The Temple of the Emerald God

by TheExclamation

Summary

Ongoing Serial
Every week (or so) a brand-new chapter of...

Swashbuckling Jungle Adventure!
The Test

FROM the angle of the knife thrust aimed at his ribs, Calavera judged the man to be experienced but untrained. He could have blocked it easily, leaving the man exposed to a solid fist in his midsection, but instead Calavera stepped sideways and backward, nimbly avoiding the blow while his attacker overextended himself, lost his balance, and stumbled several paces before regaining his footing. He whirled back around, the knife pointed at Calavera's chest.

The dodge had been a test. Rather than simply laying the man out, Calavera had wanted to know whether his assailant was intelligent enough to understand he was overmatched. Such a man could be persuaded to lower his knife, and might even learn to be less aggressive in the future.

But this man was failing the test. During the time he'd been dancing his tarantella with his back to Calavera, most men would have been able to take advantage of his vulnerability and knock him senseless. And in those moments he had understood that, which is why he'd turned around so urgently and in a defensive position. A smart man would have realised Calavera had been merciful, and now was even giving him the time he needed to catch his breath. A smart man would wonder why that was the case, and try to read his opponent. Such a man would remember how easily his best attack had been defeated, and realise both that he was overmatched and that his intended victim did not desire a fight. Such a man would then retire, and consider himself fortunate.

This man, on the contrary, now that he'd recovered himself, was forgetting he'd ever been in need of recovery. His prideful confidence in his prowess was winning out over any ability to reason which might have warned him such confidence was unjustified. This confidence was in part spurred on by the several people in this tavern who knew him, and were now cheering him on:

"Go on, Mendoza!"

"He's yours!"

"Gut the tulip!"

This last taunt stuck most irritatigingly in Calavera's craw. He would concede himself a handsome man, not large but in excellent physical condition. He thought of himself as well-groomed, for the precision of his thin moustache and the triangular beard on his chin would have impressed a geometrician. In spite of the fact he wore his curled black hair loose, such that it hung almost to his shoulders, he would not describe himself as in the slightest way effeminate - and certainly the ladies of San Rafael considered him sufficiently virile, to judge by the glances, and the occasional suggestions, he received from them.

Diego Calavera was a man, and proud of it. But he was also more than that, and he felt it was time to advise Mendoza his opponent, and the gathering crowd, of this.

"I should warn you," he said, and that last word encompassed everyone present, "that I am a member of the Emerald Guard."

In fact, Calavera was a Lieutenant in that proud and noble order, which meant that there were but two men who outranked him, the Captain of the Guard and the founder of the order, the Baron of Girona. Therefore Calavera was distinguished even among the most skilled and respected fighting men in all the world.

Mendoza looked Calavera over, carefully for the first time. There was a nobility of bearing
in Calavera's posture, if he might be permitted to say so himself, and that was the first thing
Mendoza noticed, but once again his vanity overrode his good sense, and he saw that although
Calavera's sword was of a high quality and gleamed in the candlelight, and the tan belt and
scabbard which held it against his hip were well-oiled, he did not wear the famous Tunic that
would have immediately designated him a member of the Emerald Guard. Mendoza chuckled
derisively.

"Any man can claim to be a member of the Emerald Guard."

"Not any man," said Calavera. "Not in my presence."

As he said this, he noted to his satisfaction that most onlookers had perceived the
implications of his tone, and this had been enough to convince them. Calavera had come to this
tavern not as a Guardsman, but as an ordinary civilian, desiring nothing more than the simple
pleasure of a drink amidst revelrous company. So he had not worn the Tunic that was both the
mark of his profession and the symbol of his authority. He had worn his sword, of course, for no
sensible man walked this section of San Rafael at night without some means of defending himself.
But for this reason the sword was unremarkable, and so, aside from the way he bore himself, there
was nothing to mark Calavera as an Emerald Guardsman.

Which was likely the main reason Mendoza, far from being warned off, grinned at
Calavera, chuckled once maliciously, and charged at him.
There were going to be four of them.

While advising Mendoza of the folly of his intended course of action, Calavera had been carefully scrutinising the other people in the tavern, and he'd determined that as soon as the conflict began in earnest Mendoza would be joined by three allies. Of the men who'd been shouting their encouragement for him, the first two were of the sort who are always most vocal when discussing matters of violence, but are unwilling to risk the bruising or worse that might result from actual participation. The disemboweler of effetes was another matter: He wanted to harm Calavera as a matter of principle.

Mendoza's second ally was the most interesting of the three. When Calavera had humiliated his assailant by easily dodging his first attack, every other patron in the tavern had been grinning, chuckling, or registering dread or eagerness in anticipation of events to come. This young man's face, however, had held something unique: disapproval, not of Mendoza or his actions, but of the imbalance in proficiency between the drunken brute and the Emerald Guardsman. Calavera had known many honourable men, in the name of God and Country he'd killed more than he would have preferred, and he recognised the look of obligation in this young man's eyes. Whatever his views on which man held the moral high ground, he was going to enter the fray on Mendoza's side, for such was his commitment to fairness.

The third man was the most dangerous. He was a true fighter, likely a killer, and when he'd heard that Calavera was a Guardsman his face had lit up with eagerness. This man enjoyed hurting others and hated Guardsmen. If Calavera were forced to draw his sword, this man would be the one he cut.

And so, having thus evaluated the field prior to Mendoza's second attempt, Calavera already had a battle plan. As Mendoza charged, Calavera stepped again to the man's right, which his attacker had been expecting, but Calavera remained closer than he had the first time. He reached out quickly, and before the angle of the blade could fully adjust for his evasion he grabbed Mendoza's wrist, twisted it clockwise, and yanked. Calavera pulled Mendoza past him and used his left hand to strike the man hard in the elbow, breaking his arm and directing him straight into the young man, who'd been trying to close in.

By this time a circle had formed around Calavera, the non-participants having moved out of harm's way. Calavera's manoeuvre had positioned him directly facing the fighter, who was still forcing his way through the crowd, and directly beside the disemboweler, who had not yet realised Calavera knew he was a participant in the fight. Building on the momentum from his first few steps and the strike to Mendoza, Calavera swiftly brought his left arm back and up, smashing his elbow into the disemboweler's face, breaking his nose. In the next moment he twisted his body and drove his right fist deeply into the man's genitals, a punishment profoundly satisfying to Calavera's sense of justice.

By this time the fighter had entered the circle, and Calavera stepped behind the disemboweler, who was doubled over, and with both hands shoved him in the hindquarters, driving his head toward the fighter's midsection. As anticipated, Calavera's projectile never reached its intended target, for instead the fighter pounded the back of the disemboweler's head with his fist, driving the man to the ground and removing him from the conflict.

Mendoza was bending down to retrieve his knife from the floor, and the young man was
having trouble getting around him, so Calavera's only immediate threat was the fighter. Calavera stepped quickly to him, intending to assay a complicated set of feints with his fists, but then he noticed the dagger his adversary had been concealing. He managed to reverse his momentum just in time to hop back from a nasty swing that would have sliced him open. Even so he felt the wind of the blade's trajectory as it swished past him.

Calavera's advantage was now lost. His three opponents were formed in a semicircle around him, the fighter on his left, the young man in the middle, and Mendoza on the right, his knife held clumsily in his left hand and his right arm hanging uselessly at his side.

Calavera made eye contact with the young man, then darted his eyes quickly side-to-side. The young man frowned, and looked at the Guardsman's belt. Calavera understood: He'd been indicating to the young man that the odds were now unfairly balanced in favour of Mendoza and his allies, and the young man's reply had been to indicate that Calavera's sword more than evened things out.

It was not an unreasonable point. And in any case, Calavera's intimation that he was outnumbered in these circumstances had been a lie. So the young man stood his ground, and Calavera kicked Mendoza in the side of his shin.

The man howled and buckled his knee as his fibula attempted to move in a direction not prescribed by skeletal anatomy. Calavera's action gave the fighter an opening, and he lunged at it, but the Guardsman had anticipated this. He darted forward, past the dagger, keeping close to his opponent's body, so close that when he hit the fighter in the side he could have sworn he felt the man's internal organs move beneath his fist. Leaving the fighter gasping, Calavera swiftly turned to face the young man.

But he wasn't quick enough. The first punch hit him in the jaw, and if Calavera hadn't moved his head at the last instant it would have knocked him senseless. While blinking the stars away from his vision, he managed to block the second punch and avoid the third, but the fourth one connected solidly with his midsection, forcing the air from his lungs. The next punch would knock him to the floor. It was already on its way.

And Calavera had neither the strength to block it nor the balance to dodge.
The Young Man

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH a sword is not drawn, a pistol is not fired, and a directive is not obeyed.

CALAVERA ducked.

It was a desperate act, rendering him wholly vulnerable to a kick or the downward thrust of a fist or knife, but in his circumstances potential danger was far preferable to certain injury, so he bent his knees and threw his weight downward.

His body snapped into a crouch and the young man's fist sailed over his head.

Understandably certain of connecting, Calavera's opponent had thrown his full weight into the blow, and now he was off-balance, his trunk twisted and his side exposed. Calavera hit him just above the waist with his right fist while his left hand swept out and grabbed as much of the backs of his opponent's legs as his arm's length would allow. Then he stood up, squeezing the legs to him.

The young man's knees went into the air and his head shot toward the floor. Calavera didn't watch what happened next, for pausing to observe your success rather than moving on to your next opponent was one of the first mistakes he'd had trained out of him. Instead he let go of the one adversary and turned to face his other two, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the young man twist his body and throw his hand out to protect his head, and he was pleased.

The fighter had regained his breath and Mendoza was as ready as his current state of health would allow. Calavera had to make a quick decision: focus on the greater threat, risking that the lesser would not somehow achieve something effective, or eliminate the lesser threat immediately, but then be faced with two fully-recovered, skilled opponents.

Both Mendoza and the fighter had knives, and this settled it. Calavera would have trouble getting close to the fighter while unarmed, but he could obtain Mendoza's weapon easily, and so that was his decision. He moved to Mendoza's right, putting that man's body between himself and the fighter's knife, and before Mendoza could lumber around to strike with his left, Calavera grabbed the man's broken right arm and squeezed tightly.

Mendoza howled again, and almost dropped his weapon, which Calavera did not want to have happen, so the Guardsman used his grip on the man's limb and turned Mendoza to fully face him. He grabbed Mendoza's left hand with his right, hissed, "Let go of the knife!" and tightened his grip on the broken arm.

