

# Vivat Regina

## Turn 3: Lair of the White Worm

Wednesday 27th May 1570

The Silver Eel Tavern on Cheapside was never the quietest or safest of drinking establishments in the city, and Wednesday Jugged Hare nights were no exception. Jugged Hare night was always popular, the more so when Gilbert happened to have tapped a barrel of Bock shipped from his cousin in Vienna. Captain Richard Blake ducked as a flung tankard hurtled by his ear and smiled at the garrulous singing filtered from the nook around the corner. Blake preferred a quieter pint, but held no grudge with those that approached the Eel with a sense of adventure, so he slid back into his favourite corner near the fire, and supped deep.

Scant minutes had passed before a familiar figure clattered in through the door of the Eel. Foppish hat awry, brim dripping with the rain, doublet untidy (and Blake was sure stockings and shoes were mismatched), with some old (damp) book was clutched in his hand, Kerr Avon stumbled in apologising as he banged tables and dripped on a variety of sailors and miscreants too drunk to notice. He plonked himself down opposite Blake, pulled off his hat and shook the rain off, showering Blake as he did so. Blake blinked gently at the light spray despising the tasteless fresh water he licked from his lips.

"Kerr! Welcome - now you're here I suspect a - Hoy! Gilbert! - glass of Spanish grape might be beneficial to our humours..."

"Steady, Richard, you'll be sounding like a Chiurgeon and cause confusion, not knowing one end of a Leach from the other!" chuckled Avon. Blake smiled, and slapped the table in appreciation at Avon's wit<sup>1</sup>.

This moment of obscure Elizabethan wit passed as Gwen-the-Wench arrived with one of Blake's bottles of liberated Spanish wine, cork out, and the Silver Eel's finest<sup>2</sup> glasses to match. Blake poured, Kerr Avon supped, sighed and they toasted each other.

"So, Richard, to the matter in hand. I have spent the last week wrestling with the problem of our very questionable Spanish gold - the Curse-ed Coin to be exact. After consulting numerous Texts and Authorities on the subject, let alone a number of Philosophical Divinations Known Only To Scholars..."

At this Blake winced, for he'd seen Avon's Philosophical Divinations before: after a week of eating nothing but the fresh chicken Avon supplied to the cook on an hourly basis the crew had demanded Kerr Avon be restrained and they be given salted beef, pickled mutton and hard tack again. It had taken a week for the crew to scrub the cable tier clean of



*Señora Sanchia Amelia Sabina Montoza Gracia Pepita  
Laquista Consuello Illona Allagante Estaballani Donna Tella  
Della Rovere of the Castel San Sabillia.*

<sup>1</sup> Clearly, when leach jokes were aired in the 16th century, you had to be there. They may not have translated well to our 21st century style of wit.

<sup>2</sup> i.e. actually a glass



chicken blood, yet Avon's Dog of Guidance for the voyage resolutely refused to indicate any sort of navigation acumen or familiarity with the weather that was yet to be. Blake regarded philosophical divination with some doubt as to relevance in modern maritime navigation, and considered the cost of sufficient chickens for anything more than a brief tack around the Severn Estuary to be extortionate. However, he nodded sagely in agreement as Avon chattered on...

"...darkness, Richard, darkness and blood sacrifice, young children I suspect, and a brooding evil controlled by such, drawing closer, leaching its Demonic magic from all around."

Kerr Avon shivered and edged around the table slightly closer to the warmth and light of the blazing fireplace, rain soaked clothes streaming gently as he did so. For the first time Blake noticed that he looked pale and drawn, trembling slightly perhaps from the cold rain outside, his eyes darting at every shadow, his stare focused on every light and flame.

"It was horrible, Richard," whispered Avon "every scream, despite the distance, the evil greed, and ...something attached to the coin that even as I foresaw all that had happened for the coin to become what it was, was aware of my Philosophical Gaze."

Avon's introspection was interrupted by the door to the Eel banging open, and a cowed and cloaked figure stepped boldly into the room to gaze all about before shadowed eyes came to rest upon Blake. Without hesitation the visitor strode across the room to Blake and Avon's table, and there flung back the cloak's hood and with a flourish whirled it from shoulder to chair, revealing herself: a *beautiful* woman! At such an abrupt and unusual entrance a small silence in conversations fell about the room as every eye turned momentarily to gaze. In that small pause her voice rang out clear, challenging, and with a soft Spanish lilt.

"I am Señora Sanchia Amelia Sabina Montoza Gracia Pepita Laquista Consuello Illona Allagante Estaballani Donna Tella Della Rovere of the Castel San Sabillia in the province of Córdoba. *You* are Captain Richard Blake. I will speak with you. *You* may call me Señora"

With that she turned and defiantly met every gaze directed at her, each one dropping back to its drink as the mutter of conversation resumed. The Señora settled herself in the chair opposite Blake and stared pointedly at Kerr Avon, who goggled at her wide eyed.

"Captain, we have not been introduced." She stated firmly.

"Oh, ahh, Señora, Kerr Avon, my trusted friend and ships Chiurgeon, Kerr, this is, well, the Señora." stumbled Blake to hide his surprise. Kerr nodded, as did the Señora. Introductions were sufficient in that they both knew Richard Blake.<sup>3</sup>

Blake ordered another bottle of his personal cellar of finest Spanish wine, and an extra fine<sup>4</sup> glass for the Señora.

"You may find this to your taste Señora, I do keep an excellent cellar of *prize* Spanish wine..."

"At least for an Englishman, Captain, you have some taste." She sniffed. Blake sipped wine to hide a smile - as Jules de Plessey was wont to say, "Touché."

The Señora sighed as she set the glass down, and Blake was surprised to see fully half of it gone. He glanced closer. For a woman of such breeding and position in her native Spain, the Señora looked tired and drawn.

"Captain Blake ..." she trailed off momentarily, as if gathering herself. "Richard<sup>5</sup>, your reputation and honour is such that I come to you to ask for your aid in a small matter. A family matter. One that would be *difficult* to deal with in Spain. My brother, Emez." She leaned in close, and unconsciously Blake and Avon also. "The Inquisition."

Blake swallowed, a grim resolve steeling his heart. Avon sneezed.

Through the minutes that followed the Señora explained her terrible dilemma. Her brother Emez Rovere had been the Captain of a Spanish treasure Galleon *Nuestra Señora de Begona*<sup>6</sup> that sailed back from the New World laden with native

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<sup>3</sup> A function of Blake's Leadership capabilities as Captain

<sup>4</sup> As above, but also *clean*.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Blake's attention was momentarily distracted, something about the way she said 'Richard' with the soft, husky Spanish accent almost caressing ... Blake cleared his throat brusquely, and paid proper attention.

<sup>6</sup> 'Our Lady of Begona'.



gold destined for the war chests of King Phillip. Her sister ship *Nuestra Señora de Duesto*<sup>7</sup> was lost to the storm, floundering but days from the Spanish coast after a troubled voyage across a vengeful Atlantic Ocean.

