Ruhapali and his people have been exceedingly patient in waiting so long to take up their arms. Raleigh admitted to me that you and he dared not begin this work in England, and I’m inclined to agree with him that it would have been direly dangerous to do so.”

“Superstition is a difficult enemy to fight,” Muffet said, “Whether one encounters it in the Church, the Royal College of Physicians or the prejudices of ignorant men. You’ve found that yourself, I think, in trying to persuade your fellow Englishmen that what you discovered in the moon and beyond is real.”

Drake did not want to waste time pointing out that he would have found that task far easier had Tom Digges or Walter Raleigh confirmed his story. “Be specific, doctor,” he said, “and be brief—we have no time for a long discourse.”

“Very well,” Muffet said. “I doubt that you’re acquainted with the principles of medicine, but you’ve probably heard mention of four bodily humours analogous to the four elements of inanimate matter, which must be kept in balance if the body is to remain healthy. I’ll not attempt to describe all the complications introduced into that fundamental system as a result of the New Learning, hoping that it will suffice to say that there are at least as many subsidiary substances making up the components of living bodies as there are different kinds of solids, liquids, and essences, and that their various malfunctions defy easy appeasement by the remedies contained in herbals or those at the disposal of Galenist or Paracelsian physicians. We have but

few defenses against sickness and injury, Captain, and they're by no means reliable.

“As I explained to you last night, spiders are unlike most other creatures in consuming food exclusively in liquid form. Even earthly spiders, which are exceedingly primitive, have developed complex methods of immobilizing their prey and transforming the flesh they will consume into liquid form. On worlds in which spiders, rather than insects and molluscs, have acquired intelligence and have become dominant species, they've become masters of the alchemy of flesh, whose secretions accomplish far more than mere liquefaction. The most advanced have become experts in induced transmutation, remolding other species internally and externally to their own designs. Our own alchemists have long searched for the elixir of life as well as the secret of transmuting base metals into gold and silver, but they've made even less progress in the former quest than the latter. The celestial spiders have achieved far more.

“The insects and molluscs that constitute the vast majority of intelligent species within the sidereal system do not like spiders, because they consider them dangerous predators, but that is because the spiders native to their own worlds are as primitive as the spiders of ours. In a more general sense, too, the masters of the galaxy have inherited the mentality of prey species and cannot understand the true logic of predation as a way of life. Humans, being omnivores who owe our own intelligence, culture, and civilization to hunting and animal husbandry, *can* understand, if we will only make the effort to overcome our silly prejudice. That's why we're natural allies of the celestial spiders, and why they're prepared to optimize us as a sibling species rather than a subject one.

“We humans have been alchemists of the flesh ourselves, in transforming all the species on which we depend: the livestock we keep to supply us with meat, milk, and eggs, the horses we use for transportation on land, and the dogs we employ in hunting. We change them to the best of our ability, tailoring them to our needs, optimizing them for the production of those qualities we desire in them—but we can only do so indirectly, by selective breeding. The celestial spiders are cleverer by far, employing all manner of elixirs that work directly upon the flesh of other species. They've used their intelligence very wisely in the investigation and deployment of their intrinsic abilities in this regard, and have become great experts in the calculated modification of their various domestic stocks—but they've not been content with that, either in their own worlds or in others they've found and visited.

“Where intelligence has emerged spontaneously among spider species, those species have never been content to remain alone; they've always elected to optimize intelligence in brethren species. Nor have they usually been content to restrict that privilege to other arachnids; they've been curious enough to offer the gifts of sentience, speech, and culture to species of very different kinds, including insects and molluscs. Indeed, many spiders believe that the species currently making up the dominant culture of the galaxy must have originated from spider alchemy, and then turned ungratefully against their benefactors, wiping out their makers and attempting

to hunt down and destroy similar species wherever they found them, extrapolating their fearful prey mentality.