Mendoza had no fight left in him, and he understood Calavera's message, so when the Guardsman released his grip, so did he, passing the knife into Calavera's hand.

"Now run," Calavera said, and Mendoza obeyed, pushing his way through the crowd and out the tavern door as fast as his broken arm and injured knee could take him.

It all took less than fifteen seconds, but that was enough for the young man to recover. Now
Calavera faced off against two skilled men, one of them brandishing a knife. There was a pause for breath, as all three men made their evaluations, none wanting to be the first to commit to an action.

The fighter, who had entered the brawl to satisfy his hatred, could not resist giving vent to it with his voice. Swiping his knife back and forth in front of his body, he looked Calavera straight in the eyes and said, "I'm going to enjoy ripping the life out of an Emerald Guardsman."

It was a mistake. The young man, who had entered the brawl only out of a sense of honour, looked at his ally, looked back at Calavera, took a step back, and straightened up. His intent was clear.

Calavera confirmed it: "Are you removing yourself from this conflict?"

The young man stared straight into Calavera's eyes, with regret but no apology, and said, "If his goal is solely to kill one of the protectors of this city and this country, he'll get no further help from me."

The fighter scowled at him, then returned his attention to Calavera. He wanted blood, and all other considerations were secondary.

Calavera lowered his right hand, switching his grip on Mendoza's knife. As he did so he raised his left, palm facing the fighter. "Sir, you have publicly declared your intent to murder a member of the Emerald Guard. If you do not drop your weapon to the floor and vacate these premises immediately, you will be placed under arrest."

The fighter took a step back, putting his knife back in its sheath. "I have a better idea," he said, and in the same movement with which he'd replaced his knife he reached under his vest and brought out a concealed pistol, raising it halfway to Calavera before Mendoza's knife buried itself in his throat.

The fight was over. The circle formed by the crowd dispersed, although before returning to their tables and beverages most of the tavern patrons watched as the dead man dropped to the ground.

"You two," Calavera said, pointing to the men who'd spurred Mendoza on but had not joined in the fracas. "Carry the dead man out and lay him respectfully against the wall. Then one of you will fetch a Watchman while the other revives and assists this man," indicating the lone encourager who had entered the fray, still unconscious on the floor. The two men hurried to comply, and Calavera permitted himself a moment of prideful satisfaction at the speed with which they did so. When he was finished watching, the young man was beside him.

"I feel I owe you a drink."

"You do," said Calavera. "And I accept."

And thus were all scores between the young man and the Guardsman settled. They proceeded to the bar, and when they'd been served Calavera saluted the other with his wine cup. "You are an excellent boxer."

The young man returned the salute. "And you are an excellent brawler."

They drank.

Calavera said, "I do not mind telling you, my knees still hurt from how quickly you forced me to bend them."
The young man accepted the compliment with a nod. "I would ask you a question. You were outnumbered - why didn't you draw your sword?"

"I didn't want to kill anyone."

This earned Calavera a confused look from the young man. "Surely you could have used it solely to protect yourself?"

To avoid issuing an unkind snort at the naiveté of youth, the Guardsman instead took a drink of his wine before answering. "No. The sword is a precise tool, designed for killing. When I hold it, so am I. Together, neither of us is capable of anything less."

The young man considered this in silence for several moments, the time it took for him to drink twice from his cup. Then he nodded his understanding, slowly.

By this time Calavera had finished his wine. It was always like this: No matter what the beverage was, after a fight he always consumed the first serving too quickly. He saluted the young man with his empty cup, to indicate he was on his way home, and stood up from his stool.

Yet he didn't want to leave too abruptly, so he offered some parting words. "You believe in a fair fight, sir, which is admirable, but it demonstrates to me that you have never been a soldier."

The young man, under the impression he was being insulted, was about to protest, but Calavera continued without pause.

"That is regrettable, for I honestly believe our young country would benefit considerably from having one such as you dedicated to her defence."

The young man held Calavera's gaze a moment, and the Guardsman saw he was profoundly moved by this compliment, but then he looked away, and stared into his wine. Calavera, slightly embarrassed, turned and walked toward the door, but after two steps the young man's voice stopped him: "Might I have the privilege, Guardsman, of knowing your name?"

He turned back, and discovered the remarkable young man was staring at him intently. Returning the look of those inexperienced, but determined, eyes, he said, "I am Diego Calavera." And then he turned a third time and departed, neglecting to ask the other man's name because he expected they would never see each another again.

He would learn soon enough that he was greatly mistaken.
Chapter Summary

IN WHICH Calavera draws his sword at last, then sheaths it, then draws it again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As Calavera exited the tavern and turned up the street, two men in hooded cloaks emerged from the shadows across the road and fell into step behind him.

Calavera was not concerned by this so much as he was annoyed. All he'd aspired to this evening was to sample for a couple of hours the life of a simpler man, a man unburdened by the responsibilities of defending a country and protecting her citizens. Instead he had already been attacked once tonight, for no greater offence than locking his gaze a fraction too long onto the eyes of a man whom drink had made belligerent. And now it appeared he was in danger again, for when Calavera turned off the main road, walked for two blocks along the side-streets, and then returned to the main road, the men behind him kept pace the entire time.

The physical excitement of his recent brawl having worn off, Calavera was beginning to feel a throbbing ache in every location on his torso where the young man's fists had found their mark. This made him irritable, and thus impatient to discover the purpose of his pursuers.

The main road gave out onto a public square, with a fountain in the centre. At this hour of the night it was empty, but nevertheless Calavera scanned the plaza thoroughly, hoping to spot a Watchman. If he had, he would have gone to the man and enlisted his assistance, but instead he merely confirmed that he was on his own. In his current humour, that was no deterrent.

In one smooth movement he whirled to face his pursuers and drew his sword.

They stopped walking, and Calavera tried to determine if he knew them, but the cowls over their heads were most effective, concealing their features entirely. If anything, this irritated Calavera still further.

"Gentlemen. I have had an eventful evening, and this has put me in no mood for games. Identify yourselves and state your business with me, or quit this area and look for me no more tonight. If you choose to do neither, I will have no choice but to advance upon you and settle the matter in whatever fashion I deem appropriate."

The man on Calavera's left raised his right hand out of his cloak, revealing that it was clutching a pistol.

The Guardsman acknowledged to himself that he should have anticipated this, refraining from chastising himself for a fool only because he was too weary.

The other cloaked figure directed Calavera's attention to an alleyway leading away from the plaza. The instruction was clear: Calavera was to proceed down that lane, and they would follow. Grimly noting that the man with the pistol made no gesture of encouragement, for none was
needed, Calavera sheathed his sword and started walking toward the alleyway, the two hooded men once again falling into step behind him.

The night was clear, but the buildings on either side of the alleyway were tall, plunging the entire lane into deep, dark shadow. Calavera was evaluating whether or not he should risk making some attempt on his two captors before entering such a disadvantageous area when the man without the pistol cleared his throat and pointed to a lantern suspended at the mouth of the alleyway. Following the unspoken directive, Calavera unhooked the lantern and used it to light his way forward.

When he reached the midpoint of the alleyway, the two men behind him stopped walking, and the one without the pistol cleared his throat again. Calavera turned to face them. The circumstances were ideal for them to shoot him dead, but the Guardsman's instincts were telling him such was not their intent. Trusting those instincts in such a vulnerable position was taking a great deal of self-discipline.

The man without the pistol indicated that Calavera should place his lantern on the ground, beside the wall, and he complied. As he was doing this, the man with the pistol put his weapon back under his cloak, afterward folding his hands in front of his body to demonstrate that he no longer held it.

Calavera's eyes strained to penetrate the shadows their cowls cast over their faces, but still he saw nothing within the folds but inky blackness.

With exaggerated gestures, the man who had been issuing instructions removed the glove from his right hand, loosened the solitary ring he was wearing from his middle finger, and gently tossed the ring toward Calavera.

The Guardsman lost track of the ring's trajectory as it arced toward him, but it struck him in the shoulder and landed not far from his leg. He picked it up and brought it to his eyes.

The ring was made of gold, and carved all along its surface to resemble the scales of a serpent. The only exception was the head of the serpent, which was in the shape of a triangle with rounded corners, and crafted to appear as though the creature were devouring its own tail. Two small, bright green gemstones served as the serpent's eyes.

The man who had been instructing Calavera began to speak, in a language the Guardsman, for all his experience, did not recognise. The cowled figure's voice sounded slightly familiar to him, but the tone employed was deep and resonant, with a slight grittiness. Diego had seen Faustus on the stage once, and the voice employed by Mephistopheles when referring to damnation had been much like this one.

As the voice continued, with its harsh vowels and guttural consonants, the ring in Calavera's hand seemed to respond. The gemstones that formed its eyes grew ever brighter, until rather than reflecting the light of the lantern they radiated a glow all their own. The metal of the ring became warm, then hot, and finally so hot that Calavera had to drop it to the ground.

Still the voice continued, and Calavera was only dimly aware of it, pulsing in the background like the noise of a fence post being hammered into a neighbouring field. He was all but ignoring sounds because of what was transpiring before his eyes.

The ring's eyes glowed ever brighter, and the body of the golden serpent started to grow in size. The mouth let go of its tail, and the head turned to face Calavera, who drew his sword as the voice kept intoning and the ring - now undeniably, however inexplicably, a genuine golden serpent
- grew to six, eight, ten feet in length, with a proportional thickness.

The chanting stopped. The serpent reared back, raising its head two feet above Calavera's own. The emerald-green eyes locked upon the Guardsman's gaze. A forked tongue flitted out to taste the air.

And then the head lunged downward to strike at him.

Chapter End Notes

This Chapter is dedicated to Frank, from my writing group. I may not have been able to use his idea, but it got me thinking about how to make this installment better, and what more can you ask? Thanks, Frank. t!
The Golden Serpent

Chapter Summary

Concerning the properties of snakes and precious metals, as well as the finer points of trust.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Calavera stepped left to avoid the golden serpent's fangs, he swung his sword arm swiftly and heavily, chopping just behind the base of the creature's skull. It was a solid, forceful blow, which would have broken the neck of any horse and would easily have severed the head of an ordinary serpent of this size, but, as Calavera already knew, this was no ordinary serpent.

With a terrible clang of metal upon metal that reverberated off the stone walls of the alleyway and seemed to pierce the eardrums, Calavera's sword bounced right off the creature's golden scales at a speed almost equal to that of the blow itself. In fact his weapon would have flown right out of his grip had Calavera not been grimly anticipating such a result. The sharp steel of his blade - which would require honing after this abuse - was clearly going to be ineffectual against the metal of his adversary's outer protection. The serpent's scales did, indeed, seem to be made of gold, reflecting the lantern light in a manner that was quite beautiful, truth be told. Where the sword had struck there was only the thinnest line of a dent, otherwise no indication the serpent had been struck at all.

