

ACT 3, PART 2: OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

THE SLUMBERS OF KERR AVON

Upon stone baked in blistering sunlight through ages he stood, peering out across a blinding rocky landscape towards a distant sky dark with threat seen only through the Heptarchic Eye. He was not alone, he knew, for in the hot wind that blew across his skin other's robes of silk and finer cotton than any Englishman had ever worn billowed about a form beside him. A question hung in the air between them but he was unsure if he had voiced it, or it had been asked of him, and he sought the question itself for he had only the vague notion of what it had been. A moment of expectation slipped by. He turned to Zubiya, for he knew it was her who stood beside him in such flowing white robes of finest silk and cotton cloth swept by the hot wind, tall and a mysterious dusky beauty in her face, her golden eyes meeting his. "This is only the end, Kerr Hoca: all now is darkness." And he knew the truth of it.

The grey light of dawn seeped slowly through the shutters of Chateau d'Avercy, pulling a reluctant Kerr Avon shivering from slumber. It had been a long day and his dreams had been troubled, for he found himself entangled upon the cold stone floor with his fine woollen blankets beside his soft, warm bolster full of soft sweet scented herbs. Perhaps his night had started thereon, he mused, giving rise to a half remembered dream.

Avon shook his head. He realised he'd once again slept in his clothes, although somehow his boots had become removed and lodged in the shutters, jamming them closed. He recalled the terrible exhaustion, the hurried Magick he had dredged up from memories of this and that, readings and half recalled wisdoms of scholars ancient and modern, and the hints and guidance given by Zubiya, the mysterious Moorish, or perhaps Persian, surely not Ottoman, woman scholar staying here with d'Avercy. If only, he mused, if only he'd had time to write it all down, such a fine exposition of the Heptarchic Arts he might publish...

His thoughts and frantic scrabbling for parchment and quill were interrupted by a gentle tap at the door, and a muffled but polite insistence that he join Le Comte d'Avery for breakfast..

DAWN, BLAKE AND BOSUN MATTHEWS:

Sometime still well before dawn Matthews had awoken Captain Richard Blake from his fitful slumber. As was usual for Blake even a few days at sea made him a light and troubled sleeper on land again, for it took a week to settle down to the awful stillness of his bed when in port, and a brief stop anywhere was better spent at least on board, if not actually anchored a sensible distance offshore. He sighed, and took the cup of hot spiced wine from Matthews.

"Tides in flood, Cap'n, will be on the ebb in three hours and we've the feel of a northerly turning if we can manage the headland. Seas nervous though, feelin' its goin' a rise as the wind turns." Matthews sniffed the air conspiratorially, "'An' it smells like a storm comin'".

Blake nodded in agreement. It didn't do to disagree with Matthews prognostications upon the weather, whatever their subsequent lack of accuracy, for if Matthews could smell anything in the Chateau other than the stink of flowers and decidedly strange cooking Blake would be amazed.

"Good. We'd best get prepared - breakfast, and send a message to Kestrel to be ready to make way as the tide turns." Matthews nodded. "Are the kitchens awake? I'm intent on making the best of our host, more so as a learned acquaintance of Kerr's."

"Aye Sir, they're about." Matthews nodded at the spiced wine cooling in the goblet "But they took some instruction to get yer wakener right, but I sorted 'em in the end."

Blake winced, and wondered how bad breakfast might be after Matthews had bellowed at the kitchen staff of the Chateau. Matthews spoke no French, and he was sure the kitchen spoke no English. Perhaps an oblique word with Le Comte would cover it.

"Onwards then Matthews - get me some fresh water to wash and lets make ourselves presentable..."

VICOMTE JULES DU PLESSIS BATHES. EXTENSIVELY.

Jules du Plessis had spent a pleasant night in his suite of rooms accorded to his status. Le Comte d'Avercy of Chateau d'Avercy had been most welcoming upon spying him accompanying the cart and old friend Kerr Avon. Instructions had been issued, servants had escorted him to his rooms where his bath was taken, clothes were cleaned, mended and replaced as necessary while he bathed, and he was soon again dressed in the finest lace and cloth, cleaned, perfumed and dusted with every button and gilding shining in the candlelight.

It was late when Jules was finally attired for a more formal greeting with Le Comte. He informed a servant, and after appropriate minutes was escorted to the Evening Rooms. There, formalities and pleasantries were observed, bows made, compliments exchanged, vague enquiries after mutually distant relatives who might (or might not) be once acquainted made and brushed off for future reference.