“There is, as you say, no time for a long discourse, so I shall say only this: the celestial spiders are willing to be our friends and benefactors. They’re willing to assist us in the development of cures for very many human diseases, and to help us become far more robust in resisting injury. They can help us live far longer than our traditional allotment of three-score years and ten, and they can give us the power to re-grow lost limbs and damaged organs. They cannot make us immortal, but they can make us a good deal less mortal than we are. They’re eager to do this because they’ve not had the opportunity before to work with natural species of our kind—intelligent vertebrates, that is. They don’t know of any world in which spiders have contrived to induce intelligence in vertebrate species, but those that have developed naturally on Earth have far greater natural potential by virtue of their unusual size.

“With the spiders’ assistance, therefore, humankind can take a great leap forward, benefiting from a process of perfection that might require thousands of years if we had to develop our own knowledge of the alchemy of the flesh by trial and error—assuming that we’d be let alone in the meantime by the great fleshcores and their multitudinous subject species. In sum, we *need* the celestial spiders, and have a great deal to gain from association with them—if we can only suppress and master our stupid instincts.”

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## 11

Drake had glanced repeatedly at both Ruhapali and Gilbert to see what effect Muffet’s explanatory speech was having on them. Ruhapali, apparently, had not been able to comprehend more than a fraction of it, and seemed utterly unmoved in his determination to remove all alien presences from Tahiti, in order that his people might revert to the untroubled existence they had previously enjoyed. Gilbert must have heard similar speeches many times over, with appropriate elaborations, and presumably understood the arguments better than Drake did, but he seemed distinctly unhappy. It was to him that Drake turned now.

“What’s your opinion, Sir Humphrey?” Drake asked.

“If I’d been told all this before I set sail from Southampton,” Gilbert said, bluntly, “I would not have left England. I’ve been strongly tempted to return more than once, but have been torn by conflicting responsibilities. Lately, I’ve been reluctant to leave because it would have meant abandoning Dr. Muffet and his daughter to a dangerous situation—but now that the situation has become impossible, I wonder whether my duty might be to save them, and compel them to come away. On the other hand, I cannot believe that my men will consent to bring the results of the doctor’s experiments in transmutation with us—except, perhaps, for the clever birds—and I might face a mutiny merely by virtue of trying to save the

doctor and Patience.”

“I can understand all that, Sir Humphrey,” Drake said. “But what do you think of the merits of Doctor Muffet’s scheme itself?”

“I no longer know what to think,” Gilbert admitted. “For a time, it seemed that the potential reward might outweigh any risk, but recent reports we have had from the island’s interior have made me wonder whether the real intention of these celestial visitors might be to establish a spider empire on Earth, reducing humankind to the status of mere cattle. If that is their plan, there might only be a narrow interval in which it can be nipped in the bud.”

“Nonsense!” said Muffet. “You’re allowing unreasoning revulsion to overrule the judgment of reason.”

“Even if Sir Humphrey’s fears could be set aside,” Drake said, pensively, “and everything you said were actually true, rather than the result of these celestial spiders playing you and Raleigh for fools, there’s another danger we shouldn’t discount.”

“What’s that?” Muffet demanded.

“The danger that the great empire whose shores extend even to the interior of our planet’s moon might not take kindly to an alliance between two kinds of creatures they dislike. So far as I know, no man in England knows that you are here or what you are doing—and that ignorance will presumably persist until some of us return—but that doesn’t mean that your work is secret from the folk that Raleigh and I met when we went voyaging in Master Dee’s ethership.”

“We can do nothing about that,” Muffet retorted, “except make sure that, should the insect hordes decide that humankind is dangerous to them, we’re as well able to defend ourselves as we can be. That’s a further reason to embrace alliance with the spiders, and welcome our own optimization. In any case, we’re already committed. If Ruhapali thinks that he can destroy the celestial spiders, or even the Earthly creatures they’ve so far transformed, he’s mistaken. If he refuses to abandon this war he’s begun, his forces will be defeated. He should make a treaty with us now, else things will go very badly indeed for his people.”