Despite being laden with gold, the greatest prize amongst all was a set of seven unique native coins, plundered from a temple in the dark jungle of Spain's lands there. These were to be kept separate from the other treasures and handed to King Phillip's personal envoy upon landfall. When landfall was made, however, the ship was met not by the King's representative as expected, but by a member of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, a man named Romero Estafan, and a contingent of armed men to enforce his will. Her brother was taken to present the coins to the King, along with what was assumed to be the seven coins. It was only later discovered one was missing and that the man charged with counting the coins (by the name of Rodriegez) was unable to count. The wrath of Romero Estafan was terrible to behold. The man named Rodriegez fled lest he be tortured to death for his blunder, and Emez was taken to the Castel San Sabilia to be held there pending the discovery and finding of the coin on the *Nuestra Señora de Begona*. By the time word reached the berth the ship was already unloaded and rewards dispersed. It was then that the Señora was charged with finding those that had taken reward from the crew already dispersed, and finding the missing coin: the threat of terrible consequences for her captive brother deemed a sufficient motivator.

The Señora faltered in her tale, her voice breaking momentarily.

"They burned him with brands in front of me, tore at his finger nails with pincers. My eyes, my head held so I could not look away. His screams ring through me every night. Romero described it as a demonstration, an *incentive* lest I consider failure..." She drew a deep breath, and then sat straight in her chair, chin lifting again to stare about her with contempt and authority. "You will help me find this coin Captain Blake, and earn my gratitude, even..." she glanced sideways conspiratorially and leaned closer, "payment."

Blake cleared his throat and opened his mouth to express regret, his best wishes for her good fortune in her quest, but unfortunately he would not...

"And wine. *Good* Spanish wine. Where did you get this? It's awful." Announced the Señora, splashing the remains of her glass into the fire behind Avon. Blake gawped at her for a moment, but before he could leap to the defence of his wine, Avon interjected.

"And this coin, amulet, token, what would it look like, do you know? It seems Richard and I have come into possession of something that may be just as you describe."

The hope that sprang into the Señora's eyes was enough to force discussion of where and when Blake had come by the coin. He explained of the game of cat and mouse on the high seas about the Isle of Mann many months before, resulting in the briefest of exchanges and the (brief) waylaying of the Spanish ships carrying troops for the defeated occupation of the Isle. Blake described his conversation with the commander (the truth now revealed that he had been an officer aboard the *Nuestra Señora de Begona*, paid in gold before his new command. That much of that gold found its way into Blake's hands as a bribe to let the ship return to Spain unharmed was unknowable to the Señora, and the circumstances around which the stray coin was discovered between the floor planks of Blake's cabin on the Kestrel after the strange haunting and visions experienced a few days out from the Spanish coast was quickly glossed over by Blake. He was pleased that Kerr Avon took his lead and refrained from elaborating details, however from the sketchy description supplied by the Señora, it seemed likely the one she described and that come so recently into Blake and Avon's possession were indeed the same.

"Perhaps we should adjourn to your lodgings Kerr, to better see the coin in some privacy?" suggested Richard Blake, but he was surprised (and by no means a little alarmed) by the ferocity of Kerr Avon's response.

"**NO. No.** It ... it is better that I bring it here. Where there are bright fires, light, warmth, and good people. It ... it is not a thing I would recommend anyone being alone in the dark with Richard, not anyone unversed in the Philosophical Arts and unaware of its Dark Miasmas. Señora, my lodgings are but a few minutes away in a respectable section of Bristol - I will not be long." Kerr Avon, donned his damp hat, damp cloak and strode out into the early evening drizzle towards his lodgings.

Blake relaxed briefly. A warm fire, excellent<sup>8</sup> Spanish wine, and a beautiful Spanish Señora at his table, things were looking up. Blake squared his shoulders a little, brushed his fringe of hair back while the Señora's gaze was averted, and leaned in a little, holding her gaze with his own as their eyes met.

"Señora, it's not often a successful English Captain such as myself meets with a beautiful..."

<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly 'Our Lady of Duesto'.

<sup>8</sup> Despite what the Señora says



"BLAKE? Captain BLAKE?" bellowed Gilbert the Landlord, interrupting Blake's intimate conversation. Blake looked up and caught Gilbert's eye as he pointed out Blake across the bar to a bedraggled traveller. The man nodded and limped over to where Blake and the Señora sat.

Captain Blake?" Blake nodded. "John Prenderghast at your service, but I am here in search of Kerr Avon - an acquaintance I understand?" Prenderghast held out a trembling hand, and Blake noticed the bloodied stains on his sleeve as he shook.

"Indeed, and momentarily absent from our company. Your business with my friend Kerr Avon? And take a seat before you fall down - here, take wine. Spanish, you know, very good." Sniffed Blake, and Prenderghast sank into Avon's recently relinquished chair with obvious relief. It was clear to Blake from the mud soaked clothes, cuts and bruises that Prenderghast had been sorely treated by someone. It took only moments as Prenderghast talked for the full tale of woe to become clear. Prenderghast, an assistant to the Queen's Philosopher Doctor Dee, had been charged by the respected Doctor to deliver a letter of introduction to Kerr Avon, after word had reached Dee of Avon's interest in the Philosophical Arts. Alas, Prenderghast had been caught upon the road from London to Bristol by highwaymen. Relieved of horse, money, letter, and all but the clothes he stood in, Prenderghast had made the rest of the journey over days to Bristol by foot and farm cart, to inform Kerr Avon of the letter's loss.

As the steam rose and mud cracked from Prenderghast's clothes Blake took sympathy and ordered mulled beer, as much pork belly and turnip mash as the man could eat, and room for the night for Prenderghast, and gave him the cost of the coach back to London, while promising to pass on Prenderghast's message and introduction to Kerr Avon.

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Meanwhile, Kerr Avon hurried through the dark streets of Bristol towards his lodgings. While only moments since leaving the Silver Eel, the occasional lantern at a doorway did nothing to pierce the night's darkness all about. It was at the first street corner that Kerr Avon heard the horse behind him in the darkness, as it stopped when he stopped, walked when he walked, paused when he paused. At each corner the sound of the hooves dimmed as he turned the corner, and then echoed behind him again as the horse followed.

Unnaturally concerned, Avon hurried to his own doorway, before halting and demanding of the darkness, "Show yourselves! Who follows me on horseback to my very door?" Avon unhooked the lantern from the hanger by the door and held it aloft. At the edge of the light stood a man leading a horse.

"Kerr Avon?" asked the man, in an accent strong with the Romany cant, "Wanna buy a horse?"

"What?" demanded Avon take-a-back. "Buy a horse? Why should I want to buy a horse in the middle of the night from you, whoever you are! Who are you?"

"Call me John. It's a fine horse, look at the legs, all four of them, the teeth all good stock, and a man of your standing certainly needs a horse. You can't get anywhere there from here without a horse. I can do you easy rates - a deal - because you look like an honest bloke ... in need of a horse. A good horse, full complement of legs, teeth and such. A horse that's reliable. A horse that's friendly. A horse that's *brown*...."