For its part, the creature seemed to be frustrated at having missed its target, but Calavera realised this evaluation was based on his previous experiences with snakes, knowledge which might not apply in this instance.

Swiftly upon that thought came the idea he may have drawn another false conclusion earlier on, when he'd assumed the serpent's golden scales were an outer shell; for all he knew the creature had no internal organs to speak of, nor even what one might call a proper "inside": It might very well be made of solid gold throughout.

The serpent, recovered from its failure, reared back again and opened its mouth, baring its fangs in challenge. Certainly it appeared to Calavera as though there were a throat behind the forked tongue and pointed teeth, but he had no desire to place himself close enough to the creature to make certain.

It lunged again, and Calavera dodged again, this time mostly forward and slightly to the right, so he would be close enough to poke the serpent's eye with his sword, which he did, to no avail. The eyes, as he'd expected, were as hard as gemstones.

Instead of rearing again, the creature shifted its weight, landing its chin and throat smoothly upon the ground. Then in the same movement it turned toward Calavera and hissed at him, distracting him sufficiently that the Guardsman did not notice the tail snapping around to strike him until it was almost too late. He dove over the sweeping extremity, landed in a somersault, and rolled a safe distance away. When he stood up, however, he had difficulty catching his breath: One of his abdominal muscles, already badly abused by the pummeling received from the young man in
the tavern, had been overstrained by this latest manoeuvre, and was now cramped into a tight knot.

Thus far Calavera had been able to take advantage of being faster than his opponent, but he could rely on that no longer. If something else in his torso were to suddenly seize, at an inopportune moment, it could prove fatal.

The serpent turned to face him again, lantern light glinting off its flat forehead, the tongue flitting out and in. Calavera imagined the tongue spitting at him, and wondered morbidly what form such a creature's venom might take.

He began circling his adversary, as rapidly as he could without aggravating his bruises, forcing the creature to shift its coils awkwardly in order to keep him constantly in sight. With his opponent thus off-balance Calavera had a few moments to think, although he knew he must act soon.

This unconventional foe would clearly not be defeated through conventional means. Calavera might perhaps throw a stone into its mouth and choke it, but that desperate act only had a chance of success if this creature had any kind of breathing apparatus. Calavera could not afford to make such assumptions and be wrong; he had to focus on what he knew.

The creature had started off as a ring, a piece of jewelry, with a body of gold and gemstones for eyes. Gold was a very malleable metal, as demonstrated by the dent Calavera's sword had made in its scales...

And then the truth dawned on him, clear and bright as a mountain river. He allowed himself a quick glance at the hooded men who had forced him into this conflict. They were still at the mouth of the alleyway, and although Calavera could not see their faces, their postures confirmed his expectations: They were observing him very closely, utterly uninterested in the actions of the serpent. Calavera returned his attentions to the immediate threat.

Gold being a particularly malleable metal, it is more susceptible to fire than many other elements. The moment Calavera's thoughts had alighted upon this fact, he knew why he'd been instructed to carry the lantern into the alleyway.

He was being tested.

As Calavera's circuit brought him to the lantern, he snatched it up, twisted his aching torso back, and whirled forward, launching the lantern into the serpent's body. The glass smashed and the lamp oil splashed, and wherever the fuel spread hungry flames chased after it, igniting all along the serpent's body and creating a golden glow so brilliant that in spite of the risk Calavera had no choice but to shut his eyes against the pain it caused.

The serpent gave a terrible shriek, of rage, of pain, of loss. Behind his eyelids Calavera felt the brightness ebb, so he reopened his eyes. The burning creature was getting smaller, and as it diminished in size it uncoiled itself and then re-formed in the shape of a circle. It stopped shrieking, biting down upon its tail, and shrank still further. As the body grew smaller the oil quickly burned itself out, until all that was left, lit by some weak flames struggling to survive on the floor of the alleyway, was once again a tiny golden ring, in the shape of a snake eating its own tail, with two emeralds for eyes.

But Calavera was not satisfied with this partial victory. He turned to face his two observers, his sword held straight out, pointing at the heart of the man who'd thrown him the ring. "Reveal yourselves, now, or I swear by Almighty God I will carve the life's blood from both of you, and no mere pistol, however well-aimed, shall be sufficient to stop me." He was not ordinarily given to
threats of this sort, but it had been a trying evening.

"We believe you," said the one Calavera's sword was sighting, whose voice the Guardsman was now even more certain he recognised. The two cloaked men moved their hands away from their bodies, fingers spread widely apart. Slowly they reached for their hoods, pulled them down behind their heads, and revealed their faces.

Calavera knew the faces, very well. As to whether he knew the men...

"No offense intended, gentlemen, if you are the persons you appear to be, but given recent events, which but one short hour ago I would have dismissed as impossible, I am no longer willing to trust solely the evidence of my eyes. I require some further proof of your identities."

The two men shared a look which combined surprise with satisfaction. Calavera surmised they were pleased with their experiment. This did nothing to appease him.

His examiners returned their attention to their subject, and the man who had brought the serpent ring to life spoke first. "You may not know us, Calavera, but we know you. We know you by the fire in your eyes..."

"... and the steel in your spine," said the man who'd pointed the pistol at him.

Then both men waited, expecting these words to have convinced Calavera of their identities. Which indeed they had.

Calavera replaced his sword in its sheath. "My regrets, Your Lordship, Captain," he said, the honorifics confirming his assessment that these two men were, besides the King himself, the only persons the Lieutenant recognised as his superiors: Martial Corzo, Captain of the Emerald Guard, and Vincente de Tarso, Baron of Girona and the Order's founder.

They were also, not incidentally, lifelong friends of King Guillermo I, and with His Royal Highness formed the Three Fathers of the Revolution, to whom Calavera's young country of Esperanza owed its very existence.

"The ring should be cool enough now for you to pick it up safely," said Corzo, and Calavera noted that if his Captain were to have spoken while his face was concealed, with the distinctly deep bass timbre of his voice, there was no way his Lieutenant would have failed to identify him.

Calavera looked down at the serpent ring, glinting in the starlight. It seemed inert and harmless now, but he was still disinclined to interact with it. However, he did not want to appear timid in front of his Captain, and he did trust that man with his life, so he picked it up. With the fires in the alleyway having all but died out, the ring now appeared, to the uninitiated, completely innocent.

Calavera was so taken by this thought that he almost failed to notice the Captain and the Baron turning to exit the alleyway. "Meet us at the Cemetery tomorrow morning at nine o'clock," said the latter without turning. "Wear your Tunic. And bring the ring with you." Then they were gone.

Calavera had passed their test. Left alone in the alleyway, there was no doubt in his mind that, before long, he would have cause to regret this.
Edited March 8 to capitalise the word "Tunic" - an egregious error made mind-boggling when the speaker is taken into consideration.

Further edited March 23 for one instance of spelling consistency and because somehow when I published this I temporarily forgot the final Christian name I'd decided upon for one of the characters.
IN WHICH what appears to be, on the surface, a day like any other, is, for Calavera, a morning like no other.

BY the time he returned to his home, Calavera was eager for bed, but he wasn't about to simply turn in without taking proper precautions. He was reasonably certain that the ring he carried would remain inert so long as nobody spoke in its vicinity the way the Baron had in the alleyway, but he was not the sort to favour ten extra minutes of rest over an ounce of prevention. Falling asleep with a lit candle was out of the question, so he pushed his bed over to the window, draped some essentials along the footboard, tied a rope around the bedpost, and placed the ring in a small wooden box on the far side of the room. If he were to be woken suddenly by the splintering of wood, he would have time to grab his clothes, weapons, and Tunic, before climbing out the window to safety.

As it turned out, any concerns he'd had about having to restore himself quickly from profound depths of slumber proved optimistic. Sleep, when it finally did come, was very shallow, and plagued with repetitious images of strangers in cowls and towering snakes of brilliant gold. When the cock crowed at dawn, indicating he'd been abed for four hours, Calavera decided enough was enough. He rose, washed, inspected his bruises, dressed, and had breakfast, all the while keeping the small wooden box visible from out of the corner of his eye.

Then he lifted his belt from the bedpost, placed it on the table, and sat down to perform his morning chores. He removed his sword from its scabbard and set about the grim business of re-honing its edge, undoing the damage the serpent's scales had done the night before. That completed, he oiled the sword and returned it to its place, then checked his dagger. Finding its edge satisfactory, he oiled the weapon and placed it back in its sheath. He unloaded his pistol, inspected the powder and ball, then reloaded. Lastly he went over his powder horn and his pouch of balls. Everything was in top condition, so he tied those two items back onto his belt. Then he stood up, strapped on his belt, and placed all the tools of his trade, sword, dagger, and pistol, into their proper locations upon his person. Thus was he two-thirds dressed for the day.

He returned to his bed, and considered the Tunic draped over the footboard: Deep emerald green, with silver edging and the Cross of Saint Rafael centred on the front and back. A thin edging of gold all along the outside of the cross indicated his rank.

Lieutenant Diego Calavera of the Emerald Guard stood before his Tunic, took three deep breaths, and recited his Oath:

"They will know me by the fire in my eyes and the steel in my spine."

"When I bleed, but do not falter, they will know me."

Then he donned his Tunic and placed his hat atop his head. Thus was he fully dressed.

The last thing he had to do now was decide how to transport the ring. He considered placing the entire box in his pocket, but decided against it because the container would shield him
from any telltale heat that might warn him the ring was about to transform. For a moment he wondered if he should wear the ring, for doing so might give him power over it, such as the Baron had. But this was pure speculation, even wishful thinking, and if the ring could expand then perhaps it could also contract, and Calavera refused to expose himself to the risk that the object might in one instant crush his finger while simultaneously rendering itself impossible to remove. So he simply took the ring out of the box and slipped it into his pocket.

Then, after one final inspection to ensure all was in order, he exited his room, locked the door, and walked down the corridor to the stairs that would lead him outside.

It was the policy of the Emerald Guard that only those members serving as Watchmen had their lodgings in the Stronghold of that city. This ensured that a large number of Guardsmen could be called upon instantly in the case of emergency, but also meant that in the event of attack or disaster not all of the Guardsmen would be trapped in one place. It was a policy that typified the deviousness of the Baron's thought processes.