“You will go,” Ruhapali repeated, yet again. “You will give us guns. We will kill the spiders.”

“Stay with us, Captain Drake,” Muffet said. “Help us to defend the stockade and our work. If you’ll agree to do that, I’m sure that Sir Humphrey will do likewise.”

Gilbert was not inclined to confirm or deny that speculation. Instead, he said: “If you should decide to sail away from here, Sir Francis, I shall be happy to accompany you, with as many men as may care to come with me, to whatever

destination you might have in mind.”

Drake was not grateful for this statement, which seemed to place the entire burden of decision on his unready shoulders. He had no time to figure out a way out of the impasse, though, because Edward Hammond hammered on the cabin door just then and said: “You’re needed on deck, Captain—there’s movement on sea and shore alike.”

Drake hurried from the cabin, assuming that the others would follow him. When he and Hammond arrived on the deck the mate pointed out to sea first. The night was clear, but the moonlight reflected from the sea was not very abundant. Even so, Drake could see that the waters around the *Golden Hind* were crowded with canoes—more likely hundreds than dozens. They were not, however, making any overtly hostile move toward the ship, and their paddlers seemed to be in a state of considerable confusion. There was a great deal of shouting, which seemed indicative of urgent alarm.

On the shoreward side, the horizon was red with fire and blotched with smoke, but lights of a different sort showed all along the coast, where there was more shouting. The settlement was more brightly lighted than the strands to either side of it, but did not seem quite so full of alarm.

Martin Lyle was in the rigging, with his eye glued to Drake’s telescope. “The islanders aren’t attacking the settlement, sir,” he called down. “Indeed, I think they’re begging to be let in for their own safety’s sake—they’re being attacked themselves. Everyone who can seems to have taken to the water, but there must be thousands of natives who can’t.”

Drake rounded on Muffet, who had come up behind him. “The celestial spiders have mounted their counter-offensive,” he said. “You can make a better estimate of their resources than anyone else—can they be defeated?”

“It’s not the visitors!” Muffet protested. “It’s the earthly giants—they’ve not yet contrived to set aside their inconvenient instincts, any more than the islanders have. They’re striking back reflexively. If you’ll give the celestial spiders time enough, they’ll bring the situation under control.”

“We don’t know for sure that they’re still alive,” Drake told him. “The attack was successful enough to wound Raleigh, at least, and it was begun by some kind of petard loaded with black powder. Mr. Hammond! Set men with muskets to port and starboard and have the artillerists stand ready—but the musketeers are not to fire on the islanders unless they’re attacked themselves. Lower the pinnace again and send it back to shore, ready to evacuate our remaining men—and Gilbert’s too, if they haven’t enough boats of their own.”

“Wait!” cried Muffet. “I’ll go back with them!”

“No,” said Drake shortly. “Ruhapali! Can you judge from the shouting how

things are with your own people?”

Ruhapali had already called down to the chiefs who were waiting for him in the canoe that had brought Drake back. “Spiders cannot swim,” he replied, “but some got into boats—they caused much fear. Many people waded into shallow water—they are safe, for now. Sire Gilbert’s men must open the gates of stockade to let my people in. They will fight spiders with your people.”

“No!” Muffet cried. “They must not!”

Drake’s opinion was that this was probably the most sensible option for the men within the stockade—but he knew how difficult it would be for the people currently locked inside to make the decision, given that some of the spiders would probably gain access along with the panicked islanders. He was sorely tempted to go ashore with the pinnace himself, but his own men formed a tiny minority of the company within the stockade, and he could not be sure that the others would take orders from him at present—or from anyone, including Sir Humphrey Gilbert.

There was a sudden clatter of wings and a large macaw hurtled out of the darkness to land on the arm that Thomas Muffet had hastily raised up.

“Raleigh’s coming!” the bird squawked. “Stay calm! Raleigh’s coming!”

“You heard that!” Muffet shouted—unnecessarily loudly, since Drake was still close at hand.