As discourse proceeded over a light meal of larks tongues in aspic and a small herbaceous border, it was made clear that Jules' presence was a disturbance. For one night in Paris some years before had seen he and his fellow Huguenots fled and dispersed. While title and position might maintain respect from the past it was most awkward to be present today, more so when his lands might well have been raised and family put to the sword some years before. As Le Comte Guillaume d'Avercy implied most obliquely, it was not him, you understand my good Vicomte du Plessis, but it was ... awkward, but most fortunate he had arrived with the excuse of Englishmen, however demeaning that might be. While word would travel, it saved Le Comte d'Avercy and Vicomte du Plessis from actually having to do anything. But, most graciously, when was he leaving?

Formalities complete, Jules du Plessis retired to his suite of rooms within the Chateau. A second bath seemed in order, along with a fine Bordeaux from his host's cellar to toast the rising moon through the open shutters. The morning would bring an excellent breakfast, and thence he hoped a brisk departure, for as his host had implied, word *would* get out...

Ftf 14/10/23

ACT 3, PART 2: OLD ACQUAINTANCE (CONT.) 21ST JULY 1582 - ONWARD

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY:

- Vicomte Jules du Plessis.
- Captain Richard Blake a friend and acquaintance of Vicomte Jules de Plessis
- His Trusty Crew of the Kestrel.
- Auralia Perez deLyon (Mistress of Bernard Gui, notable within the Inquisition).
- Kerr Avon, noted man of physic and philosophy, also a friend and acquaintance of Vicomte Jules de Plessis.
- Le Comte Guillame d'Avercy, a man of great learning relating to Physic, Balancing of Humors, a Diagnostician without compare.
- Zubiya, a confidante of Le Comte, of unusual learnings.
- Fishmen from The Deeps, and their Attendant Malevolent Octopus
- Tipo - Lad, Spanish.
- Narcissa Gui - Sister of Bernard Gui, of the Inquisition
- Rodrigo Delgado - Prisoner.
- Men at Arms, Peasants, Rogues, various, in the employ of factions, various, and others yet undeclared

A disturbed evening. For Jules du Plessis the attentions of the Mayor's daughter are not unwelcome, and a night of Noblesse Oblige and attendant idle flattery reveals a visit 6 months before by an unnamed Cardinal and his Swiss guard, and the arrival for Zubiya from the East, an old friend of the Comte in his travelling years. Despite the untimely death of the Comtesse there is little tattle of their relationship, for all appears mutually respectful, even to servants!

Meanwhile, dawn's first hint and vivid dreams interrupt the recovery of Kerr Avon from magic's most fatiguing the night before, and a tap upon the door before dawn completes the night of vividity. Revealed to be the same Zubiya discussed at that very moment in another part of the Chateau, she comes to offer respect for his efforts to save deLyon, and a single perfect pearl in artisanal box of unfamiliar wood is given before she departs as silently as she arrived, soundless silks billowing silently.

It is then to breakfast, where the Comte is encouraging in their need to leave, lest they tarnish his good reputation by being English or deeply disreputable Huguenot's, despite being properly born and properly French. The question of travel is offset to the state of de Lyon, of whom the Comte is doubtful, as is Zubiya, but they decide travel before weather is wiser than more delay. Zubiya declines Avon's offer to accompany them, for she too travels soon, perhaps back East. Or not.

That same evening the tranquility of the Kestrel sailing South is disturbed by monstrous tentacles plucking crewmen in half, and further FishMen, familiar in form of Blake's experience, leaping upon the decks. A stout defence a-deck led by Jules du Plessis and Captain Blake sees off the worst with casualties to both, but two fishy fiends make it below where, drawn to the now-malevolent powers of the deLyon necklace, they burst in upon Kerr Avon nursing Auralia back to health, tearing a terrible wound upon her abdomen before their despatch by Avon's sword and pistol.

Days later upon most excellent navigation by Captain Blake to return to the common cove upon which the abduction of de Lyon occurred months before, the Kestrel returns, but to observe only a lad, Tipo by name, upon the beach, waving. As he explains, his master Rodrigo taken by Gui's men but days before leave him as their only contact.

Ashore it is Blake, Avon and du Plessis riding with Tipo as guide to the Villa del Chapiz, of the Gui household a days ride away. Camped overnight in a farmhouse ruin their rest is disturbed by a wailing phantasm; a babe slayed, a grieving mother slaughtered and the poltergeist spirit remaining malevolent to the extent of objects flung, it seems to Avon that Mars passes high above, while the moon is displayed, and that all might account for such a disturbed spirit in such a dark place. Disturbed, they re-camp elsewhere.