"You want me to pay for this old nag? Are you kidding? How much?" interrupted Avon, while he peered around with the lantern in search of any other foes beside the mad Romany.

"Why, Sir, cheap at twice the price. A single coin of gold will make this fine horse yours. Such excellent stock!" The Romany leaned forward, intent on Avon as he scented some interest.

"Gold?" snapped Avon. "It doesn't even have a saddle!"

The Romany grinned unpleasantly and whistled a brief single note. From the darkness beyond Avon's lantern a saddle slapped onto the cobble and slithered to within a few yards of Avon. 'Aha!' thought Avon, 'an accomplice revealed!'

"Too expensive, still, I am not commonly in possession of gold coin and have none to spare for a horse!" snapped Avon, edging towards his doorway, and the pistol he kept within for deterring unwanted callers.

"Oh, but I think you have..." Wheedled the Romany abruptly, taking half a step forward into the light. "One gold coin in particular that would be *payment* in full, *gratefully* received. That one coin in *particular* for any other passed off, might there be *consequences*..."

Avon felt chill. No chance meeting this then. Somehow the Romany knew of the cursed coin from the New World. And threats: such things were more Blake's area, but Kerr Avon felt he'd learned a lot over these past months accompanying Blake.



"Well, Call-Me-John, I have no gold coin, don't want your horse, and if you are still here when I come out my lodgings with my pistols I shall show you how I deal with persistent horse salesmen!" Kerr Avon turned and slammed open the door of his lodgings, jumped inside and slammed the door closed behind him. Outside the Romany called,

"No need to take it personal! I'll come back later, when you've had some time to consider!" and the sound of horses hooves trotted off down the street.

Kerr Avon strode up to his rooms and checked the obvious and less obvious hiding places thereabout. Some were hiding places that were obvious, other's obviously less so, and both were there to delay and divert attention from the true hiding place of the coin within its lead and salt filled oaken box. Avon wrapped the box in a sack, and made a quiet exit through the back door, pistol in hand. Of horse salesmen there was no sign.

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Kerr Avon hot-footed it back to the tavern as quickly as his legs and hurried glances behind him while dodging from doorway lantern to doorway lantern would allow. Gasping, he burst back through the door to the welcoming fug of the Silver Eel. Blake and the Señora were just where he had left them, albeit Blake was now holding one of her hands, tracing some of the lines on her palm, and attempting to ad-lib knowledge of palm reading: surely there couldn't be any other explanation? Avon plonked the box containing the New World coin between them to interrupt the moment with something clearly more relevant. Huddling close in their corner table Blake and the Señora stared as Avon unlocked the box and popped the lid, bending back the leaden flap and brushing aside the salt.

"...Yes." Murmured the Señora after a moments hesitation, staring at the twisted figure displayed on the face "That must be it. The description is accurate." She glanced nervously around, and Avon noted the prickling of chicken bumps rising on her exposed arms. Abruptly the room felt oppressively warm, the air thick and difficult to breath, the cooking smells too reminiscent of burning flesh, mixed with a sickly sweet scent of wild rose.

"In the light, it glistens as if smeared with something." Murmured Blake

"Aye, a warm gold, is it warm to the touch...?" hesitated the Señora as both she and Blake reached for the coin simultaneously.

Avon snapped the lid of the box closed, and both Blake and the Señora jerked back in surprise, unaware of how close they both, indeed they all had been leaning to stare at the untarnished glint of the golden coin. The air in the Silver Eel seemed to clear again, and the smell of burned flesh took on the odour of roasting suckling pig from the spit at the rear.

"Now you understand a little?" murmured Avon. "It is wise that the coin is never outside of this box and alone with anyone who is not aware of the Philosophical Arts and the temptations those can manifest?"

Avon detailed his encounter with 'Call-Me-John' the Romany horse salesman and his unnerving knowledge and interest in single gold coins. Blake nodded, his recent conversation with John Prenderghast in Kerr's absence falling into place as he then recounted it back to Kerr himself.

"We thought the coin was unknown, certainly its presence here. It appears to be becoming more important and interesting to the less desirable segments of society by the day." stated Avon, adding hastily "Present company excepted..."

The Señora sniffed.

"I know not how Dee came upon information of the coin, but for a man of such great reputation I suppose it should be unsurprising. If the letter was as Prenderghast described, perhaps we should visit the good Doctor on the Thames - I understand he keeps a residence there." Suggested Avon. "I've never met the man - this would be an ideal introduction." Avon looked at Blake "Personal advisor to the Queen!"

Blake nodded. There might be distinct advantages to knowing such an influential Courtier.

"We'll escort the Señora to her lodgings Kerr," suggested Blake, "then perhaps it would be better if we spent the night aboard the Kestrel. Señora, the tide will be turning midmorning, and then we sail"

Avon nodded and rose.

"I suggest we move together, Señora; Richard, I have a few things to collect from my lodgings, thence we escort the Señora home, and then to the ship. Señora, will Captain Blake expect you before the tide turns tomorrow?" asked Avon.



As Avon was talking Gilbert caught Blake's eye and nodded to a greasy weasel-faced man propping the bar, and shrugged.

"A moment, Kerr." Requested Blake as they passed the man as they were en-route to the door.

"Captain Richard Blake?" asked the man. Blake nodded. "A moment." He guided Blake a few steps away to a quieter corner. After a moment's conversation it became clear to Blake that he was one of the Bishop of Ross's men, a Catholic sympathiser at best, and a full blooded Papist at worst. He introduced himself as James Miller, indicating that 'We might have a little job for you' in a manner that made Blake's Protestant gut squirm<sup>9</sup>. The job appeared to be moving men and goods to Scotland without undue fuss or the attention of anyone else. Blake dismissed the man presumptuously indicating he was sailing with the tide on other business, and would be in London shortly and back in Bristol in some weeks. Miller seemed unperturbed by this, and simply indicated the job could wait, payment would be significant, and he would be in touch in London. Blake was pleased to see that the ruse he and Sir Alistair Uttinfefer had pulled to convince Catholic revolutionaries in Antwerp that they were both good Papists had started to spread far and wide. Walsingham would be pleased! With a grim smile he mentally thanked the good Sir Alistair whom he'd left behind in Antwerp to continue to job of infiltrating the Papist subversives chain of money and supplies that fed into England. He grimaced, considered a visit to Antwerp to track down Sir Alistair as soon as matters with the Señora were dealt with. He dismissed James Miller with a curt nod and followed Avon and the Señora into the night.

It was but a few minutes bold stride for Avon, Blake and the Señora through the dark streets of Bristol to Avon's lodgings with drawn swords and primed pistols. Unsurprisingly they were neither accosted nor challenged by stray horse traders. However, upon reaching Avon's lodgings it was clear that all was not well - the door stood ajar, and a moment's inspection of the interior indicated it had been searched hurriedly and violently. Avon's scant belongings were scattered and overturned throughout his rooms, with furniture turned awry and pottery smashed. Avon hesitated at the threshold of his rooms, eyes darting hither and thither, assessing the position of this, the state of that.