“It’s too late!” Drake told him, in a much quieter voice. “There’s no way this situation can be quickly repaired. If the spiders can be commanded to desist—which I doubt—that will only give the islanders the opportunity to renew their own assaults. If Raleigh and his precious celestial spiders have left the valley, they’ll either seem that much more dangerous, or that much more vulnerable to attack—and I presume that they’ll defend themselves if they *are* attacked.” He raised his voice to shout to the boatswain in command of the pinnace: “Don’t delay, Mr. Stephens! I want everyone back safe, as quickly as possible!”

Humphrey Gilbert had also taken matters into his own hands, and was shouting across the water to the watchmen aboard his own ships, instructing them to launch what boats they could to fetch men from the shore.

The sound of gunfire broke out ashore—a disordered crackling rather than disciplined volleys.

“What is it, Martin?” Drake called.

“The islanders have broken into the stockade, sir,” the boy reported. “They weren’t let in, and some of the defenders have fired on them. They’re attacking the musketeers now, sir.”

“Ruhapali!” Drake said. “You must stop your people fighting ours, if you



can! We're not your enemy!"

Ruhapali shook his head, to indicate helplessness rather than refusal. Drake turned around, intending to go up into the rigging to take the telescope from his kinsman and watch the disaster unfolding, but he stopped abruptly as he almost fell over Patience Muffet. She looked up at him, and said—in a voice pitched so softly that no one else could hear—"Please take me ashore, Captain. Hector, Achilles, and the others will need me."

Drake shook his head, to signify bewilderment as well as refusal. His head was aching, and exhaustion was beginning to inhibit his movements. Even so, he began to climb, going up far enough to be able to take the telescope from Martin's outstretched hand. He focused the instrument on the shore, but lights were going out now as the struggle within the stockade became evermore chaotic, and it was very difficult to make out any detail.

"How many cannon are manned and ready, Ned?" Drake demanded.

"Three port, three starboard, sir!" Hammond reported.

"Tell the for'ard gunner on the shoreward side to fire a shot into the shallows—but make sure it falls harmlessly, well clear of boats of any sort."

"Aye, sir!" the mate replied—and disappeared to make sure that the order was carried out to the letter. Drake hoped that the sound of the cannon firing might bring about a pause on shore, which would allow the defenders of the stockade and the islanders alike to realize that they had no quarrel with one another as urgent as their fear of the fire-maddened spiders.

When the cannon boomed, Drake saw through the spyglass that there was, indeed, a pause while everyone looked around—but the moment of stillness was short-lived. There were screams as well as shouts audible within the stockade now, and Drake guessed that the islanders' pursuers had followed them through the broken gate. He redirected the telescope toward the pinnacle, which had reached shore alongside the much smaller rowboat. He could only hope that his men would contrive to reach the vessels safely and begin the evacuation.

He heard the thud of a spear that hit the side of the vessel then, and the whistle of an arrow soaring over the deck. He groaned, knowing that the missiles must have been sent forth in blind panic rather than as aspects of an organized attack. He filled his lungs with air, ready to tell his men to desist from firing for a few moments longer, but it was already too late; a volley of shots returned the fire from the canoes, and there was nothing to be done thereafter but scramble down to the deck and fetch a weapon for himself, ready to repel boarders if the necessity arose. Ruhapali was still on the deck, shouting orders in his own language, but it was impossible to tell whether the orders were having any effect.

"Raleigh's coming!" squawked the macaw, again. "All's well! Raleigh's

coming!”

“He’ll arrive too late,” Drake said, wearily, fixing his eyes on Muffet rather than the bird. “I’ll take him aboard if he can get here, but I won’t take his accursed spiders—they must fend for themselves.”

“They will, Captain,” Muffet retorted. “You may be sure of that.”