Calavera's room was above a typesetter's, two blocks from the Stronghold. He would have preferred a longer, more restorative walk every morning, but he could not bring himself to reside any further away from his comrades and the epicentre of their activity. As it was still very early, today he decided to travel by a much longer route, and so rather than turning down the road that would take him directly to the Stronghold, he continued to walk straight.

The sun was still low enough in the sky for the buildings to create long shadows across the streets, but San Rafael, being the capital of Esperanza and its busiest city, was already preparing to face the day. A fruitseller was setting up her stand, the scent from a baker's open window promised fresh bread within, and Sonia, a prostitute who preferred to work mornings because there were fewer competitors, was deep in negotiation with her first customer of the day, a sorrowful young moneylender whose wife had recently died after a tragic and protracted illness.

For Calavera, the world had changed overnight, and it disconcerted him that nobody else seemed to have noticed. Everything looked exactly as it had the previous morning, and his neighbours greeted him as they'd always done, none of them sharing looks indicating they, too, were privy to the secret he'd learned the night before. The Guardsman did not suddenly see dragons or winged horses flying overhead. There was no misshapen street merchant offering to spin straw into gold. No trio of women approached, bearing eye of newt, toe of frog, and baboon's blood.

Calavera's hand found the ring in his pocket and he squeezed it, once, to assure himself both that it still existed and that it remained tranquil.

"Diego Calavera!"

The voice had come from behind him. In one smooth, instinctive motion Calavera whirled to face it and placed his hand on his sword, dismissing the sharp pains in his torso.

The speaker met this challenge with a bark of laughter. "First you stride past me without so much as a glance, and then upon hearing my voice you ready yourself for a fight. Is that any way to treat an old friend?"

The man facing Calavera was tall, and broad of shoulder. He wore his straight black hair long, tied behind his head and falling halfway down his back. His piercing blue eyes were lit by a mischievous twinkle. While his back was impeccably straight his demeanour was nevertheless relaxed and fluid, and he wore the Tunic of the Emerald Guard as though it were his second skin:

Lanza Dorado.
In addition to being one of Calavera's dearest friends, and a valued comrade of so many perilous enterprises that counting them was meaningless, Dorado was the most ordered, disciplined, and rational person Calavera had ever met.

On this singular morning, the sight of this particular man was a welcome and unexpected relief, the answer to a dream.
The Summoning

Chapter Summary

Concerning relative skills at fisticuffs, strange goings-on within the Order, and uncharacteristic behaviour from our Lieutenant.

CALAVERA threw his arms wide and strode toward his friend. "Lanza! I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you this morning."

Such was his joy that he forgot entirely the injuries received the night before, and embraced his friend heartily, whereupon the crush of his middle against the other's solidity caused his wounds to screech in agony.

Calavera reflexively hissed with the pain, and Lanza broke the hug instantly. "Diego, are you quite all right?"

Although tempted to say he did not know the honest answer to that question, Calavera elected for the time being to address only Dorado's immediate concern. "My apologies. I was in an altercation last night, in which my body was much abused by a remarkable young man, not only honourable to a fault - and I say that without hyperbole - but possibly the finest pugilist I have ever encountered."

"Better than you?"

"I have the bruises to prove it."

"Better than me?" and whereas with his first question Dorado's tone had been politely sceptical, now it contained undisguised incredulousness.

Calavera smiled at him. "Let us hope, for both your sakes, that the two of you never have occasion to find out." He clapped his friend on the shoulder, his arm remembering from much practice to swing slightly upward in order to reach its target. "So what brings you here? When last I heard, you were assigned to patrol Northern Aragón."

"I was," said Dorado, his open countenance tightening somewhat, "but in the name of the Baron and by command of the Captain, I and several others were ordered to present ourselves at the Stronghold in San Rafael. This order was delivered to my Lieutenant by a messenger on horseback, and in the day it took to gather together all those summoned, sufficient carriages arrived to transport us here."

This was highly irregular. Most Guardsmen marched as a unit to their new postings, which indicated to Calavera that this summons was not a posting at all. What it might be instead, he could not guess, because in the seven-year history of the Guard, he had never heard of such a thing.

"A similar group of carriages arrived yesterday, from Navarra," he said, hoping this might trigger in Dorado some helpful additional memory.

Instead, Dorado snorted. "I became immediately aware of this upon entering the
Stronghold, when our carriages were beset upon by yesterday's arrivals, all of them curious, all of them hoping we knew more than they did."

"And of course you did not." This mystery was typical of how the Baron conducted his affairs. Having lived most of his life in a state of concealment and manipulation - without which, admittedly, the independence of Esperanza would never have been achieved - de Tarso was not the sort to reveal his intent to anyone until such time as that secrecy threatened the success of his endeavours. He could have explained to Calavera last night his actions in the alleyway, for example, but for whatever reason, half of which was undoubtedly a sense of the theatrical cultivated to keep all others off-balance in their dealings with him, the Baron had chosen to delay informing his Lieutenant of why he'd set a supernatural serpent upon him until the morning. Calavera found himself growing quite impatient for his rendezvous with de Tarso and Corzo. "I have a meeting with the Baron and the Captain at nine; perhaps after our business is concluded I shall ask them to satisfy our curiosities."

Dorado snorted again. "I should like to witness that. The Baron won't answer you; that's certain. It remains only to determine whether he rebukes your impudence or lies to you by omission."

Calavera expected the latter. Given that his superiors had gone to the trouble of putting him through a trial the previous night, he was expecting them to task him with something unique this morning, and in those circumstances Calavera found it more likely that today the Baron would be solicitous rather than overbearing. But all this speculation he decided to keep to himself for the time being; although he and Dorado had shared innumerable confidences over the years, there was no question in Calavera's mind that he was expected to keep the circumstances of the previous evening to himself, and he wanted to expose neither himself nor Dorado to dishonour. Further he could not divest himself of the vague feeling that revealing too much might somehow risk both his friend's safety and his career. With all this in mind, Calavera returned the topic to the summoning of the Guardsmen. "No doubt tomorrow we shall see a convoy of carriages arriving from Cataluña."

"I can already confirm this. I spoke to Arpista as I was exiting the Stronghold. He arrived yesterday, and in keeping with his insatiable curiosity, he's learned that, indeed, dispatches and carriages were sent to every corner of our country. Further, it seems that only the elite are being summoned."

Calavera again smiled at his friend, in much the same way as when Dorado had expressed doubt that anyone could best him at fisticuffs. Between men such as themselves there could be no arrogance: The acknowledgement of superiority in the skills of their profession was nothing more than a matter of proven fact, the recognition of which was far preferable to any lies of false modesty.

"I knew Arpista and Duque had arrived from Navarra," said Calavera, "and now that you cause me to deliberate upon it, two days ago Cuerno and José Herrera arrived from the South of País Vasco."

"I arrived with the younger Herrera," Dorado said. "And among those in the other carriages were Trebor and Corrida."

"Good Lord!" For these were, without doubt, among the very finest fighting men Calavera had ever known. He could scarcely believe they were all being assembled in one locale. "Is there no one left to defend our borders?"

Dorado nodded his comparable sentiments. "I pondered the same question upon arriving
"Praise God for that." Calavera was uncharacteristically disturbed by these new tidings, and he could not think why. Perhaps his constitution was too shaken by the ring in his pocket, and all the potential implications it bore in its wake? His mind was overfull. "Has there been any speculation as to what might be the reason for this summoning?"

"Hah! In a carriage full of Guardsmen, who are raised to that honour by virtue not only of their physical prowess but also of their intelligence? We were forced to spend an entire day's journey in closed quarters with naught but our minds and the company of our fellows to sustain us - we spoke of little else!

"Three theories prevail above all others. The first is that an attack is expected upon San Rafael, and no measures are considered too extreme in the defending of our capital. I do not much credit this hypothesis."

Nor did Calavera; it implied either panic or desperation on the part of both the Baron and the Captain, an impossibility to anyone who knew them well enough.

"The second is that there is to be a tournament, to determine the finest among us, and the third notion is that there is to be a great ceremony, at which we are all to be presented with medals of achievement."

Calavera could see in his friend's eyes a scepticism matching his own. A tournament? Medals? These were frivolities, perhaps useful for increasing the perception of the Emerald Guard in Esperanza and the rest of Europe, but as far as Calavera was aware the Guard's reputation at home and abroad was excellent, requiring no such public spectacle. Within the ranks, these ceremonies would be viewed as nothing more than trivialities.

"I agree," said Dorado, waking Calavera from his reverie.

"I beg your pardon, my friend. With what do you agree?"

"You just said, 'It is too much.' When I agreed I took your meaning to be that the circumstances were over-elaborate, but now based on your countenance, I am no longer certain what you meant."

Calavera, who had not even been aware he'd spoken, was likewise uncertain. "Lanza, my friend, you have my apologies. I have much on my mind this morning, of which this latest mystery is but a fraction."

"I am pleased to hear it," said Dorado, "for otherwise, based upon your unusual behaviour, I should wonder whether you were somehow not my friend at all, but some manner of impostor."

It was a sentiment uncomfortably reminiscent of the similar question Calavera had posed to the two cloaked figures in the alleyway. Once again he found himself lapsing into an uncharacteristic silence.

Dorado, to his credit, laughed and clapped Calavera on the shoulder, the combination of his enthusiasm and his natural strength very nearly knocking the pensive Lieutenant sideways. "You said you had a meeting this morning with our superiors. Go, then, and take the time you need to prepare yourself. When you encounter them, settle for nothing less than the full truth, which all four of us know you have earned a hundred times over. The Baron will attempt to withhold some information, which he cannot help, and the Captain will defer to him out of respect and friendship."
Be firm, and remember the Captain's love and care for the men under his command. If you persist with Corzo, he will favour his duty to us over his history with the Baron, and he will insist on telling you everything."

Calavera was touched, deeply: Dorado was absolutely right. "Thank you."

"I have said nothing less than my friend Diego Calavera would himself have said, had he been here with us this morning." His smile was warm and forgiving.

Diego smiled back. "I will come and find you after my meeting, and I will have something pertinent to tell you. I do not yet know what further knowledge I will possess, nor to which of many potential subjects it will be relevant, nor further still can I surmise at this time what I will be honour-bound to keep to myself, but you have my word that my report to you will contain some form of enlightenment."

"Then you will find me at the Stronghold," said Dorado. "I await your news eagerly."

They nodded to one another, and Calavera turned and walked away, toward the Cemetery and the scheduled meeting with his superiors. He was tempted to look back at his friend, but he resisted, because Dorado had already given him all the reassurance he would need.