Next day to journeys end, with a brief stop in sight of the Villa del Chapiz to observe a long-dead caged body labelled Witch suspended from a tree. And to supply a woman and child begging at the road side with some considerable copper coinage. Del Chapiz presents as two grand Casa's separate and joined, of old age, and quite Moorish in design, gardens and low walls, but little else is noted by those observing

At Villa del Chapiz Narcissa Gui, Sister of Bernard, surprises herself with a recognition of Avon as being on a long list of the Inquisition's most requested, there is a naming of du Plessis identifying him also, and Captain Blake's growing reputation bears a passing nod from Narcissa. In Bernard's absence an exchange agreed as communicated, de Lyon for a man named Delgado, a name familiar to some that they had met before, perhaps in Antwerp, and heard as an innumerate Spanish sailor poor at counting gold coin from the New World by Blake and Avon's acquaintance The Señora. Fear and reluctance overcome by love and a need to talk to her lover, de Lyon insists on the exchange, and Delgado is brought forth, exchange made, despite a thwarted attempt to capture Kerr Avon. They flee with Delgado after battling assembled guardsmen and giving up de Lyon to her wishes and the hating heart of the sister Narcissa.

Latterly, with de Plessis slaughtering through the guardsman, did they turn back to pound upon the door of the Villa, but to find Narcissa and Auralia fled by horse to fate unknown,

perhaps to a promised rendezvous with beloved Bernard. Some small library books and items of casual interest made of gold were suitably plundered...

(Cont. online)

THEREAFTER:

Slung upon Kerr Avon's saddle, almost limp and clinging in chains those weight keeping him in saddle alone, Rodrigo Delgado is in a sorry state to Avon's eyes and nose.

The smell of burnt flesh, and fresh wounds abound, a blazing hot brand or poker clearly applied here and there about his body, elsewhere bloody wounds from beatings and bruises blue across limbs exposed by the rags he wore. An alarming assembly of suffering for the scant days he had spent in the Gui's custody. Even to Kerr Avon's eye, it appears a brutal few days for Delgado, and perhaps very lucky he had not spent more time in Narcissi's clutche

As Avon, Blake and du Plessis canter gently the first few miles away from the Villa del Chapiz Delgado returns to consciousness, asking for water, perhaps a sniff of something stronger, and there is a pause off the road to assess his injuries, for it appears there is little chance of pursuit, Narcissa Gui, her personal guard and de Lyon captive having fled the Villa after the du Plessis slaughter.

It seems opportune to camp in the same stand of trees they moved to after the haunting on there first night of travel. Fire made, the full focus of medical expertise is engaged to ascertain the extent of Delgado's injuries by the notorious diagnostician Kerr Avon; after some hours of study by setting sun and firelight, and bound with a deft hand by Jules, has Delgado better than before, if not very well at all.

"This looks vaguely familiar." Prompted Delgado as the sun set and he looked around, shifting to sit more comfortably.

"We are on the Serez road back to the coast." Explained du Plessis. "Less than half a day from the Gui Villa and to the coast before noon tomorrow as we came here."

For a moment Delgado looked alarmed, then cautious.

"And so it draws, even now..." He muttered, only loud enough for Kerr Avon to hear. Then, looking up "Captain Blake, how far to your ship?"

"Half a day - we will reach it tomorrow around noon given an early start, and should make a tide to see us on our way." Replied Blake. "Why, do you fear pursuit?"

"Nay, what I saw was a trounced and demoralised rabble running." Smiled Delgado, with a nod to Jules. "If you can spare a few hours, I require assistance to retrieve what belonged to another from a ruin nearby, hidden when it became clear I could not escape my

pursuers some days ago: The ruin was once the Capilla de la Dama Generosa, now a shattered shell, it is not far..."

"And what is it?" Asked Blake

"I know not, for sure. A vial of glass, and within a liquid, dark in the brightest sunlight, yet light in the darkest night. The result of Papists cursing a pious and pitiful sick man, Azir, by name, in the depths of Santa Iglesia Catedral de la Encarnación in Granada, and played out upon it's steps a day later as the sun burned, where he cried out and was struck down, blood turned black and stinking, erupting from every pore, his form consumed by vermin only moments later"

"What ... ? I ...". Kerr Avon gathered himself after the surprise of such a graphic and vehement description. "What happened - leave out no detail. Did you witness this personally??"

"Alas, I did not. I was moments too late, with barely time to gather the content of the smallest glass vesicle and flee. I had thought at the time unobserved, but it seems not."

Avon shook his head

"I am confused - a terrible death, perhaps some plague of the South come from the Moorish lands where such things are common. But hardly cause to suggest Papist curses..."

"He had died the day before." Interrupted Delgado. "His Sisters had seen him away to be buried with all appropriate they could gather - farthings perhaps - to their local priest, name Naloné, in the Albayzin district of Granada. Yet they saw him upon the steps a day later, for word had already spread of *something*...."