\* \* \* \*

## 12

Drake snatched a cutlass from one of his musketeers, but there were no more spears and arrows hurtling on to the deck now; whether that was because of the volley of musketfire or Ruhapali’s shouted orders he could not tell. He renewed his instructions to his own men, telling them to desist from any violence unless and until their lives were under threat. Then he put the telescope to his eye again, searching for the pinnace. He saw that it was moving away from the shore again, having picked up a considerable number of passengers. The vessel was moving away from the remaining lights on shore into deep gloom, but the hectic movement of the shadows told him that something was badly wrong.

It seemed at first that the people on the boat must be fighting amongst themselves, and Drake wondered whether the islanders might be trying to seize the pinnace for their own purposes—but then he realized that they were actually battling against two huge spiders that had managed to clamber aboard. Although three or four of the men had muskets, they had obviously discharged their rounds already and had not had an opportunity to reload, for they were using the guns as if they were clubs. Others were using the oars as staves to ward off the spiders—with the result that the pinnace was drifting in the shallows rather than making significant headway.

Drake rounded on Ruhapali. “Can your canoe get me to that pinnace? You may bring your fellow chiefs up here, if I can take their places with half a dozen men.”

“No,” the Tahitian said, immediately. “We will take you. You give us guns to fire.”

It seemed to Drake to be a very bad time for haggling, but Ruhapali obviously felt that he had been cheated of his bargain before and was not about to let an opportunity to recover it pass him by. “Ned!” Drake called to Hammond, who had just reappeared on deck. “Bring me four loaded muskets, now!”

Hammond obeyed, but when he saw what Drake intended to do he begged to be allowed to go in his stead, or at least to accompany him. “You’re exhausted, captain!” the mate added, by way of justification.

“No time to argue, Ned—and no room in the boat!” Drake replied, before

collecting two of the guns and lowering himself over the side. Ruhapali followed, carrying two more.

The paddlers were ready, and the canoe shot away from the flank of the *Golden Hind*, heading straight for the pinnace. There was no light aboard either boat, but the larger boat was still close enough to shore for them to obtain some benefit from the few lanterns still burning in the settlement.

The passengers on the pinnace had cornered the two spiders at one end of the vessel, and were holding them back with the oars and the empty guns, but at least two sailors had fallen down, presumably bitten.

Drake moved into the prow of the canoe, ready to slash with the cutlass at the creatures' legs. He remembered what Raleigh had said about the difficulty of augmenting the load-bearing capacity of spiders' limbs, and thought that a likely way to immobilize them quickly. It might then be possible for the oars to be used as levers to tip them overboard. Ruhapali had other ideas, though. "Get down, Captain Drake!" the chieftain called—just in time, for his inexperienced gunners were far too eager to fire. Four shots went off almost simultaneously, but one islander was knocked completely off balance by the recoil, only just managing to drop the gun into the boat before he toppled overboard.

One of the spiders flinched visibly, presumably having been hit, but the other bullets seemed to have missed their targets. The monster that had been hit had not been killed, and it turned to face the approaching canoe. Drake had to stand up again and carry out his plan, slashing wildly at the legs of both creatures.

Now that he was within touching distance Drake was able to appreciate the true enormity of their size and ugliness; they were, indeed, as large as sheep, and as shaggy too, but their shape was very different and there was something intrinsically horrifying about the way they moved on eight legs rather than four, with a curious fluid quality. Drake could barely make out the features of their horrid heads in the poor light, and could not make out the merest glint of an eye, but he felt an unexpected surge of revulsion that must have been born of pure imagination.

*But this is the world as it is, he thought. The sky is full of stars invisible to the naked eye, and the countless stars have worlds where creatures like these think, feel, and scheme like Earthly men. Whatever happens here, on this remote island, our entire world is caught in their web, helplessly.*

The injured spider lunged at him as he struck out, and when the two vessels scraped sides it contrived to scramble from the pinnace into the canoe, where it fought for balance. Once it had found its footing, the monster would surely have hurled itself upon its attacker—but the pause was just long enough to allow Drake to slash cruelly at two of its legs, cutting them simultaneously, with enough force to break them both. A third leg must already have been injured, for the spider now found itself quite unable to follow through with its attack. While it floundered on the

floor of the canoe, Drake thrust again with his blade, and then again, making sure that the monster was dead.