The events of last night had so overwhelmed Calavera with questions that he'd become unsure of himself, and therefore uncertain how to proceed. But the solidity and directness of his true friend Lanza Dorado had returned him to himself.

Diego Calavera was a man who excelled at finding the answers to his questions. The Baron and the Captain had those answers, and so his course was clear:

Notwithstanding that they were the founders of the Order, his commanders, and the oldest and closest friends of the King himself, their Lieutenant was going to have his answers from them, whatever it might take.
The Cemetery

Chapter Summary

Ruminations: Those who died in birthing a country; Part of a boy survives into manhood; A wrong step can lead to terror and death.

WHenever he was on his way to somewhere specific rather than simply walking for its own sake, Calaveraprefered long, quick strides, and today his pace was even faster, inspired as it was by curiosity, impatience, and determination in equal measure. And thus when he arrived at the front gates to the Cemetery of Saint Mary of Purity, the clocks had just finished striking eight, meaning he'd arrived for his meeting almost a full hour ahead of the appointed time.

Last night the Baron had stipulated merely that they would meet at "the Cemetery," but to a Guardsman this could only mean Saint Mary of Purity, for these were the grounds where all of his comrades-in-arms had been laid to rest since the Order's foundation. The Baron had not specified a location within the cemetery, but Calavera was certain he and his superiors would have no difficulty finding one another.

Despite being impatient for answers, the Lieutenant chose to take advantage of the early hour and visit with absent brethren, in the section reserved for those soldiers who had fallen during the Revolution. Placing himself before the rows of crosses, he took a deep breath, bowed his head, pulled his crucifix out of his clothes by the chain, and grasped that necklace tightly. Then he took another deep breath, closed his eyes, and murmured a prayer to the Blessed Virgin. Once that was done, he kissed the crucifix and placed it reverently back under his shirt, feeling comforted as the warm metal lay once more against his breast.

When he raised his head he discovered the Baron and the Captain were standing nearby, observing him in silence from a respectful distance. They did not move until he did, and as Calavera strode toward them the Baron removed a coin from his purse and handed it to the Captain.

"The wager was for the time of your arrival," said Corzo as Calavera approached. "We both believed you would be impatient this morning, but whereas I expected you to arrive earlier than the half-hour, the Baron maintained that you would resist the urge to arrive too early because it would make you more impatient."

Calavera nodded his head, to hide his smirk, and kept to himself the fact that if he had not encountered Lanza Dorado, the Baron would surely have won the wager. It suited his current mood to allow de Tarso to believe one of his predictions had proven false.

After the appropriate pause, to indicate he was accepting defeat gracefully, the Baron spoke. "Our discussion today will take place inside the Gutiérrez Mausoleum." He held out his hand. "I'll have the ring now, Calavera."

That gesture, supercilious and presumptuous, was all the fuel the embers of Calavera's temper required to burst into full flame. Nevertheless, he kept his tone strictly civil, and thus more reproachful, as he replied, "Notwithstanding that you are superior to me in rank, and that the ring is your property, when a gentleman asks another to do something for him, common courtesy dictates
that the request be accompanied by an acknowledgement which indicates the speaker respects and appreciates the other's efforts. 'If you please' is the most common phrase used for such a purpose."

A heavy silence descended, colder and deeper than the hundreds of graves which surrounded them. The Captain crossed his arms and looked away, his face carefully inscrutable: He was going to let the Baron deal with this insubordination.

For his part, de Tarso's body became perfectly still, and he stared Calavera square in the eye. Each man's gaze was studiously neutral, and neither said a word, yet they were communicating a great deal to one another.

In the deep, fiercely intelligent eyes of Vincente de Tarso, Calavera could read the Baron's entire life story. This was the man, born into affluence but not nobility, who had returned from education in England to a Spain he could no longer tolerate, and had thereupon formulated a plan so bold and implausible it could only have been the product of genius or insanity.

He selected a man, an old and dear friend as well as a noble, to be the King of a country he would create. Then another old friend, a soldier by the name of Martial Corzo, was raised to the rank of General, and made the leader of the Revolutionary army. The man who would become Guillermo I won the heart of the people, his passion and idealism inspiring them to cast off the laws of Spain despite the terrible risks. He was so effective that even some neighbouring territories in France were moved to join the Cause. At the same time General Corzo won the heart of the military, his strength of character and tactical brilliance driving his men from one glorious victory to another.

Meanwhile in the background de Tarso, who could never have done either, manipulated all the forces and powers beneath the surface. His methods, while utterly necessary, were much less respectable: spying, bribery, deceit, blackmail, and, most infamously, assassination.

With his political opponents thus removed or otherwise silenced, de Tarso declared Girona a Barony, and himself the Baron of it, giving himself an official voice at Court by right of Nobility. And then, when the Revolution proved successful and his long-held dream of the Kingdom of Esperanza became a reality, he founded the nation's elite society of protectors: the Order of the Emerald Guard, tasked with being the personal guard of the King and his family, the Watchmen of every major city, and a special military force that would be sent to every region of the country in which their skills were required. All these men were placed under the command of the Captain of the Emerald Guard, Martial Corzo, who retired from warfare in order to maintain the peace.

Finally, the Baron conscripted Guardsmen who would not be under Corzo's direct command. As members of the Order they swore to honour the Captain's authority, but they reported only to de Tarso, and operated primarily outside the borders of Esperanza. These men formed the Baron's extensive and much-feared spy network, the second finest in all the world after the agents of France's Cardinal Richelieu.

This was the legend and legacy of Vincente de Tarso, and every moment of it was visible behind the Baron's eyes. As Diego Calavera held this gaze, he absorbed the cunning and ruthlessness of a man who perceived what others could not, stopped at nothing, had dared everything, and had succeeded beyond the most outlandish dreams of man. It was not an easy gaze to hold.

But, like the Baron, Calavera was a proud man, and dangerous in his own fashion, so he would not look away.

Then, after an agonisingly long period in which the Lieutenant felt his resolve tested in
ways he had never before experienced... the Baron smiled.

And for one mad moment Calavera was convinced he was going to the headsman.

Then the Captain, seeing his friend's expression, also smiled, and Calavera knew all would be well.

The Baron waved his hand, dispelling the tension. "The Captain and I look for a certain breed of man when we are deciding who will be admitted into the Emerald Guard. It would be unreasonable, then, for us to take exception when the very traits we seek are brought to bear against us." He held out his hand again. May I please have the ring, Calavera?"

His inflection held not the slightest hint of irony, and so Calavera reached into his pocket, took the ring, and placed it in the Baron's outstretched hand. The Lieutenant had been eager to divest himself of it, expecting to feel some sense of relief, but what he experienced instead was more a feeling of liberty, far stronger than he'd anticipated.

The Baron placed the ring back on the middle finger of his right hand, and inspected it to make sure all was correct. Then he asked, "Do you believe in magic, Calavera?"

"With respect, Your Lordship, that question is no longer applicable. To believe or otherwise is the choice one makes when one reaches the limits of certainty. All question of certainty for me was resolved last night, when I saw an inanimate object increase a hundredfold in size and move of its own volition."

"Hm," Corzo muttered, not at all to himself. "Good answer."

The Baron nodded, and stretched his arm toward a pebbled path. "Shall we to the Mausoleum?" Then without waiting for an answer he turned and started walking away.

Calavera moved to follow, but the Captain indicated he should wait. Corzo paused while the Baron took a few more strides away, then leaned closely to his Lieutenant and said, too quietly for the other to hear, "You were not entirely outside of your rights to demand courtesy of the Baron when you did, but if you were ever to upbraid his Lordship again in such a fashion I would be forced to consider your rudeness a stain upon the honour of the Guard. In that event I would have no choice but to demand immediate satisfaction."

This truth, presented deceptively simply, was in its own way as intimidating as the Baron's gaze: Calavera was an excellent swordsman, but Corzo was a supreme swordsman. Yet the Lieutenant demurred primarily out of respect for his Captain, and the knowledge that his words had been just and reasonable.

"I will govern myself properly," he said, and then hurried to add, because somehow, uncharacteristically, he had forgotten, "Sir."

Corzo squeezed his shoulder, the comforting gesture of a supportive uncle. "You deserve answers, and today you shall receive them. You have my word."

That was all Calavera needed. The two men hurried to catch up with the Baron.

They only reached him after he'd arrived at the Gutiérrez Mausoleum, a permanent monument to the late General of the Revolutionary forces. de Tarso was looking up at the coat of arms atop the white marble structure and crossing himself. Corzo and Calavera followed suit. Then de Tarso removed a key from his pocket and unlocked the heavy wooden door. Once they were all inside he closed the door again and re-locked it. Only then did Corzo strike his flint against a torch
and bring it to life, the orange light casting an eerie glow upon the white marble walls. The carvings depicted scenes of great Roman battles. Shadows danced upon the Legionnaires and their barbarian foes.

Calavera carefully manoeuvred himself around the sharp corners of the great stone casing commanding the centre of the room. He would dearly have loved to ask why they were holding their discussion in such a place, but he expected he would know the answer soon enough. Also, he wanted to demonstrate restraint in front of his Captain, and did not want to give the Baron the satisfaction of knowing his theatrics were having the desired effect.

But he became ashamed of these thoughts with the next words the Baron spoke. "What you are about to hear, Calavera, has not even been shared with the King. You are only the third Esperanzan, including myself and the Captain, to learn what I am about to impart to you. In a very real sense, that makes you the most trusted of all the Lieutenants in the Emerald Guard."

Calavera felt his face flush, and hoped that in the light of the torch it was not apparent. He knew his own worthiness, and he was proud of his achievements, but despite this he never would have imagined receiving the honour he was being given.

"You were tested last night, Calavera; no doubt this does not come as a surprise to you. Then we left the ring in your possession, so you might have the opportunity of coming to terms with what you'd learned: that magic, of the sort described by hermetics and alchemists and folk legends, does in some form exist, as a matter of undeniable fact. I asked you for the ring in the flippant manner I did to gauge your state of mind after having spent the entire night under the potential threat of a supernatural object." He gave a short chuckle. "I leave it to you to determine for yourself what now qualifies as "natural," and what is better served by a different descriptor."

Indeed, upon de Tarso using the word "supernatural" Calavera had found himself pondering that very same question. He was rapidly concluding he would never again have a definitive answer.

The Baron clapped his hands together loudly. "Now - shall we descend?"