"And ... But..." sputtered Avon, "This doesn't demonstrate a connection, a man a bit like their dead brother, hardly...."

"Father Naloné told of men who came from the Cathedral and took his body, paid handsomely with a promise he should pass on the payment ... or keep it for the good of his church. I talked with him before it was late the same day. Alas, there was no early the next. He spoke to me in fear and loathing. All that he mentioned was he overheard the words 'Qual bull azarusee'."

Kerr Avon twitched. His mind ran through the mispronounced words. Something, almost Persian, but rather not...

"And what is it?" He asked, mouth dry.

"I don't know." Replied Delgado, offhandedly. "But I have its blood. And word to deliver all such assets and intelligencia to Northumberland, with not a word to Dee..."

"A simple diversion of a few hours will not be particularly taxing," remarked Richard Blake as he idly counted his loot by the light of the campfire. Such fine baubles, he mused, plundered from the jewellery caskets of Lady Narcissa Gui. He set aside one of the more valuable necklaces, perhaps to soon adorn the throat of Emma Grove in Bristol, along with a couple of gold rings. "If you feel this vial of papist necromancy would be of interest to our patron."

"But more immediately, I would be interested to hear what has happened to you these past few days, Delgado. You have obviously been roughly handled, and might have a tale to tell?"

Delgado laughed, a harsh edge staining the sound.

"A few weeks ago I was on the steps of the Santa Iglesia after nights of questions and answers, many from those that would rather not give, and one who thought only his confessor was listening. There is a bitter trail in this game, Blake, the cost of defending our Queen is a high one."

He gestured to Jules for water, and sipped through cracked lips before continuing.

"Naloné was a good man, for a Papist, I think. His was not the cost, his was the poor and pitiful who had nothing, and would lose more, despite they're all papist and damned. His time was but yet started, before he was drawn in by those older and more corrupted. Do the names Pedro de Deza or Luis de Bolaños mean anything to you? The first a Cardinal, the second allegedly a Friar, but one who walks with an entourage since he returned from the New World. Both of them steeped in the darkness of Spain. Both of them complicit in seeking ... something. It is they who my contacts saw with the cursed Romero Estefan, and Bernard Gui. Estefan a name I recall you may be familiar with Blake, and you Avon? One so tainted that even the Inquisition shies away of late."

Blake nodded.

"We had dealings with him some time ago, at the request of a lady acquaintance, to rescue a family member who was a likely sacrifice to his dark schemes. Avon here faced him directly..."

"Aye. I will not disguise the fact he is tainted with some devilish darkness perhaps even more demonic than mere Popery. I believe I was witness to him summoning spirits, and some devilish power over a giant Worm of the Earth, twice the height of a man!" Agreed Kerr. He glanced around, leaning in conspiratorially. "Definitely not an *Oxford* man."

"No surprise. He has tortured confessions a way through Spain and Eastwards this last year. In Granada at the Santa Iglesia they held a dozen men in the cells. All gone in an hour after Mass was done and before midnight. They said the screams could be heard in the Cathedral itself. Thank the Lord God I was not there to hear it." Delgado muttered something under his breath which might have been a short prayer.

Blake shivered. The evening was drawing in. Avon threw more wood upon the fire, and it spluttered and blazed lifting sparks for a moment. Comforting. Delgado looked more tired, even haggard, than he had done at the start of his report. To all it was clear that his witnesses of events was grim indeed.

"I'd heard of something. I have, well, contacts. There was talk of rituals and spirits summoned, and prayers to ... others. Not the good Lord in all his wisdom, but something else, demonic, Luciferous. So elected to search around for more, and let Her Majesty's Ears and Eyes know. Gossip here, a word there, and confession one day and a Priest beaten to death an hour after I talked with him were enough to convince me - they seek some power beholden to the Lord, something described in the good book, but I know not *what!*."

Delgado slammed his fist into the dusty ground with furious frustration. Then winced, clutching to the wounds on his chest and shoulder.

"Thereafter it was made luck I was at the Cathedral and heard the screams. I fled with the vial from Granada, knowing Gui was still there and a part of this, I sought to be here first should he travel, perhaps to gain entrance to the Villa and corner the sister or ransack his letters on a night dark. Alas, word flew faster than I. I was quick, but they and theirs must have spied me in Granada, or even before. Word was out, and I'd had barely time to travel here and make arrangements before Gui's men found me."

Delgado sipped water from the goblet Jules had supplied.

"Hugely fortunate in some ways. I realised they were aware and managed to flee the Villa and hide the vial before I was trapped. Word had come that someone was arriving to exchange the de Lyon woman Gui favoured, but I was unable to find out who for. This was all under the sisters control in Gui's absence, and she had no idea either it seems, as I was dragged out of the cellars to you, thank The Lord God our Merciful Saviour...."