He felt a surge of triumph then, which overwhelmed the residual effects of his earlier frisson of terror.

In the meantime, the islanders had pulled their fellow out of the water, and the oarsmen in the pinnace had managed to tip the second arachnid invader—which was also badly wounded by now—into the seething wake of the lighter vessel.

Drake turned to Ruhapali, intending to order him back to the *Golden Hind*, but he felt suddenly giddy, and his limbs seemed about to give out. In any case, Ruhapali was already giving orders in his own tongue. The canoe turned, and came alongside the pinnace.

“Go with your own people,” Ruhapali instructed Drake. “Go now!”

There was nothing to be gained by argument, and Drake now felt drained of every vestige of his strength. He allowed himself to be transferred to the pinnace, leaving the four muskets behind.

Drake presumed that Ruhapali would find some black powder left behind in the settlement—but even if he did not, mere possession of the guns would increase the chieftain’s status among his own people, and his determination to use the weapons against the celestial spiders. Drake knew that he was in no position to offer the Tahitian sound advice as to his future policy or strategy.

With the oarsmen now able to work unhindered, the pinnace sped back to the *Golden Hind* and unloaded its human cargo, including the two injured men. Drake found the strength to climb up to the deck, but Edward Hammond and Sir Humphrey Gilbert had to grab his arms and pull him over the rail. “Have we any men left ashore, Mr. Stephens?” Drake muttered to the boatswain.

“No sir,” Stephens replied. “We have three of Gilbert’s men aboard, but the rest of ours were taken aboard the rowboat.” He pointed toward the shore, but Drake could not see the smaller vessel in the darkness.

“No more spears or arrows have been launched against us, sir,” Hammond reported. “Your guest put an end to that, I think.”

“Bring the pinnace aboard but keep the rowboat in the water attached by a painter, and its oarsmen ready,” Drake ordered, hoarsely. “Keep an armed lookout—but no more shooting, unless it’s necessary. We’ll sit tight till dawn, and reappraise the situation when we’ve more light.”

“May I borrow your rowboat to return to my own ship, Sir Francis, along with the men the pinnace brought?” Gilbert asked.

“Aye, Sir Humphrey, if you wish,” Drake said, wearily, “but you might do

better to come back when you've delivered your men and issued your orders. We'll need to decide what to do tomorrow, and it would be better if some of us, at least, were prepared to agree on a course of action."

Gilbert made a vague promise to return when he could, and lowered himself over the side. His men did not seem overly enthusiastic to leave the relative safety of the *Golden Hind*, but they complied with their master's orders.

"All's well!" proclaimed Agamemnon, who was now perched in the rigging. He was not alone; a dozen more birds had flown to join him, and the flock seemed as ready to wait out the night aboard as the ship's human crew.

"Let's hope so," Drake murmured, as he slumped against the mast. Hammond and Stephens had to pick him up, and help him below to his cabin. There they laid him on his bunk and promised that everything would be held secure until morning.

\* \* \* \*

### 13

Drake did not wake until some time after dawn, and would have slept longer had Martin Lyle not crept hesitantly into the cabin.

"What is it, Martin?" Drake demanded, knowing that the boy would not have ventured to disturb him unless he was needed.

"There's a native canoe off the port bow, sir—but the men in it are darker-skinned than the islanders. One of them speaks English, and says that you know him."

"Raleigh?" Drake asked, rubbing his eyes. "Get me some water, will you, Martin?"

"He didn't give his name, sir," Martin replied. He fetched a jug of water, from which Drake drank avidly.

"I'll be on deck directly," Drake said. "Ask our visitor to wait. Is Muffet awake?"

"No, sir. He and his daughter are asleep. The birds are still perched in the rigging, but Mr. Hammond ordered a search to be conducted for spiders as soon as it was light. None have been found, of any size." The boy left after making this report, and Drake followed him some five minutes later, having made what adjustments as he could to his appearance, so that he might better play the part of a gentleman and captain of an English ship.