"Kerr! This is ...!" started Blake in horror: Kerr Avon held up his hand for silence. Lantern before him he paced into the room, brushing a rug purposefully with his boot here, shifting a wall tapestry a fraction with his finger there, purposely touching insignificant items within the room in turn, in an order precisely thus and so<sup>10</sup>, before turning to Blake and The Señora with a smile.

"Excellent!" he stated. "Nothing of significant import is disturbed!"<sup>11</sup>

"What?" gasped Blake in horror at the statement and the state of the rooms. "Your belongings, Kerr - half smashed, half cast about and who knows what looted?! The Romany - that was no coincidence!"

Kerr Avon nodded and smiled.

"Calm, Richard, they neither found what they were looking for," he shrugged his shoulder to disturb the sack on his back containing the box and coin, "nor anything else of import. That said, it may be time to move lodgings to somewhere a little more secure."

Blake was baffled by this statement on the evidence all about but shrugged with some acceptance.

"You'll lodge aboard the Kestrel until this is done and we can find somewhere more appropriate." He stated. Kerr Avon nodded, musing.

"Indeed... there is a third cousin, twice removed, near the ruins of Tintern Abbey who might have room to spare - close enough, but far enough" mused Avon. "But that awaits. Señora, Richard, if you would give me a few moments alone to gather my belongings?" Requested Avon.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Nothing worse than a greased, weaseley Papist' as Blake was renowned for saying in later years, for reasons that may yet become clear.

<sup>10</sup> And it did occur to Richard Blake for a moment that each object Avon touched amongst the chaos was undisturbed amongst the detritus, as if it might have been placed already thus and so in advance, both to orchestrate the intent, draw and distract the eye, and when he examined them he rubbed at parts of them unnecessarily the better to pull away tufts of parchment. Such moments were not uncommon when Kerr Avon was involved and Richard Blake dismissed and forgot about such occurrence just as he had on every other occasion.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry: took note of your description about obvious and less obviously hidden things. Some less obvious things I assumed were hidden in plain sight. You might like to think if one of your skills extends to this sort of thing, or cook up another one ready for some XPs to spend on it.



It was indeed but a few moments, perhaps barely three, before the door to Avon's rooms creaked open again and he lurched out, sack over one shoulder, an enormous leather shoulder bag over the other, and a heavy travelling chest dragged behind.

"All accounted for!" He stated brightly.

### Wednesday 3rd June, 1570.

The voyage from Bristol to London in the Kestrel was its usual bright and breezy trip along the coast for Richard Blake, and its usual nightmare of spilled drafts and scattered powders for Kerr Avon. On this one voyage though the presence of The Señora kept everyone cordial, punctual for dinner<sup>12</sup>, and appropriately dressed until the Kestrel was moored safely in the Thames, in the heart of London.

Despite the entreaties of both Blake and Avon the Señora was not prepared to spend her nights any further on the cramped quarters of the Kestrel. If nothing else the smells that Blake described as 'homely' she seemed to take some exception to, and was want to scatter rosewater and other wafting graces about when all but those on watch were asleep below decks. Avon had speculated on how it had improved the 'homeliness' of Bosun Mathews, but not in a good way. With this in mind The Señora insisted in taking rooms in London, not least to ensure easy access to the best tailors and couture's from which to refresh her depleted wardrobe. After some consideration Blake and Avon agreed that The Peacock Room Tavern would be appropriate and safe, for it was frequented by Gentlemen and was an establishment of Quality. And, it was not Cheap. The Señora's safety would be additionally assured by the despatching of Bosun Mathews to accompany her as protection - Blake had a keen respect for Bosun Mathews natural talents for inspiring the Kestrel, her crew and Blake himself with foul language, and his talent for extreme violence when required to protect the Kestrel, her crew, and Blake himself: even Avon agreed Mathews was ideal company for The Señora.

While the Señora was quartered in The Peacock, Blake and Avon took themselves by horse upstream to the residence of Dr. Dee, advisor to the Queen on all matters philosophical, but alas upon their arrival there was only Dee's housekeeper in residence who knew only that he was to be away for several days. Disappointed they turned back down stream towards London as evening fell, leaving only a message that Kerr Avon had visited, explaining that he knew only of a letter of introduction via Prenderghast, and requesting leave to meet Dee at some other time.

### Thursday, 4rd June, 1570.

It was the next morning that a distraught Mathews came running up the riverbank just as Blake and Avon set foot with the news of The Señora's abduction.

"Only the two ales, Sir, and I checked her door was locked as I passed, but when I couldn't get no reply at dawn I burst the door, and found her gone! Not a sign! The scullery girl said she'd retired for the evening and not seen her after!"

"But she might just have popped out for something...?" suggested Avon.

"An' all her clothes were still there - not the clothes she were in yesterday." blurted Mathews

"In London, wearing the same clothes on two consecutive days?" murmured Blake, rhetorically. "While she is Spanish and allowances might be made..." he trailed off.

"Kidnap?!" gasped Avon. "We'll never follow he trail if she's been gone that long. Mathews: did you ask everyone at the Peacock?"

"Aye, Sir, everyone who'd know, cook, scullery maid, stable boy, an' all, and I slipped them a little something like the Cap'n showed me to get the information, at least until I ran out of ha'pennies, but the chamber made didn't mind so long as I slipped her one behind the wash 'ouse out back..."

"Ah. Yes. Thank you Mathews, good work." interrupted Blake to cover Avon's muttered 'Just like the Captain...'

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<sup>12</sup> At one of which I seem to recall The Señora let sip that the gold her brother was transporting to Spain was most significantly from the Tisnada region of the Southern New World.



"You're Right, Kerr - with hours of head start they could be well out of London now in any direction, or hidden anywhere in the City. There's only one man in London who can find her."

Avon nodded.

"Walsingham."

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Barely an hour later Avon and Blake sat in the busy corridor outside the clerks' office of an anonymous building near Tower gate. There was hustle. There was bustle. A clerk had taken their names, and told them that Walsingham did not take personal callers without an appointment. After an extended exchange between the clerk and Blake, during which Avon was impressed that at no time did he actually *see* the silver shilling change hands, the clerk departed and promptly returned to inform them that due to an administrative error their appointment had been overlooked, and if they would wait Walsingham would 'fit them in'.

After an hour on the corridors hard bench counting the clerks<sup>13</sup>, 'their' clerk peered around the door and gestured them in through the clerks' outer office filled with small desks, dozens of clerks making careful notes on parchment from other scraps and vast lengths of shelves crammed with stacks of parchment, and even bound books that looked suspiciously unlike Bibles. The clerk hurried them to an unassuming door at the end of the office, tapped and hustled them through.

Walsingham sat at a large table which was covered in parchments, maps and oddments. Candles stands full of collapsed and puddled candles stood all about the room. Walsingham's nib scratched loudly on a parchment as he made a note.