Delgado paused, a puzzled frown forming.

"Who *exactly* were you here to exchange the de Lyon whore for?"

"You, I hope," remarked Richard Blake as he gazed out past the camp fire.

"Me?"

"Well, you're the person Gui's rather attractive sister traded for our captive. Let's hope you're the person Wallsingham wanted in return."

"You don't know for sure?" said Delgado.

"Wallsingham is a very secretive man. Why, I suspect he even keeps secrets from himself." Blake smiled at the quality of his own little witticism. "If I were to offer a criticism of Wallsingham - which of course I would never consider doing - I might question his reluctance to inform me who it actually was I was supposed to retrieve during the exchange. A few details would surely have helped matters. But here we are, and I am forced to accept anyone that Lady Narcissa Gui offered me, and I had to do so pretending you were exactly the hostage I was expecting." Blake winked. "Can't let the enemy know

how ill-informed I am. That really wouldn't do. Fake it until you can make it – that's one of the Blake family mottos. Confidence and a good beard will get you a long way in life."

"But..."

"So here you are, and we will be bringing you back to Wallsingham, and if you're not the person Wallsingham was expecting, well, I'll waive my fee for this mission, accordingly." Blake gazed at Avon, and added, "Though we haven't actually been promised any pay, have we, Avon?"

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that, Blake," replied Avon.

"In fact Wallsingham never pays me," Blake stroked his beard. "As far as I remember."

"You do this for Queen and Country," said Delgado.

"Something like that."

"My dear Richard, do please tell me that you have at the very least presented your 'invoice' to Walsingham ..." Avon's voice trails off as he observes the blank look on Blake's face.

"Oh no. You don't even know the term. Fear not, it is simply a formal bill describing services performed or goods provided along with payment terms. As a general rule I require payment in good old King Harry's gold Sovereigns in advance."

"You'll have to excuse Avon," Blake remarked to Delgado with a smile. "I am sure he would even be so bold as to consider presenting our Queen with an invoice for services rendered!"

Blake juggled some precious earrings in his hand – taken of course from the jewellery box of the Lady Narcissa Gui. "Wallsingham's blessing proves useful at times, Avon. To be useful to the most powerful man in England comes with its own rewards. But as for coin – fear not – tonight the lovely Lady Narcissa Gui has paid us in kind. I took the liberty of exploring her bedroom before we left. All proceeds will be shared out honestly according to the stipulated shares by contract on board the Kestrel. I've set aside a couple of trinkets that will look lovely adorning Emma's throat, but rest assured those will come out of my share. I am an honest scoundrel when it comes to friends and crewmen." Blake winked across the campfire.

"While we're on the subject of women, are you still receiving scented letters from that mysterious Lady Inquisitor?"

"As I recall the villa was most regrettably ransacked by starving locals impoverished by de Gui herself thus we would not be expected to have the faintest idea what became of any valuables she may have left behind."

Avon is keen to maintain appearances since he is a Scholar not a Brigand.

"Sadly, excessive brigandry is a consequence of devout Catholicism. Deprived of the Lord's blessing, these lands are often plagued by base thieves. Thankfully, you and I, Avon, will look after Lady Gui's valuables while she is indisposed - fleeing in haste, even - and she can of course call round to the Silver Eel in Bristol any time she's ready to take charge of her property again."

"How sad that the rather fine '61 vintages from the Gui cellar may also have been lost to brigands ..." observes Kerr Avon mournfully waving his half empty goblet in Blake's general direction. "Yes do top me up please."

Blake slopped more wine into Avon's goblet. He'd glugged a mouthful himself, but it tasted sour in comparison the plunder he had back at the Silver Eel. 'Gone off' he thought. But Avon seemed to like it. Indeed, he was swilling it about his mouth, gargling and snorting in a most scholarly way before swallowing, and muttering about '*east facing vine*', and '*flinty*', but also '*moon waxing gibbous at harvest, (gargle) Saturn prominent...*' which was rather reassuring.

"I do hate to distract from appreciation of plundered wine." Interrupted Delgado. "But I was in the clutches of that vile papist woman from barely a week, and yet you turn up here on Walsingham's orders to exchange the Lyon tart for ... you didn't know who?" He frowned. "There wasn't a lot else to take my attention so I'm fairly sure there weren't any notable prisoner, indeed, anyone much at all, in the cellars under the Villa."

"Well, the ways of Walsingham are mysterious, and he seems to know things no one else does." Replied Blake, eyeing the dimming light upon the western horizon, and habitually checking the stars, cloud direction and smell of the air.