The canoe carrying Walter Raleigh and five optimized islanders was idling in the water some ten or twelve yards from the *Hind*'s bow. It was being watched by half a dozen of Drake's sailors, all armed with muskets, but there was no evident alarm on either side.

“I’m glad to see you well, Walter,” Drake said, not having to raise his voice unduly to be heard. “I feared that you might have been killed by that spear.”

Raleigh parted his shirt so that Drake could see the wound, which seemed half-healed already. “It would have killed a man like you, Francis,” Raleigh said. “I’m glad you can see that it was only a minor inconvenience to a man like me. I’m sorry that we were interrupted—and sorrier still that Dr Muffet’s work has been disrupted. That might cost England dear, if you and Gilbert are not inclined to stay here any longer.”

“What do you expect of us, Walter?” Drake said, with more than a little bitterness. “I fought one of your giant spiders last night, at close quarters, and there can’t be many of Gilbert’s men who haven’t seen them at their worst. If I ordered all Englishmen ashore, with abundant armaments, to support Ruhapali’s campaign, they’d probably go—but I surely couldn’t persuade them to stay on any other basis, and wouldn’t want to. Captains, like kings, reign on sufferance.”

“If we’d only had time,” Raleigh complained, “Muffet and I could have helped you see reason. You, of all people, should understand the necessity of what we’re doing.”

“If the only way for humankind to escape being held in a menagerie by a legion of giant ants and slugs is to submit to transfiguration and be held in thrall by arachnid alchemists,” Drake said, “I think I’d rather choose between the Devil and the deep blue sea.”

“John Dee will understand,” Raleigh said. “He knows more of alchemy than any man in England.”

“If I ever see him again, I’ll tell him what I’ve seen,” Drake said, glad to find a concession he could make without effort. “I’ll be exceedingly careful in telling anyone else, although I can’t speak for others in that regard.”

“You’d do well to stay here with us, Francis,” Raleigh said. “If your crewmen won’t, that’s their affair—but you can get down into the canoe now, along with Muffet and Patience. Were you to call for volunteers to accompany you, I dare say that you might find a few.”

“I couldn’t do that even if I wanted to, Walter,” Drake told him. “My first duty is to my ship and my men. I have to see them safely home, if I can, and to find them a better reward for their long expedition than I’ve so far contrived to do—something more easily tradable than potions distilled from spider venom.”

“Can you really intend to return to South America and raid Spanish ships and settlements, after what you’ve discovered here?” Raleigh demanded.

“It’s a trade I know,” Drake told him. “But I also know that there’s an Austral continent west of here, with two large islands in between, set some way to the south.

Were I to go that way, I could sail around the world before going home, as Magellan's crew claimed to have done following his death."

"That's a pity," Raleigh said. "Will you fetch Muffet and Patience, then? I'm sure they'll be anxious to return to shore."

"Is it safe for them to do so?" Drake asked.

"Ruhapali's people are counting the cost of their adventure at present," Raleigh told him. "If they're wise, they won't attempt to renew their assault—but if not, we can defend ourselves. Muffet and Patience will be far safer here than they would be aboard your ship, whether you decide to sail east or west—and the same goes for you. Shall I gather supplies for you, and make sure you're well-provisioned before you sail?"

"That's very kind, Walter," Drake said, "but there are other islands in the cluster, where we can make our own arrangements to take on food and water."

"Do you suppose that we'd sneak cargo aboard that you'd rather not carry, under cover of supplying food and water? You mistake us, Francis—we're honest dealers. We mean you no harm, and wouldn't seek to use you unawares."

What Drake actually thought was that if the celestial spiders did want to use the English ships to transport any of their produce, just as they had earlier used Master Dee's ethership, they had had plenty of opportunity already to secrete their tiny agents in Gilbert's vessels. "I trust your word, Walter," was what he said aloud, "but I don't want to expose you to any risk. I suspect that Ruhapali's far from finished, as yet—and you might find him a more difficult opponent than you imagine."