"Captain Blake. And," Walsingham glanced at a parchment page covered in neatly scribed notes beside his left hand, "Kerr Avon. I trust my clerk has enough for new shoes."

Blake swallowed.

"For his whole family. The matter was urgent, and time pressing," stated Blake

"Explain."

Blake explained the background of The Señora's plight, omitting details of why she was involved with he and Avon, hoping that a tale of her usefulness as a spy in Spain would cover any investigation, and how she had gone unaccountably missing despite retaining the Kestrel to take her back to Spain. A long moment of the scratching pen greeted the end of Blake's tale before Walsingham replied.

"Enquiries will be made. You may wait."

And wait they did. After 2 hours on the bench outside of Walsingham's offices Blake's resolve was about to break. The thought of a pint of Porter across the road in The Hog and Strumpet was becoming unbearable, and he was about to suggest it to Avon when one of Walsingham's clerks sidled out of the offices and handed him a folded note. Kerr Avon leaned over as Blake opened it and read

*"Senora forcibly assisted to south bank. Four Romany companions. Destination likely Welldown horse fayre."*

"So," deduced Avon, "we're going to need a horse then."

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<sup>13</sup> Avon's total reached 17 who walked past them on multiple occasion to and from the office alone. A frankly outrageous number for any man who was not the Monarch.



## Welldown Horse Fayre (later that afternoon, Thursday 4th June, 1570)

"We are Queen's Men!" Announced Kerr Avon to the small crowd of Romany children and women gathering about him, Richard Blake, and their horse. "We have a Letter Of Authority from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth herself, as this is the Queen's land, and subject to the authority of the Bishop of Westminster. Here, observe my colleague's display of the Letter Of Authority with Her Majesty's signature, demonstrating this is a genuine Letter Of Authority and that we are Queen's Men." Avon gestured and Blake briefly waved his tattered Letter of Marque at the Romany women and children wandering towards them.

"We are here to check for Horse Ma..." began Avon.

"*Spanish!*" Hissed Blake from the corner of his mouth towards Avon.

"*Spanish Horse Mange*. Very dangerous. Miasmas from bogs are known to cause it. Also tents and fires. All of which seem to be plentiful here. Now, if you'll move aside we'll undertake our work for The Queen." Stated Avon. By this time however a variety of Romany men had wandered up to the small crowd.

"Never 'eard of it." Stated one, fingering a cudgel dangling from his belt.

"How can y'tell? No such thing. Them'd be lame else." Stated another.

"Ah! To your good fortune, I have with me<sup>14</sup> all that we need to detect Spanish Horse Mange in your mares and stallions!" Avon brandished a coloured bottle of oily, noxious fluid from his pocket in one hand, and a pouch of fine powder from another. With deft finger he popped the cork from the bottle with his fingers and waved its vapours in the direction of the increasingly restless, threatening Romanies, causing one to gag and another to faint convincingly as the noxious miasmas swirled and exuded from the bottle.

"There's no mange 'ere, you're not welcome, Queen's authority or no," interrupted a tall, dark Romany man who'd approached as Avon spoke, "so fuck off back to the river an' stay there. And take that nag with you - you'll not trade today." His hand slipped to a long knife at his belt, and more men stepped up behind him.

"We are here on Her Majesty's business." Blake, stood straight to his full height. "Spanish horse mange is a plague amongst..."

"Fuck off or I'll have 'em cut ya." With that this gaggle of children and women scattered, not willing to be involved in a brawl with two unarmed Queens Men and a dozen of their own knife wielding husbands, brothers and sons.

It was that moment that Avon smelled it. An eddy, a trifle of the breeze perhaps, the smell of wild roses, sickly and intense but for a moment, before a heady whirl that belied the cloying scent. The breeze was clear, and the source of the scent a larger tent some 30 yards away. Before Blake could continue further Avon interrupted, nodding at Blake.

"We've no need for trouble. The Queen will here of this, and I hope for your sakes your horses have not yet contracted the *Spanish Horse Mange*, lest they all become sickly this week. We will retire and consult with our superiors over your reluctance!" He backed away slowly with Blake but the Romanies made no move to follow. With cautious glances over their shoulders they walked away and over the slight rise towards the river as the Romany men dispersed, only a couple remaining to watch them be gone.

## Later, That Same Evening

The Romany camp was bright with fires and torches, fiddle and pipe lifted across the breeze, swirling as some danced, drink flowing; the horse trading had been good this month it seemed, and tomorrow it looked like they might yet be packed to leave westward.

Kerr Avon and Richard Blake looked the part: dirty doublets, dirty faces and cheap ale slopped onto their clothes, but a jaunty feather here, a grubby (but colourful) neckerchief there. Blake declared they'd pass as Romany from a distance, so long as Avon was not required to speak lest he sound educated and slip unconsciously into mumbling Greek or Latin through nerves.

Richard Blake led the way, skirting the camp out in the darkness beyond the firelights and the men who stood more purposefully about one large tent, partaking in neither dance nor drink. With quiet whispers from their dark vantage

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<sup>14</sup> And 1EP was spent for Avon to remember the fiddling little detail of having an appropriate bottle of Disgusting Concoction in your pocket with which to demonstrate and 'detect' The Spanish Horse Mange.



they identified the blind spot where the casual observers could not easily see the approach to the tent, and Blake was away, a shadow against darkness and in moments up to the back of the tent. His razor sharp dirk made a quiet slit in the heavy canvas as he smothered any light from within with his doublet.

Eye to slit Blake peered within at a scene of horror that left him raging. Lit by candles in an arc of strange symbols upon the floor, bowls of garish coloured fires upon stands at cardinal points and guttering lanterns on poles about, a great vat in the centre steamed and smoked while cloaked and hooded Adepts chanted to the beat of a Master's repeated words in no language Blake recognised. Before the Master a wooden frame part splayed across the vat held The Señora bound and barely clothed, her arm roped above the vat as blood dripped therein from the ornate dagger that pierced fully through her palm.

With haste and trembling Blake gestured Avon over in the darkness to observe.

"Hmm - I think it's a ritual of some sort Richard, although exactly what would need some study. Perhaps if I was to observe for a few hours?" began Avon after peering through the slit.

"Oh really?" hissed Blake. "The Señora likely doesn't have a couple of hours: she's already been in their clutches since the early hours and it will soon be midnight."

"But disrupting the ritual may release..." Began Avon.

"But Kerr, *The Señora*. Need I remind you? A respectable woman, even Spanish, does not deserve..." hissed Blake

"Wait," interrupted Avon. "far more importantly I believe she's currently our patron."

"A key point," ceded Blake dryly, "so I see you have come around to the urgency of rescue. Perhaps you might provide some distractions to avoid the assembled Romany cut-throats converging upon this tent when I rush the adepts with sword and pistols?"

"Ah! An excellent idea!" agreed Avon. At the suggestion there might be violence and blood Avon agreed hurriedly to wander the camp drunkenly and set fires to whatever seemed amenable before Blake burst in to wreak havoc.