"Oh he's well informed." Snapped Delgado. 'I make sure of that. And a host of others I don't doubt. But did you check the cellars when you unsacked the Villa? And how many horses left the stables when the Gui and Lyon women fled? How many guards? Were there wagon tracks? In short, was anyone else taken from the cellars?"

He frowned, clearly frustrated before continuing, almost talking to himself as he reasoned.

"No. No, there wasn't time. You were pounding on the doors in minutes. No time to clear a victim from the cellar unless it was planned, and there was no sign. Too much left. Gui himself expected back in a few days perhaps. No, this suggests someone knew I would be there...."

It was Jules who broke the stretching silence as he sniffed the goblet of wine Avon handed him.

"Monsieur Delgado. If someone knew you were 'ere less than a week ago we were either not sent 'ere for you, or the knowledge came long before that you would be 'ere. In that case the conclusion is clear: you were betrayed, and played for a fool since Granada. Or worse, we were, and there is a weakness in Walsingham's web..." He trailed off, and grimaced at the goblet of wine. "Merde. This is rat piss."

Jules threw wine and goblet into a nearby bush, and stood.

"Per'aps it is time we found your ruin Monsiour, and then 'urried back to the boat, eh Captain?"

"Our primary concern was securing the safety of the man or woman we had been sent to find. That's presumably you. That meant getting you as far away from the estate as possible, as quickly as possible, bearing in mind we are in hostile territory and vastly outnumbered. When a plan descends into violence, a wise Captain takes stock of the situation and secures the prime directive before he allows himself the luxury of exploring the villa from top to bottom."

Blake smiled to himself. That sound quite good, actually. Securing the prime directive. Very professional, indeed. He'd make a note of that phrase and use it again in the future.

"You found time though to explore the bedroom of the vile papist woman," remarked Delgado. "At great length, apparently." He eyed the jewels.

"She may have had papers that Wallsingham would find interesting," remarked Blake. "Wallsingham would have wanted me to..."

"Root around in the woman's underwear drawer?" suggested Delgado.

"You make that sound like a bad thing," said Blake, with a wink.

Delgado snorted and turned away, but Blake was suspicious that he caught sight of a twinkle, and that Delgado had spent more than a few minutes rummaging through the drawers of many woman of noble birth throughout Spain. On some occasions most probably with encouragement of the Lady concerned. Blake hid a smile in his stubble as Delgado turned back.

"You are both right." he stated. "I would be most grateful of your assistance to regain another's property, and thence make speed to your ship, Captain Blake. Hmm, 'Kestrel' as I recall?"

"Aye." replied Blake, slightly pleased, despite himself, that Delgado knew her name. "Six guns, and a spare crew, but every man hand picked, and been with me for years."

Delgado nodded, and Blake sensed a respectful trust in his judgement.

"Still. Walsingham is a man most loyal to the Queen, and hence his favour and finance flows from her, let alone Lord Cecil and his Treasury. A man most cautious with England's finances. Unfortunately Spanish gold flowing from the New World far outweighed England's purse, so we all must do our best to relieve Philip and his minions of such ill-gotten gains at every opportunity. I applaud your resourcefulness, Captain. Perhaps next time you can check the dungeon as well...."

Delgado gave Blake a wry nod.

"For the Good Lord's sake, do none of you have something stronger than this Spanish vinegar?" he demanded. "I've been tortured by a mad papist bitch - can't I get a decent drink?"

The ever well-prepared Dr Avon checks his travelling pouch for a flask of newfangled Scottish Whisky. *(1 point Preparedness)*

"I generally prescribe a dram of Torabhaig for cases of torture at the hands of mad papist rather attractive psychopaths." declares Avon handing Delgado a small flask.

"This ruin of your is most curiously named. Capilla de la Dama Generosa. The house of the generous lady. It sounds like one of those houses of ill-repute frequented by sailors."

Avon takes advantage of this hiatus in Blake's usual pell mell of gadding around to fussily clean and reload his flintlock pistols.

du Plessis muses, quietly amused but a little disquieted that his reputation has become that of the Butcher of the Villa del Chapiz. Hell, his blood was up, and bloody peasants were waving things at him, but what of the stealthy lad who escaped Paris through this very land? Ah, youth.

"M'sieur Delgado. You speak evenly of demoniac forces at work hereabouts. Would it surprise you that we ourselves have faced, er, things, that have previously not been ours to whot of. I say this somewhat guardedly, of course, because le Bon Dieu is always listening, but I fancy that these, things, are neither of Heaven nor of Hell. What say you to that?"

Blake nods as his French friend speaks, then adds his own confirmation.