The Captain snorted; he was in on the joke. Calavera decided the best course of action was to play along: "Lead on, Your Lordship." Corzo smiled, broadly.

de Tarso ran his hand along the back right corner of the room, Corzo holding the torch above him. When the Baron came to the depiction of a fallen Centurion being carried from the battlefield upon his shield, he pressed his fingers into the shield, and it seemed to Calavera as though the stone yielded beneath de Tarso's touch. He would have believed this a trick of the torchlight were it not for the faintest clicking sound that accompanied the gesture.

Next the Baron crossed to the back left corner, where he grabbed tightly onto a wall sconce and pulled, causing a section of the wall to separate and move into the room. Calavera understood immediately: Pressing the shield had released the catch for a secret door set into the wall, for which the sconce was the handle. And behind the heavy marble was a staircase, running along the back of the mausoleum and leading underground.

When the door was fully open, the Baron said to Calavera, "While we are down here you needn't burden yourself with the obligation of referring to me by my honorific. The Captain and I need no such reminder of your allegiance, and I am fairly certain no one else shall be present to overhear you." As he said this, his eyes were wide, and the corners of his mouth upturned. There was no mistaking the expression: the Baron of Girona, feared throughout Esperanza and the rest of Europe for his cold and lethal inscrutability, was feeling mischievous!
Calavera could not help it; he turned to the Captain for confirmation.

"All men are born boys, and all boys dream of adventure. If a man should come to me seeking to be made an Emerald Guardsman, and that man were to deny being motivated in part by fantasies of riding a horse and swinging a sword, I should reject that man's candidacy on the grounds that he is either an ignoble liar or a man who does not know himself adequately."

Calavera smiled at his Captain, and he returned it, but then Corzo's face became grave, and he indicated the Baron had something further to say. Calavera shifted his attention back to the other man.

"Counting the floor we currently stand upon as Zero, and the first stair as One, make certain you step over the fourth, tenth, and eighteenth stairs; in other words do not put your weight on them. Do you have any questions?"

Calavera wanted to reply that in fact he had many questions, but the time for playfulness had passed. "I do not."

"Then Martial will lead, you will go second, and I will follow last."

Calavera took note: Although they were the dearest of friends, nobody the Lieutenant knew had ever heard the Baron refer to the Captain by his Christian name.

But he did not have time to think on this, for Corzo had started down the stairs and now it was Calavera's turn. He stepped down onto the first stair, counting "One" loudly in his mind, then "Two," and so forth. As he descended, focusing on his feet and where they trod, he noted that the stones of the fourth, tenth, and eighteenth steps were just the tiniest bit narrower than the others, and thus slightly further away from the walls on either side, a difference that was imperceptible if one didn't know to look for it. Calavera counted twenty-one steps in all, and when he reached the floor below he paused a moment to let the Baron pass, then returned to the staircase. The walls were made of gray stone, and although Calavera was certainly no mason it seemed to him that many of the gaps between these stones were larger than they ought to be. A theory immediately sprung to mind, and he wanted to test it.

Calavera turned around, and for the first time properly examined the underground tunnel to which the secret passage had brought them. It was a crypt, laid with brick of such impeccably smooth precision that he was now certain of his suspicions regarding the rough walls of the staircase. Flanking the crypt were two statues of soldiers from the Revolution, one made of marble and the other of bronze. Each figure held a wooden lance, but whereas the fingers of the bronze figure had been molded around his weapon, the sculptor of marble had left his lancer's hand slightly open. Calavera took the lance from this statue and asked the Baron, "May I?"

"I think you should. But stay well back."

Calavera needed no such warning! He approached the stairs slowly, holding the lance out in front of him, his grip as far back on the weapon as it could go while still allowing him full control. Then he placed the tip of the lance on the eighteenth step, paused for breath, and pushed downward.

The stair moved, whistling sounds filled the air, and the staircase was filled with dozens of tiny flying objects, emerging speedily from the walls and clattering loudly against the stones on the opposite sides. Some of these projectiles tumbled down the staircase, and one of them rolled all the way to the toe of Calavera's boot. He leaned the lance against the wall and picked the projectile up, taking great care to touch only the base and not the tip.
It was a dart. As Calavera had deduced, weight placed upon a forbidden stair would cause it to descend, triggering a mechanism which launched the darts from the cracks between the stones. And anyone unfortunate enough to be caught on the stairs when that happened would be punctured several times.

Approximately the length of Calavera's finger, the dart consisted of a wooden cylinder of narrow diameter into which had been set an even narrower rod of metal, sharpened to a point at the end and, judging by the discoloration at its extremity, tipped with some sort of liquid.

"It causes paralysis," said the Baron from behind him. "Should anyone but myself or the Captain come down here, I don't simply want that person stopped: I want to question the intruder, thoroughly."

For the last little while Calavera had forgotten what kind of man the Baron truly was. Although he'd learned today that the cold and calculating façade concealed a man with emotions like any other, that forbidding persona still had its basis in very grim reality. Now, despite himself, the Lieutenant imagined what it must be like to be trapped in an underground crypt, at the mercy of Vincente de Tarso, while that man demanded most forcefully and painfully information you were honour-bound not to divulge, and you were unable to move.

Firelight glinted off the dart's tip, but Calavera felt no warmth.
Deeper Into The Maze

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH Calavera discovers that logic can solve some puzzles, but not others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CALAVERA tossed the dart back onto the staircase, a coarse gesture that enabled him to break the projectile's chilling effect upon him. Then he retrieved the lance from the wall.

"The toxin comes from the Maya people, of New Spain," said the Baron as Calavera returned the weapon to the marble soldier's hand. "They tip their spears with it when they fish. The effects are not permanent: A smaller animal will die from the effects, of course, but a larger one will be able to move again, in time. The duration of that time can be shortened with the consumption of water in large quantities, provided of course the victim can be made to swallow it without choking."

Calavera would rather have been spared the morbid lecture, and he must have unwittingly let it show, for the Baron added, in a firmer tone, "I mention this because there is a reasonable chance you will encounter this poison again, sometime in the future."

The Lieutenant could sense that the effects of the night before, the poor sleep and the physical injury, were harming his outlook, making him feel that the Baron was toying with him the way a cat plays with a wounded bird. He struggled to remember this was merely the Baron's way of behaving with everyone, and that both de Tarso and the Captain had promised to reveal everything to him this morning. Calavera caught the Baron's eye and nodded his thanks for the information.

Then, to his surprise, both de Tarso and Corzo stepped aside to let him lead the way down the tunnel. Seeing that he had very little choice, he walked past them, deeper into the crypt.

While the corridor contained the expected recesses in the walls, set at waist height and large enough to hold a wooden casket, these recesses were not arranged according to any pattern Calavera could discern. He would have expected to find the same number of coffins on either side, and for them to be spaced equal distances from one another along the walls, but he passed three coffins on the left before the first one on the right, and whereas there were several yards separating the first and second recesses, only one yard separated the second from the third. The overall unpredictability was discomfiting.

Which, Calavera realised, the designer had undoubtedly intended.

They arrived at the opening to a chamber, much wider than the corridor, and square, with a sarcophagus in the middle and two rows of deceased set into the walls. Calavera was just about to step inside when something made him stop.

Holding his foot where he'd halted it, two inches above the floor of the chamber, Calavera examined the room to determine what unconsciously-perceived warning sign had made him
hesitate. It did not take long.

The floor was tiled with clay squares measuring three inches on either side. Most of these tiles were polished, but a small number of them were rough. As with the recesses in the tunnel walls, these squares were not laid out in any obvious pattern. Calavera stepped back out of the chamber, crouched, and looked more closely.

There was a pattern. Counting from the right, and moving left along the row closest to his position, the fourth, tenth, and eighteenth tiles were rough. Restarting the count with "one" at the twenty-second tile, Calavera discovered the numbers repeated, and that when one reached the final tile in a row one continued the count with the tile directly above it, moving in the opposite direction from the row before. Since it was the same pattern as the staircase, all one had to do was avoid the rough tiles.

And no doubt one would step directly into the Baron's trap. It was impossible that the riddle of this floor was the same as that of the stairs; Calavera understood de Tarso well enough to know the Baron would consider that an amateurish redundancy. So... was one expected to walk only on the rough tiles? No, that would be the same puzzle in reverse, a mere variant.

Calavera whirled around. "The floor is a distraction!"

From their stances he realised that the Baron and the Captain had been standing patiently behind him, waiting to see if he would solve this latest mystery. Further, he understood that they'd let him lead because this had been their intent all along.

Something within Calavera changed at that moment. Whereas previously he would have become impatient or angry at the prospect of having to pass yet another test without learning the reason behind it, his mind was now starting to pull all of the Baron's hints and insinuations together, adding to them the tests he had been given, and coming up not with an answer, but an impression: Whatever was being presented to him, it was enormous in scope - and correspondingly dangerous. No, Calavera was no longer hot-tempered; now his blood ran cold.

"Excellent," said the Baron, in response to Calavera's conclusion about the tiled floor. "You are halfway to the solution." And then he and the Captain waited for the second half.

There was nothing for it; Calavera turned back to the chamber. If the floor was a distraction, then the trap lay elsewhere. So he must search for the trap - but the trap would be hidden, by an expert in deceit. No, Calavera corrected himself, every trap consisted of two parts, and while the trigger would be hidden, the resulting peril would be more difficult to disguise, as Calavera had learned upon discovering the dart holes in the staircase walls.

Since he'd already examined the floor thoroughly, and concealing the peril in the walls had been done, Calavera turned his scrutiny upward. Despite the thick cobwebs, it did not take him long to see the lines in the ceiling. Above either entrance to the chamber was a rectangle slightly longer than the opening beneath it.

As this was a test, and his evaluators were present, Calavera voiced his thoughts aloud, as much for their benefit as to focus his thinking. "When the trap is sprung, a rectangular block of stone will fall in front of each opening, caging the intruder within the chamber. But in order for this to succeed, the trigger must be close to the centre of the room, far from the exits. Another reason to place the trigger in the middle is to prevent it being triggered prior to entering. If this were to happen, the intruder would be unable to proceed, but he would still be able to leave the way he came, which you would not find satisfactory."
Behind him Corzo cleared his throat. Calavera could imagine the look he was giving the Baron, but he didn't allow it to distract him.

"Having tested the tiles before stepping inside, and finding them innocuous, the victim will then enter the room, and will look elsewhere for the solution. The centrepiece is too obvious, unless... "

He turned back to his examiners. "The sarcophagus is the solution. All of the tiles in the centre of the room will trigger the blocks. In order to avoid stepping on them one has to crawl on top of the case, to the other side. Only one man in twenty-five will think of this, because it is undignified. Further, the solution is impossible to test without committing to a course of action. That is precisely the sort of devious... " and Calavera was suddenly concerned he might have overstepped himself.