After what seemed an eternity waiting for the Romney minders of the tent to turn away Avon crawled and stumbled back into the darkness to retrieve the ale jug, and made a wide circuit to get away from the ritual tent. The dancing light of the fires both dazzled the eye and lit the tents and carts scattered about the encampment. It was only a few minutes, despite seeming an age to Avon, for him to lurch and swig his way convincingly past a bonfire of fiddlers and dancers, a slurred gesticulation at another Romany as drunk as he was pretending to be, before his feet turned towards the corral of horses, their cart of hay and tack. A torch gathered from a nearby tent after a characterful piss in the grass beside and his steps became more purposeful until, hidden from view, he stood behind another.

"Here goes, Kerr, ready or not." Avon muttered, and crouched down to set light to the back of the tent with the torch. As the flames caught and licked he staggered on his way rolling with the cider gait as shouts went up behind.

"Fire!" "Buckets!" "Hoi! Fire!" "Water!"

With aplomb Kerr staggered towards a group pausing confused in mid swig beside a camp fire.

"Hoi! Fire! Buckets, you!" He bellowed at the assembled. In realisation that the nearby tent was aflame they leaped and scrambled. Avon chuckled and turned unsteadily to jog towards the horses.<sup>15</sup>

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Blake hunkered down beside the tent, doublet over his face to become a lump in the ground as peaked out and watched the Romany guards about the tent. Dazzled by the camp fires about they hadn't spotted either Avon or him, but Blake feared his luck might run out at any moment. It seemed like an eternity after Avon had slipped away that a shout went up from the far side of the camp. Fire! The guards attention was drawn and their feet took steps towards the flames suddenly licking brightly upwards. Blake loosened his sword and dirk, turning to the slit and opening it further upwards with the dirk's razor edge.

"No pistols - no attention, lest all be lost." He pulled apart the slit in the tent as a louder cry went up about the camp.

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<sup>15</sup> It was soon hereafter as Avon slipped back towards the ritual tent, that he felt the cold shriek of something passing low overhead from the ritual tent, straight to the south east. There was no sound to be heard, but to a man of such philosophical inclinations it was obvious.



"The horses! Save the horses!" Flames billowed high from the other side of the camp as a cart full of hay and horse tack caught fire with an alarming abruptness, as if not just from a stray spark. And to add to the confusion the panicking horses appeared to have all loosed their ties and the fence at the same time, and panicked by the flame scattered through the camp. "Well-done Kerr!" muttered Blake, and burst through tent slit to save the Señora.

Blake rolled into the tent and leaped to his feet. The closest Adept had his back to Blake and was the obvious first target. Blake ran, leaped over the flickering candles outlining the strange symbols and circle about the vat and ritual, and cut the man down in a single blow from behind. It was only as the Adept tumbled to the floor spraying blood from a severed artery in half a neck that the others began to realise Blake was amongst them.

Without hesitation Blake pulled his sword free from the adept and ran towards the Master of the ritual. The Master held up his hands, and started to back away. Blake leaped forward and thrust his sword straight in the gut, twisting and pulling free, then turned for the third. The Adept was crawling away towards the tent entrance mumbling unrecognisably. Blake leaped on his back and plunged his sword between the ribs and into his heart. The fourth scuttled and backed to the edge of the ring of candles mumbling, but to terrified to back across them for some strange reason. Blake simply cut him down where he stood with a single blow.

Blake panted and looked around. All dead and only moments elapsed, barely a sound above the noise and cries outside as Avon's fire setting occupied the camp. The Master that Blake has thrust through the gut moaned on the floor clutching his stomach and began to crawl away. Blake stepped over behind him, leaned down and slit his throat with his sword.

With the Adepts and Master dead Blake turned his attention to The Señora. A dagger was thrust through her hand to make blood drip into the devilish concoction in the boiling vat beneath. Her eyes were closed and for a moment Blake feared she was dead, but the ragged rise and fall of her chest clearly attested to her breathing. With some effort Blake tore his eyes away from her barely covered breasts and other scant, torn undergarments for this was not the time to ... to ... Blake grimaced and with a deft hand cut the ropes binding the unconscious Señora to the frame. She collapsed into his arms, blood from her hand scattering drops across the vat and floor. Blake carried the Señora to the slit in the tent and cautiously poked his head through.

"Psst - Blake" hissed the shadowy outline of Avon as slipped around the tent. "Best hurry, they won't be busy for long."

"I have her Kerr, but she is bleeding badly from a dagger in her hand. Take her shoulders." Blake ducked back into the tent and heaved the Señora's head and shoulders through the slit with Avon's help. Avon examined her hand by touch in the darkness and tore a strip from his own shirt to bind the dagger and the hand together, both to staunch the bleeding there was and stop the dagger moving to cause more damage.

"Kerr, I killed them all, but there was a ritual, a vat, symbols..."

Avon nodded. "I'll not be long." He slipped inside the tent.

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Avon crossed the floor, stepping over the candles and symbols inscribed upon the bare earth, nodding approvingly as he noted where Blake had stepped over both even when carrying the Señora. He eyed the disgusting, bubbling gop in the vat, but it was the body of the Master that was a surprise. Where Blake had described killing a man there was but a smear across the ground exuding miasmatic vapours and stained, pockmarked earth about the stinking, empty robes.

Avon cast about for a book or papers to indicate ritual, and for his further studies, but there were none. He grimaced: he knew not what the ritual was for, but where a ritual with boundaries was broken there would be a release of philosophical, even spiritual excess. This ritual could not be allowed to finish, even without the Señora: there was no telling how far it had progressed. Avon eyed the nearest candles and ring of boundary symbols and without hesitation kicked the nearest brazier over across them both.

The seal of the ritual was broken and Avon felt the gust of air that moved no candle flame, and for a moment a building tension in the atmosphere as the philosophies balanced. He dived for the slit in the tent as all about the ritual was caught ablaze in but a moment without so much as a spark or ember to kindle such flames!

They stumbled away from the camp with the Señora between them and over the rise as the tent blazed behind. It was but an hour back to the South Bank with their trusty steed to carry the Señora, and thence to the Kestrel and Avon's tiny cabin and his Chiurgeon's salves and unguents.

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Blake tapped gingerly on the door to Avon's cabin on the Kestrel.

"Well?" He hissed. "Is it done? Do you need help?"



"Y-yes." The door opened and Avon emerged, sweating and trembling to lean against the wall. Blake handed Avon a tot of whisky and dabbed his brow with the cuff of his own shirt. "The first cut, always the hardest. I think I've successfully made the first step though..." Avon held up the Señora's stocking with a trembling hand. "I ... I nearly touched her ankle, Richard! I didn't know what to do - I had to close my eyes!"

Blake patted the trembling Avon on the shoulder sympathetically. The risk of seeing too much of the Señora's beauty unclothed, even by a determined Chuirgeon such as Kerr, was difficult to contemplate.

"May I look in, to see how she rests?" He gestured towards the door.