"Within a month he'll be our staunchest ally," Raleigh said, confidently, "and within ten years—twenty, at most—Tahiti will be a nation to compare with any in Europe, sending diplomats to China and the Americas."

Drake looked around then, as Thomas Muffet and his daughter came on to the deck.

"Thank you for hearing me out last night, Captain," Muffet said, "and for keeping us safe aboard your vessel during the unpleasantness. I doubt that I'll be able to return to my laboratory for a while, but I can do my work in the interior."

"And will your daughter be safe there?" Drake asked, bluntly. "Are you really prepared to take her into the spider city?"

"Of course," Muffet said. "She has no fear of spiders."

Drake looked down at the little girl, who was standing quite calmly behind her father, living up to her name. He remembered what Muffet had said about the celestial spiders' ability to bring about internal as well as external transmutations.

“Bring the canoe alongside, Walter,” Drake said, calmly. “You may take your passengers aboard. Your other friends will fly, I suppose.” He glanced upward as he spoke to where Agamemnon was perched, surrounded by two dozen fellows.

“Would you like a parrot as a gift?” Muffet asked. “Tame ones that can mimic human voices are quite popular with sailors, I understand.”

“No, thank you,” Drake said. “I’m sure your birds would be much happier at home than they would be aboard ship. We wouldn’t find it easy to care for them during long periods at sea.”

Muffet made certain that Patience was safe as she clambered over the rail and began to descend the rope ladder to Raleigh’s canoe, but he turned to face Drake again before following her.

“Perhaps we’ll meet again, Captain,” he said, “in England if not in Tahiti. I wish you felt able to stay longer—I’m sure you could be persuaded that our mission here is in the best interests of England, and of humankind.”

Drake felt sure that he could be persuaded, too, if he were to give the celestial spiders the opportunity—but it was the means they might use to persuade him that he feared. Muffet and Raleigh seemed far too sure of themselves for him to believe that they were guided by mere reason—and Patience was positively uncanny. On the other hand, he had no firm grounds for deciding that they were other than human, or direly dangerous. If they were, then it was at least possible, if not likely, that there were others of their kind among Gilbert’s men.

“I discovered three years ago, Dr. Muffet,” Drake said, “that the world in which we find ourselves is very far from what our forefathers believed it to be. I can only hope that John Field was wrong in his interpretation of it, and that you and Walter might be right—but I’m beginning to see, now, why Tom Digges might be more content than any of us, in being able to believe that it was all a silly dream. Perhaps it was, after all, an angel that accompanied him into a world of multifarious demonkinds.”

“There’s no security in illusion, Francis,” Raleigh said, from the canoe. “We must accept the limitless universe as we find it, and make what alliances we can.”

“We’re your friends,” Muffet added, as he climbed down to join his companions. “We always shall be, no matter what you fear or believe.”

“And I’m yours,” Drake assured them.

He watched the canoe make its way back to the headland east of the harbor. There were other canoes visible on the water, further out to sea, but none made any attempt to intercept it.

Martin Lyle brought the telescope forward, and Drake turned it on the settlement. It seemed crowded with islanders, busy making their own arrangements



to settle there.

“What shall we do, Captain?” Martin asked.

“We’ll sail west,” Drake said. “We’ll reprovision from other islands in the cluster, then head for the two larger ones that lie south-east of the Austral continent. Then we’ll investigate the continent itself. We’ll collect what we can to carry home to England, but we’ll be sure to take as much information as we can gather about the remote reaches of the world.”

“They won’t believe us in England, sir,” the boy said. “There are too many travelers’ tales already about giant spiders and clever birds. They’ll think us liars.”

“Aye,” said Drake. “But not for long, I suspect. One way or another, the people of England will see the Age of Miracles reborn—and we can only hope that they won’t find it unbearable as an era in which to live and dream.”

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