But Corzo laughed, his booming tone reverberating off the stone walls. "It seems our Lieutenant is beginning to enjoy himself."

The Baron smiled at Calavera, trying to project warmth with a face unaccustomed to displaying it. "I am pleased. I had hoped you would enjoy yourself, eventually, since the desire to learn is conducive to success. Your interest and skill in solving these puzzles is most reassuring."

"For his part," said the Captain, "Calavera does not appear reassured."

"Nor would either of us, in his position. The best we can do for him is to arrive at our destination as quickly as possible, and give him the explanation he is eagerly awaiting, at which point he will still not be entirely reassured, but he shall at the very least understand what specifically he has to be disconcerted about."

"Right then, let us clamber over this corpse and proceed to the details!" With this, Corzo stepped boldly past Calavera and into the room. He walked directly up to the sarcophagus, climbed on top of it, stood fully upright, strode to the other side, and hopped back down to the floor. He turned around. "I have practiced, of course, so if you wish to crawl over the case rather than walk, you needn't worry that anyone will find you humorous."

Calavera was not concerned. He preferred to sacrifice a tiny bit of dignity in order to achieve success. In his viewpoint the rewards of victory returned the small portion of lost pride several times over. He traversed the sarcophagus on hands and knees. To his surprise, so did the Baron.

Once the three men found themselves standing in the tunnel on the other side of the chamber, the Baron approached the nearest recess and, using his back to block Calavera's view of his hands, manipulated something within. Calavera's ears, alert for the tiniest sound, heard the click of a catch being released, but he did not see anything in the tunnel move. The Baron turned around, wiping his hands together. "I think it will be faster if I lead from here on." And he started down the tunnel.

They walked quickly, and on two occasions the Baron held up his hand for them to stop, then again manipulated something within a recess before they continued. The second time, Calavera peered carefully into the shadows and noted the point of a spear sticking out of the wall above the casket.

In addition to the physical dangers, the crypt had a second means of thwarting unwelcome visitors: It was laid out like a maze, containing many forks, side-tunnels, and, Calavera was certain, dead ends. He no longer had any idea in which direction they were walking relative to
where they had begun, as was no doubt the desired effect. But soon enough they arrived at their destination, a blank wall which the Baron approached without slowing his pace, and simply pushed out of the way.

Loudly enough so only Calavera could hear, the Captain said, "He unlocked that door when we exited the first chamber; the catch is behind the coffin." Then the two men followed de Tarso inside.

Beyond the hidden door was another room, done up in a style different from the rest of the crypt. This was a full office, with a desk along one wall, bookshelves lining another, and a map of the known world hung on a third, beside a diagram which Calavera felt he should recognise but did not. The Captain placed his torch in a sconce, then used a short twig to ignite the numerous oil lamps. Soon the room was bright enough that one would be able to read even in the darkest corner. The Baron closed the door and turned to Calavera, holding up his finger.

"Do you feel the breeze? This room is ventilated from several openings; it needs to be well-lit, and it wouldn't do to have the occupants become lightheaded from excessive smoke."

He was bragging of his design, and with good reason. Calavera presumed he had not had many opportunities to show it off. In fact, assuming the King knew of this place, the Lieutenant might be only the third person to whom the Baron had ever presented his achievement. While Calavera was mildly amused at de Tarso's behaviour, he was primarily deeply flattered, once more, by the honour he was being given.

The Baron kneeled down in a corner and pried up a flat stone which even in this light and with Calavera scrutinising everything carefully had appeared to him neither loose nor distinct. Beneath the stone was an opening about the size of a fist. Calavera could not see how far the hole extended, but from somewhere within its depths he heard creatures chittering and hissing, sounds so unsettling to the human instinct that even the Baron grimaced as he quickly pried the snake ring off his finger and dropped it into the narrow pit. Then he replaced the cover and made sure it was fitted properly.

Presumably this was where the ring was normally kept. Calavera was tempted to ask the Baron how he would retrieve it again, but he did not expect de Tarso to satisfy his curiosity. Besides, the Lieutenant could think of two possible ways to do it, both of them potentially lethal if unsuccessful. He expected the more hazardous of the two was the correct method.

The Baron stood up and brushed the dust from his legs. "Well, Calavera, at long last, here we are: the answers you have, with admirable patience, been expecting." He took a deep breath, not, Calavera perceived, out of his usual sense of the dramatic, but because of the gravity of what he was about to present.

"Do you know what our young country lacks, Calavera? The single most important thing an emergent nation requires before it will be accepted by those who recall a time prior to its existence? Legitimacy.

"I know what you're thinking. The Revolution began in 1617, and lasted four years. Surely the length of that conflict, and the fact we were victorious, accords us some credit. And if not, what of the accomplishments of Esperanza in the seven years we have existed as an independent Kingdom? The military alliances, the trade agreements, and I daresay the establishment of the most well-known and respected national guard in all of Europe, they must grant us some measure of legitimacy, must they not? And yet...

"Legitimacy is a matter of belief. If people believe we are a legitimate nation, then they..."
will treat us as such. If they do not, if they expect that before long our lands and people will be re-absorbed back into Spain and France, then to them we are merely a temporary aberration. When we declared ourselves a free Kingdom, we sued to all the nations of Europe to recognise Esperanza as an independent state. The English and the Dutch agreed, of course, because they were our allies during the Revolution, and they've always been the historic enemies of Spain and France. Russia recognises us because they're desperate for access to Mediterranean trade. But not a single Catholic nation recognises us, even though we exchange goods, and have excellent relations, with all but a handful of them. Naturally, we've applied pressure to these allies-in-all-but-name, but they are afraid, and with good reason. The first Catholic state to give recognition to Esperanza will incur the combined wrath of Spain, France, and the Holy Roman Empire."

"But that makes no sense! We are a Catholic nation!"

"This is not a matter of logic, Calavera: It is a struggle for power. The Pope has threatened our King with excommunication several times, but has yet to make those threats manifest. Is His Holiness motivated by a firm spiritual conviction, or does he hesitate because some day he may require this country's assistance?"

Calavera had no answer for that.

The Baron shrugged in sympathy. "You cannot be expected to understand every nuance of European politics in the last eleven years. It suffices today only that you accept the following: Esperanza was able to gain her independence because the most powerful nations in Europe are at war with one another, and thus Spain and France could not afford to divert their considerable resources into preventing our departure."

It had not seemed to Calavera at the time, when his friends and comrades were dying all around him on the battlefield, that Spain and France were expending no effort at all in defeating the Revolutionary army, but this was not the time to say so.

The Baron continued. "The present fighting will not last forever, and once it ends, whatever the outcome, Spain and France will be free to turn their full attention to Esperanza. Attacking us from both sides, they will tear us to shreds for our transgressions, unless we have legitimacy, in which case they will be forced to accept us. For this reason, we must be recognised, by several Catholic nations, before the current conflicts come to an end. And since we do not know when that will be, we have no time to lose. Can you accept this premise?"

"I accept it," Calavera said. "Furthermore, I suspect I'm even beginning to understand it."

"That's excellent," said the Baron, "because both the Captain and myself consider it essential that you comprehend the full import of the duty you are about to be assigned. We are entrusting you with nothing less than the future of our entire country."

Chapter End Notes

I was tempted to title this Chapter Crypt Analysis, but only for a brief moment. - t!
Chapter Summary

IN WHICH Calavera learns of Jewish mysticism, ancient gods, a deceased scholar, and the circuitous route to legitimacy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

INTO the silence that followed, Corzo, highly amused with himself, asked, "Do you have any questions thus far?"

Calavera judiciously chose not to give his Captain the answer he felt the man deserved. Having rejected that option, he evaluated several others, foremost among them asking how the future of Esperanza might rely upon a Lieutenant learning that magic existed, or upon that same Lieutenant's ability to avoid traps while navigating a crypt. But as he attempted to untangle the chaos of threads in his mind, every thread led to the same conclusion, which was what he chose to express. "At the moment, I take it for granted that any and all questions I have will be answered in their proper time, and by the end of this discussion."

The imperative this placed upon Calavera's superiors was undeniable, and the Baron laughed at the audacity of it. "We will do our best to ensure your faith in us is not misplaced."

In spite of himself, Calavera found he was beginning to enjoy their little game. God help him.

Or perhaps the very aspects of his personality which had led them to select the Lieutenant for this momentous task, whatever it might be, were the same factors which accounted for his present excitement.

Calavera dragged his thoughts forcibly away from that spiral. A fellow Lieutenant had once advised him that he had a tendency to, as the other Guardsman had put it, "over-think" a problem. He'd never fully understood what that verb was intended to express, but he suspected he was currently guilty of it. He resolved to enjoy what there was to enjoy, while letting none of the gravity escape him.

The Baron continued. "Do you know what Kabbalah is, Calavera?"

"I believe so. Is it not the Jewish form of alchemy?"

de Tarso grunted. "It is, after a fashion. There are many theories about how the two disciplines overlap. To my mind the most credible is that alchemy is simply Kabbalah couched in metaphor, to conceal its origins and intent. After all, in our current climate mere avarice is more acceptable to society than both sorcery and Judaism, and less likely to have one burned at the stake."

Calavera chose to respond by clearing his throat. His uncompromising views on the Inquisition were well enough known that he trusted the Baron and the Captain to be aware of them,
The Baron pointed at the diagram on the wall, the one Calavera had found familiar but could not identify. "This is what the Kabbalists call the Tree of Life. It is a form of universal map in which one can position the totality of existence: physical, emotional, and spiritual. It makes no argument for the legitimacy of any religion, and it does not in any way contradict the findings of science, but in spite of this the Church has declared it heretical and modernity considers it dismissible superstition. For my part, I find their willful ignorance contemptible - and unimaginative. You are an avid theatre-goer, are you not? 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy... '"

"Hamlet," said Calavera, who'd seen the play three times, one of those courtesy of an English troupe the Baron himself had brought to Esperanza for a performance. "And if I am not mistaken, the titular Prince addresses his friend Horatio by name somewhere within that passage."

de Tarso nodded. 'I expect you would know better than I would. No matter; the point is that we cannot know everything - as you discovered last night - but the Kabbalah gives us a means to understand the unexplainable.