"Ah. No. No, Patient - Chuirgeon confidentiality and all that, Richard." Kerr Avon straightened himself and finished the whisky in a single gulp. "I know what must be done." The door closed behind him. Moments later Blake heard him call out.

"I - I am cutting to expose the second ankle!" Avon's voice from within the cabin squeaked with tension. "I have my eyes closed, Richard!"

"You can do it Kerr!" called Blake.

"I - oh my!"

There was a moments pause before Blake heard a thud from within Avon's cabin. Blake sighed. Avon had opened his eyes. And fainted. Again.

## Saturday 20th June, 1570: Spain

As the Kestrel drew into sight of the Spanish coast Kerr Avon reflected on the start of the voyage some two weeks or so before. Treating the wound in the Señora's hand had been a challenge, even for someone as skilled a Chuirgeon as he. The wound had not been clean, and it had taken all his skill (and no small resort to his Philosophical Arts and Learnings) to remove the dagger through the palm of her right hand, and to ensure the wound both closed and healed properly. It was a relief to them both when the fever broke after three days and she awoke. Within a week the wound had drained with a bristle and closed, and now, after a little more than two, she wore only a light bandage about the palm of her hand.

It had been some hours gone when they rode at anchor in the bay beyond San Castilla on the northern coast of Spain. A small beach and cliffs dotted with tidal sea caves suggested an easy landing from the Kestrel's boat, so Blake ordered Mathews to row while, he, Avon and the Señora would go ashore and walk the quarter mile inland to the villa. The Señora had emerged upon deck dressed formally, yet made light of the decent into the boat. Avon carried the box and coin in a sack, while both he and Blake were armed with sword and pistol.

To none of their surprise they were met by a small guard contingent from the villa within a few hundred feet of the cliff top after they landed the boat and made the sweaty climb to the top, having left Mathews with the boat below. The Señora was short and to the point with the guards, in Spanish, and explained to Blake and Avon as they walked (or were escorted according to the Señora) that they were both her mercenary bodyguards come to escort the box and herself to meet Romeroz. She had also refused the request that they hand over their weapons, and played upon the guards pride that they need not fear just two men and a woman.

As they approached the Villa The Señora marched ahead of Avon, Blake and the Spanish guards, who had had to hurry to keep up. They were led to a small courtyard within which to wait. A fountain played gently about, bushes and walkways provided shade and cool air against the noon sun. They didn't have long to wait before the summons came: The Señora alone was to bring the box with the coin to Romeroz.

Blake and Avon exchanged glances and after a token protest had little choice but to let her go alone. They tried to appear relaxed and idle, and discussed the small orange tree beside the fountain animatedly to lull the guards into complacency.

Barely had they exchanged a few words on the subject of oranges and fountains after the Señora had departed, than the gentle tinkling of the fountain and buzz of insects was cut by the boom of a pistol shot from within the Villa. The guards looked startled but Blake was the first to react. At his full height and in the Captain's voice and manner that Avon had seen often he took command of the situation

"You! You and You." Blake ordered the guards. "Secure the exits to the Villa immediately!"



Startled, and obeying the gesture and tone of command alone<sup>16</sup> the guards scuttled down the corridor from the courtyard, spreading out to find doors to guard.

"Quick!" snapped Blake. "They'll realise in a moment!" He and Avon ran down the corridor drawing sword and pistol.

The direction of the pistol shot was clear from the cries and sounds of ringing steel as rapiers clashed. As Blake and Avon rounded the corner they were met by a shocking sight. The Señora, dress awry, fell back step by step defending herself with a rapier from two guards. Behind the guards a set of stars led downwards into darkness. A discarded pistol still smoked on the ground behind her. Alas, at that moment the two guards attacked the Señora as one, and a lucky blow sent her sword spinning away as the second sword thrust low pinned her thigh through the heavy folds of the dress. As she fell Blake and Avon leapt forward to take on the guards before either could finish her as she lay helpless.

For Richard Blake's attacker the fight was short and to the point. They exchanged a blow, a parry and Blake ran him through. Kerr Avon's opponent was less lucky. For several moments they fought, a parry here, a riposte there, but with the loss of his fellow-guard in the first seconds of the battle the confidence of Avon's opponent wavered and he became defensive, backed step by step, until, with Kerr Avon chuckling at his every parry and Blake shouting encouragement, he inevitably fell backwards down the stairs.

As Blake peered down the stairs into the darkness of the Villa cellars below Avon turned to The Señora. Ever resourceful she was tearing the petticoats beneath the dress and bound the rapier wound in her leg as she explained events.

"It was Romeroz. I asked to see my brother before handing over the box. He laughed at me. Said he was already good as dead. I shot him. I think I winged him. He got the box when the guards attacked me. Went down the stairs into the cellars. Help me up Kerr Avon: I can walk. I will have my revenge for all he has done to my brother!"

Kerr Avon helped The Señora to her feet, and they joined Blake at the cellar stairs.

"That's no cellar," stated Blake, "too deep. Rough hewn walls just down there." He pointed. "I'd guess old tunnels." He glanced at Avon and the Señora. "Kerr, you're on rear guard, Señora, behind me."<sup>17</sup>

The decent to the caverns was brief, Blake tripped down the stairs two at a time and the limping Señora struggled to keep up. After passing a dozen or more torches on the tunnel stairs they burst into a sandy-floored cavern to behold a fearful sight. The greater cavern was junction for multiple tunnels. Opposite theirs another of greater dimension met the cavern, and writhing there lay a giant white worm, fair filling the tunnel, and fully some 15feet or more tall but its bulk hidden back in the tunnel from which it spilled. Before it, warded by symbols and shapes struck in the sandy floor with candles, ashes and salt stood Romeroz, the evil coin from the New World in his hand and a ritual chant upon his lips. The Señora let out a cry and ran forward: her brother Emez lay chained and bloodied in the sand, surrounded by the wards and symbols before the worm.

"Hold!" cried Blake and raised his pistol towards Romeroz, knowing at such range the shot had little chance of striking. "I am Captain Richard Blake, with Kerr Avon and The Señora come for her brother as you bargained! You will hand him over unharmed as agreed!"

With a flourish Romeroz paused to spit in the sand and then continued to chant, raising the dark coin above his head as he gesticulated towards the White Worm.

"My God, Richard! He's going to control the worm with dark powers locked up in the coin!" gasped Avon<sup>18</sup>.

"Too late, Kerr," replied Blake as the worm began to ripple forward towards Emez, "the sacrifice is already in place." Blake levelled his pistol, aimed and fired at the worms gaping maw, but to no apparent effect. Blake grinned as the worm turned slightly towards him then swung back towards Emez. He ran forward after the Señora, hopping over the symbols and wards, grabbed Emez by the chains, heaved the weeping Señora to her feet and dragged them both along the sand back towards Kerr Avon, obliterating symbols, trails of salt and ashes all in one smear.