"We've seen things you wouldn't believe, Delgado. Attack ships on fire off the coast of Cadiz. We've watched demon eyes glitter in the dark through a Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments, of course, will ultimately be lost in time, like tears in the rain, but they are part of our lives now."

"Giant dogs breathing fire, fish men wielding tridents, ship-devouring white worms pursuing us in the sea ..." Avon adds to the list.

"It's quite an adventurous life, if unpaid, doing Walsingham's little odd jobs."

But as Avon continued their revelations with horrific tales for fire breathing dogs, fish men and ship-devouring worms Jules looked around, frowning, his hand unconsciously straying to his sword hilt as he stood and stared about outside the firelight.

Rodrigo Delgado looked from face to face in silence, startled at the revelations, horrified by the things they describe, but yet more concerned at Jules' behaviour.

"What...?" He whispered urgently, hand groping unconsciously for a dagger that was no longer on his belt.

"Mmm." Jules growled quietly. "I know not - something, while Richard was speaking, per'aps a sound. Listen ..."

But as Jules finished the fire crackled and flung sparks to the starlit sky, and the moment was lost.

"I am sorry." Jules took one glance around at the landscape beyond the fire and shrugged. "Nothing - I am more at home in the streets of Paris than 'ere perhaps, and this talk of Daemon's is ... well ..." he shrugged and sat down.

Delgado stared at him for a moment, concern creasing a frown into his forehead.

"Perhaps..." He started slowly. "Perhaps, Gentlemen now's the time to attend the ruin and retrieve what I hid there sooner than later. I believe..." He rolled around to his knees, and then stood, albeit somewhat shakily. "I... I believe I can manage with a little help. " He looked again out of the firelight circle, a momentary glance, quickly smothered. "And can direct, for I have a reasonably clear picture, even though things will be a little obscured by night." He flashed a quick smile. "Not an unusual thing in my line of work, as you might well have guessed."

He stretched, grimaced and groaned.

"Perhaps we can discuss more of your infernal encounters en-route. Now, while the moon is up, would seem opportune?"

"Now? As in... right now? In the dark?" Blake gazes at the welcoming fire and the exquisite bottles of wine plundered from the cellar of the villa. It was promising to be an excellent night under the stars. "You're sure you can find this ruin in the dark?"

Delgado seemed confident he could.

"Ah well, I suppose the bottles will keep for another night. Provided prowling wolves don't run away with them."

Blake stood up and brushed the dirt from his breeches. "They say there is no rest for the wicked, but rarely do they remind us that Godly men are stirred from their well-earned comforts, too. Come then, let us see to this errand before Avon pulls out a book from his satchel and settles down for the night."

Delgado looked around outside the circle of firelight.

"You were the ones speaking of daemonic beings, and I am the one with a sense of urgency. Combined I feel a level of nervousness at lingering here, this close. I would like to be done and away from this place, Captain." He gestured to his bandages and bruises. "For obvious reasons."

Delgado frowned.

"Although, I can see the desire for daylight might be opportune amongst fellows with experience of the Damned and Daemonic, and, I grant you..." he nodded to Blake and then each of them in turn, "....those worse than your average Papist. Perhaps you are correct, and we should await the dawn."

Delgado plumped himself down again before the fire.

"...And give her a chance to come back."

Delgado gestured at the pile of wine bottles.

"Is there anything better than the last one?"

"Oh assuredly!" exclaimed Blake, and pulled one at random.

"Then we can try that." Agreed Delgado. "Before Gui himself to turns up."

Blake pulled the bottle from the small pile, and dug at the cork wax with his dagger.

"Perhaps with his good friend Romarez Estefan by all accounts a Sorcerer afeared by our own Kerr Avon?" Continued Delgado, staring despondently into the fire.

Blake prized at the cork with his dagger, before groping in his belt for his bottle screw.

"And a dozen or more of the Inquisition Guardians they escort."

The bottle Blake was heaving at popped deliciously, in a way only fine plundered Spanish wine did.

"But no matter, they'll not notice us and our fire here. Perhaps. But they'd have to be blind."

Blake poured a draught into his goblet, and sipped. **Delicious!**

"Afeared?" Asks a genuinely puzzled Kerr Avon. "I don't follow you Delgado. Understandable considering the inhospitable treatment you have received from de Gui." Avon accepts another measure of the fine Spanish wine.

"Hmm ... a tad obvious but quaffable."

He swirls his goblet and examines its contents as if it has some important clue buried within the winy depths.

"You'll find that if anyone is 'afeared' it is Senor Esteban who has cause for concern that he might become worthy of my attention."

Delgado nodded clearly much impressed by swirling.

"Indeed, Master Avon, I'll not argue with you on that. I hear only rumours and gossip. I'm sure your knowledge of him as a man of learning is much greater than mine."