"No wards, any of us could be dinner to the worm now, Romeroz!" shouted Kerr Avon, and advanced towards the desperately chanting man. Then with a bellow Avon sprinted towards Romeroz, who took one look at the great worm waving about the cavern searching for its missing prey, the obliterated wards and the charging Kerr Avon, and ran for the nearest tunnel with Kerr Avon in pursuit.

<sup>16</sup> To the extent of a 12 on the dice I recall - excellent result! More so as they didn't speak english!

<sup>17</sup> The voice of command in Blake,

<sup>18</sup> Philosophical insights in full flow...



Now unconstrained, the worms cold, oozing hunger had focussed on the warmest, bloodiest food it could smell before it, and it slithered forward towards Blake, the Señora and her chained brother. Blake considered his rapier, but the sheer size of the worm suggested it would do as little good as the pistol shot. In desperation he seized one of the burning brazier torches that stood planted in the sand, each iron and some 6 feet tall, and advanced towards the worms gaping maw.

The worm sensed Blake's presence and lunged forward, Blake thrust the flame at the worm's mouth and it wavered, lunged again as Blake danced to the side and swiped with the flames again. Clearly the worm was disturbed by the fire, but not enough to keep it from its meal. In desperation Blake ran forward and lunged again, heaving the flaming end of the brazier up into the worms mouth, lodging it against the roof. The worm reared at the pain of the flames, and Blake was able to jam the brazier foot into its mouth, jamming the worms slathering jaws open! Alas, Blake was not quick enough to escape unscathed: the writhing worm reared and swung as Blake tried to jump away, striking him aside with the ease of a swatted fly and sending him tumbling yards across the sand.

Blake staggered to his feet, clutching his side as the pain from the smashing blow from the worm ebbed, and ran to The Señora and Emez, just as she freed him from the final chains.

"Run!" gasped Blake, and headed towards the nearest, narrowest tunnel from which his finely tuned sense of smell had detected a salty tang, a sign he fervently hoped of the ocean and escape!

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Kerr Avon charged up the tunnel after Romeroz with all the desperation of terror. A giant white worm behind<sup>19</sup> and a fearful master of the darkest philosophical arts before, equally intent on devouring all! Kerr Avon ran not to keep up, but to keep close enough so the chance Romeroz had to turn and use his philosophical arts were as small as the gap between them. Kerr Avon ran, but even he could see he was no match for the fleet of foot Romeroz.

As Kerr Avon barrelled round a last corner he faced Romeroz down the last few yards of tunnel. Romeroz clutched the coin in his hands and spoke words Kerr Avon believed unspeakable. Kerr Avon cowered, for he expected nothing less than death as Romeroz evoked the philosophical paths and opened the way for those from other Sephira. The very rocks about them groaned and cracked, and Avon hid his face in fear as Romeroz laughed.

Then, silence.

Avon peeked, just as a chink of rock cracked, splintered and fell from the roof to the floor of the sandy tunnel. The crack widened, scattered in smaller cracks that made larger and smaller chinks of roof and wall break off and fall to the ground, oddly, precariously balancing one atop the other. Avon and Romeroz both gaped at the sight as the stone flakes and boulders tottered upon one another. With a fear burning the back of his throat Avon saw an opportunity and leapt forward past the balancing rocks, dodging larger rocks that fell, rolled and then bounced atop the others most disturbingly. He lunged at Romeroz and snatched the coin from the gaping philosophers hand.

As Avon turned to dive back Romeroz shrieked and backed away. There in the corridor stood a stone figure, assembled from shards, pebbles, rock splinters and boulders it took the form of a man, at least to the compliment of arms, legs and a large boulder for the head, yet fully 8 feet or more tall. The head rotated fully about and dark smudges in the pockmarked surface of the 'head' stared through them both as the stone man lurched forward. Avon shrieked and dived forward towards the gap between its legs as Romeroz turned and ran.

To Avon's eternal relief the stone man ignored him, the legs bludgeoning him aside much as he had run fully into a wall, or been clipped by a boulder, for that was indeed what they were. As the heavy tread shook the tunnels Avon ran back the way he'd come as fast as his bruised legs and body could take him, clutching the dark, evil New World coin.

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It was but moments before Avon staggered back into the cavern to see Blake, The Señora and Emez running (and staggering) towards a wider tunnel, the White Worm thrashing and writhing about as it freed its mouth from Blake's craftily aimed brazier stand.

Avon ran behind them as they escaped down the tunnel, and soon the glow of daylight and sound of the sea announced their arrival at the beach. Blake bellowed to Mathews who lolled on the ship's boat beached in the surf. With Mathews' efforts and the four of them shoving the boat was quickly afloat and they pulled hard back to the Kestrel.

As they boarded they looked back toward the beach as the white worm emerged from the same tunnel as had they, it's gaping maw questing for their trail and sniffing inexorably along their path to the sea.

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<sup>19</sup> that was possibly devouring his friends even as he ran,



"MAKE SAIL!" bellowed Blake, "MAN THE GUNS!"

"Tides not turned Captain!" snapped Mathews, "There's barely a couple of knots in the wind. We'll not be out of this bay a while."

Blake and Avon exchanged glances then stared back across the water to the beach. The worm paused at the water's edge.

"Perhaps it's lost the trail..." muttered Blake. Avon shook his head, and turned for his cabin as the worm slithered into the surf, straight towards the Kestrel. Blake cursed.

Avon was already half way down the steps.

Minutes later he emerged, draped in what red he could find, jars, bottles, boxes and pouches clutched in his arms, to stand on deck before the sail. Blake raised the glass to his eyes, and cried out in alarm as a disconcerting wave rolled in the opposite direction to all the others, straight towards the Kestrel.

Avon muttered. He flung powders into the air, smeared strange unguents on the sail he stood before, crushed herbs and bugs in a pestle and mortar before throwing them to the sky, chalked symbols on the deck before a lantern into which he flicked a powder to produce a coloured flash and cloud of acrid, sparkling smoke, muttered, slowly, ever more slowly as he seemed to stagger beneath a great weight and fell to his knees.

Blake looked back aghast, to see the White worm break surface in a wave trough barely 100 yards distant.

With a terrible effort, Avon spoke a final word. The end of it was obscured by a deafening crack as clear-sky lightening snapped to the sea and mast about them, a gust of wind made the Kestrel heel as he sails snapped taught and the bow dug in under the sudden wind pressure. In moments a wind chopped and gusted out of the bay, pulling the Kestrel forward and tearing away the opposing waves tips in a mist of spray.

Avon rolled onto his back and stared up at the clear sky through the rigging, ears still ringing from the thunder bolt. For a moment strange voices had called. For a moment unearthly forms had beckoned to him in a gap between sea and the sky, between far and near, between self and other. A terrible intoxication had taken hold of him and a long tunnel had stood before him, yet he knew not where it led. But the rich, heady scent of flowers was all about him. Avon shuddered, terrible fear for his own weakness filling his mind.

An hour later they were in open ocean, the coast a haze behind them, running under a brisk sail as the Kestrel fled North for England.

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