Avon nodded, minor matter of honour satisfied from someone clearly not of a scholarly background, so such misunderstanding not only understandable, but clearly elucidated and corrected. No danger of Delgado's ignorance underrating an Oxford man again! Lesson learned!

Avon gestured to Blake for the wine bottle, and slopped some into his now empty goblet, and sipped.

He frowned. It was a touch ... well ... silky. He grabbed the bottle before Blake could pull away, and slipped some more in the goblet. sipped.

"An earthy copritute." He opined. "Delicate of hedgerow fruit, and underlying and rare vanilla from the Moorish, coupled with blackberry, and ... mmm ... Saturn again, but first quarter, probably and offlugate quartile. Very subtle. Very, very, Subtle. Mmm. Just tip it in, eh...?"

Avon inhaled the scent of the wine, a delicate nose, a fine foray into vanilla, black current and then the scent of wild rose wafted through upon the evening air, a moment to confuse the educated nose.

"Most excellent", He opined, and handed round goblets all to those about.

"Here most assuredly a finest wine." stated Avon. And all about declared that well and true, and supped upon the that therein, goblets raised to a general agreement. Bottle open, they poured and supped again from goblets in every hand, whilst Master Blake groped again for another bottle of the most excellent wine, fumbling to cork extract and pour more...

"Ah, a heady scent!" Exclaimed Kerr Avon, sniffing the night's dark air in reverence, and raising a goblet fine to all about!

Still clear night, but the moon has slid some hours distance across the celestial sphere, when the jollity slowly fades. Those assembled about the embers of the fire blink and smile, but time and detail are gone.

It is Kerr Avon, unsurprisingly, who assembles his thoughts first, pushing through a veil of vague happiness, a feeling of good time had by all, song and wine sung both heartily for hours passed. He spies a wine bottle upon the floor. And another. Another still.

"Some revelry ..." he murmurs to himself. And looks about at his companions still smiling vaguely into empty goblets.

Under the starlit vault of the heavens, where the constellations traced their ancient paths with stately indifference to the affairs of men, Kerr Avon, scholar and man of science, regarded his surroundings with a newly sharpened acuity. The night was still, save for the soft susurrus of the wind through the trees, and the occasional crackle of the dying fire which had, but hours ago, been the heart of their merriment.

Avon, with the discerning eye of a medical practitioner, took in the scene: his companions, brothers in arms and men of actions all, lay scattered about the clearing, their faces serene in the embrace of Dionysian slumber. Their revelry, a less than rare abandonment of Kerr Avon's own stoic pursuits, lay strewn about as empty bottles and goblets, silent testimonies to the night's revelry.

Yet, for Avon, such indulgence could not be countenanced unchecked. The reputation of a doctor, especially one from the hallowed halls of Oxford, was a fragile thing, easily tarnished by whispers of unseemly behavior, particularly here, in the heart of what might

be deemed enemy territory. The very thought of a Cambridge eye witnessing their unguarded joviality set his mind on edge.

With the precision of an alchemist, he reached for his personal concoction of Hammoniacus sal. This was no ordinary blend; its base was the revered crystals from Mount Vesuvius, embodying the elemental forces of Fire and Earth. To this, he had added shavings of deer horn, an homage to the alertness and agility of the creature. The mixture was potent, designed to cut through the fog of inebriation like a scythe through ripe wheat.

With his senses thus sharpened, Avon turned his gaze upwards, to the celestial tapestry above. The stars, those eternal watchers, held sway over the fates of men, and Avon, a scholar grounded in the philosophies of the ancients, knew well the importance of understanding their silent messages. His eyes traced the constellations, seeking signs and portents, for in such times as these, when the world of academia was as much a battlefield as any other, the alignment of the stars could be as crucial as any sword or shield.

In the quiet of the night, with his companions lost in dreams of Bacchanalian delight, Kerr Avon stood a solitary figure, a man of science and reason amidst a tableau of disarray, his mind a bastion of clarity in a world that too often blurred the lines between wisdom and folly.

* * * * *

Come morning the assembled adventurers awake to find Blake has already roused the camp fire to acceptable standards and is preparing a suitable breakfast of salted bacon and bread, to fortify one and all before the group sets out for the ruins in search of Delgado's 'prize'.

"Skullduggery and flashing swordplay on an empty stomach is poorly advised," remarks Blake as he turns the bacon in the iron skillet. "I trust your heads are none the worse for wear this morning?"

Blake, of course, has a hardy constitution (TOUGH!) which should give him an edge in drinking games.

"We seem to have vanquished several of these papist wines last night and converted them in our stomachs to the Protestant faith! My preferred form of transubstantiation, if I'm being honest."

(Cont...)