"The foremost gentile Kabbalist in Europe is Jacques Gaffarel. As you would expect, for most of his life he was alternately dismissed and despised, until he found himself a wealthy and powerful patron: Cardinal Richelieu of France. Under the Cardinal's sponsorship, Gaffarel has amassed the greatest library of Kabbalistic writings in Europe. As an advantageous consequence, given that Kabbalah is by nature an all-inclusive system, the Richelieu-Gaffarel collection can also be considered one of the finest collections of esoteric writing in the entire world."

"Next to the Baron's own, of course," said Corzo, softly enough so as not to interrupt de Tarso's flow.

"While amassing this library the Cardinal came to the inevitable conclusion that what we call 'magic' exists. This led him, again as it must, to another realization: that the God of the Holy Scriptures is not the only one of his kind."

Calavera was about to protest, but de Tarso held up his hand for patience. "The Commandments handed down to Moses specify that the Israelites shall have no other god before the one who delivered them from slavery. Surely it follows that there must be others of His ilk, if God would make a point of asserting His supremacy over them." Now he paused for Calavera's response.

"I am not convinced," said Calavera carefully, "that this viewpoint does not derive from the imprecisions of translation, as well as the academic predilection for reading into a text more than the words intend. Nevertheless, for the time being I am content to follow this line of reasoning along with you, to see where it leads."

The Baron thanked Calavera with dip of his head before continuing. "The Maya people of New Spain, whom I have already mentioned, believe in a pantheon of gods, much like the ancient Greeks and Romans did. Among their gods, the most prominent is Chaac, the god of thunder and rain. In their mythology, Chaac is a benevolent god, the protector of Humankind, often called upon to defend mortals from forces that would otherwise destroy them. One such malignant god is Yaxax'tun.

"Yaxax'tun was a serpent god whose body was made of green stone, and in fact his name is derived from a combination of the words for 'green' and 'stone' in the Mayan language. The legend has it that Yaxax'tun demanded unquestioning loyalty and obedience from the ancient Maya, but as
they already had the protection of Chaac, they refused, and so Yaxax'tun sought to destroy them. But Chaac intervened, and the two gods fought a great and terrible battle in the skies, creating thunder and lightning the likes of which have never been seen before or since. Giant pellets of ice rained down from the heavens. This battle lasted for what the Mayan writings describe as 'forty voyages of the sun across the sky.'

"Don't look so scandalised, Calavera; sufficient cultures have recorded a great storm lasting forty days that I now consider it noteworthy when a civilization's history does not include such a story. The more one learns about the myths of all Human peoples the clearer it becomes that any religion is merely a regional and cultural expression of basic, consistent, and ineffable concepts, rooted in one universal truth. But I see you would prefer for me to continue without further digression.

"On the fortieth day, both Chaac and Yaxax'tun were near exhaustion, and the serpent god made his last and greatest attempt at victory: He wrapped himself around Chaac and began to squeeze the life out of him. The writings on this moment are quite beautiful, in my opinion. Suffice it to say that Chaac very nearly gave in, but just when it looked as though all was lost he gave one final, mighty thrust of his arms outward, and the body of Yaxax'tun, already weakened from many cuts, was ripped apart: Chaac was victorious. The blood of the serpent god fell to Earth as gold, and the flesh as green stones - or, as we call them, emeralds.

"What would be most interesting about this story to the Conquistadors, if they were the sort to prefer learning about a culture rather than slaughtering it and stealing its riches, is that the Maya people occupy a part of New Spain that colonists have largely ignored, because it contains no gold and no precious stones - an assessment in direct opposition to this legend. Given that all such stories have their basis in some form of fact, it must follow that if a native people is aware of both emeralds and gold, they know of a land somewhere within their territory in which such precious materials can be found in abundance."

"The ring," said Calavera, so immersed in the tale he was barely aware he was speaking. "It's a representation of Yaxax'tun, created by people who occupy an area where gold and emeralds are believed not to exist... but they must."

"Precisely. This brings us to a French hermetic - neither an alchemist nor a Kabbalist, interestingly - named Guillaume Henri. He led an expedition to New Spain, specifically to the Maya settlement they call Tipu, to discover whether there was any truth to the legends. He took twenty men with him, five of them scholars and the rest former soldiers, mercenaries hired for protection. Of the twenty-one men who traveled into the dense jungles beyond Tipu, he was the only one to return, barely alive, with nothing to show for his trouble but the tattered clothes on his back, his journal, and a most peculiar affliction: Once a well-respected writer and orator, for the rest of his life Guillaume Henri would never again be able to write or speak.

"Upon his return to France the Cardinal took an interest in him, and he received the finest treatment Richelieu's considerable resources could provide, but the doctors were at a loss to explain Henri's condition. He appeared to be in full possession of his sanity, he was still able to comprehend both the spoken and the written word, and further he could communicate through hand gestures and the drawing of pictographs, but he was utterly incapable of communicating through speech or in writing."

The Baron paused for a moment, to give Calavera the opportunity to offer a hypothesis, but when it was clear Calavera intended only to listen for the moment, de Tarso said, "I believe, of course, that Henri was the victim of a curse."
Calavera nodded. Less than a day ago he would have rejected that opinion, but now to him that theory made perfect sense.

"The last entry in Henri's journal was dated two days after his expedition departed Tipu. They'd heard of a temple the ancient Maya had constructed in honour of Yaxax'tun, and Henri believed they would come upon it the following day. Whatever did happen that day, he never wrote it down, for by then he had become unable.

"That ill-fated journey began in the Autumn of 1625, and Henri returned to France in the Summer of 1626. The following year, Cardinal Richelieu financed his own expedition to locate Yaxax'tun's temple. He sent thirty of his Gendarmes into the jungle beyond Tipu; they were never seen again.

"Because the Cardinal was intruding upon Spanish territory, and more importantly seeking treasures both financial and magical, he kept the voyage a secret, not even informing the King at first. When Henri found out, he was both enraged and terrified, believing not only that Richelieu had manipulated and betrayed him, but also that the temple of Yaxax'tun, which he'd never seen but fervently believed existed, was sacred and should not be disturbed by any man. And so he removed his journal from the Cardinal's library and fled to Spain. Richelieu had him pursued, but this attracted the attention of the Inquisition, which managed to find Henri before the Gendarmes. The unfortunate scholar was killed, and in the confusion his journal was lost."

"I have a question," said Calavera, prompting a bark of laughter from Corzo.

The Baron smirked at the Lieutenant, looking like the cat who'd not only swallowed the canary but was now on a high perch, beyond the reach of any reprisal. He could answer Calavera's question without even having to hear what it was.

"My agent is called Santiago, and his service was exemplary. He smuggled Henri out of France by ship, because they were certain to be caught if they'd tried to reach Esperanza over land. Richelieu himself never would have advised the Inquisition of a hermetic's arrival in Valencia, but an over-eager man of his did precisely that, presumably to flush Henri out into the open. It worked, and while he was being taken into custody the Gendarmes arrived, incognito, to steal him back for France."

Calavera had heard of this incident, as had most Europeans. "The Twelfth of Valencia?" The legendary conflict had not taken place on the twelfth of its month, but rather was so named because of the number of lives it had claimed. What the Lieutenant and everyone else had been told was that a group of uncommonly skilled brigands had attacked Spanish soldiers while they were trying to arrest a suspected heretic. After a long and vicious fight, all eight of the brigands had been slain, along with three Spanish and the heretic himself. The reason for the attack had never been discovered - or so the story went.

The Baron nodded his confirmation of Calavera's guess. "So you see, Santiago was up against overwhelming odds. Once it became clear to him that the Spanish were going to be victorious, and further that he could not extract his charge safely from the chaos, he killed Henri himself, saving him from the Inquisition's brutality. Then he escaped with Henri's journal - and the gold ring the hermetic always wore around his neck. A ring which is not mentioned in Henri's journal, but is described in two books on that shelf," and here he pointed to the leather volumes that covered most of a wall, "one of which includes an incantation in the Mayan tongue to give that ring life, as well as instructions to render it an inert object once more, should anyone be foolish enough to try the incantation."

And now, at last, Calavera had enough pieces of the puzzle to fit them together. He knew
the staggering task he was going to be asked to accomplish.

"May I please sit down?"

There were only two chairs in the room, one behind the desk and the other facing it. Corzo grabbed the latter, which presumably tradition dictated was his, and slid it over to Calavera without so much as a change in expression. The Lieutenant sat; the Captain and the Baron waited until he was ready to speak.

It took a few moments, as Calavera thought of and rejected several ways to begin. Ultimately he decided to speak bluntly. "You want me to find the Temple of the Emerald God."

de Tarso and Corzo nodded, once each, slowly.

Calavera had been about to ask the reason, but another realization crashed upon him and he voiced it straight away. "The other Guardsmen - the elites arriving from everywhere in the country - they've been summoned to form my expedition party!"

"Time is precious," said Corzo, "as you'll soon learn. You'll be selecting men to accompany you, and we want those men to be nearby, ready for immediate departure."

The upheaval this was causing within the rest of the Order, a disturbance neither the Baron nor the Captain would have created lightly, led straight into the question of motive Calavera had been about to raise. "You mentioned legitimacy, and the future of this country. I do not yet see how locating a temple sacred to a people most of Europe knows nothing about will afford us that legitimacy."

Since politics was more the Baron's area of expertise, Corzo let de Tarso answer. "As you will recall, no Catholic nation will be the first to recognise us. But the leaders of two such countries have given me their word that they are willing to recognise us if another Catholic nation does so at the same time. Those two nations are the Republic of Genoa and the Electorate of Bavaria.

"Genoa is known for being an exceptionally wealthy state, but its ruling families find this reputation insufficient. They also want to be world leaders in culture and learning, a goal which will benefit all of Europe while not incidentally increasing their own status. To this end, they are building a museum in their capital to rival any in Europe. The Doge of Bavaria has promised me, if I can provide their new museum with artifacts from a civilization in the New World, items possessed by no other country, that not only will this be sufficient to demonstrate Esperanza's right to take its place among the nations of Europe, but further our generosity will be rewarded with an official declaration of recognition.

"As for Bavaria, no doubt you are aware that the Elector Maximillan I and his wife Elisabeth have been unable to produce any children. Their marriage is, from all accounts, an enviably happy one, and so there is no question of Elisabeth being replaced. With no direct inheritor, the popular choice to succeed Maximillian, among both the nobility and the people, is the Elector's nephew Charles, named for Elisabeth's father."

"I met Charles," said Calavera, "when he came for the Coronation. He's an extraordinary young man; I daresay he made a most favourable impression upon every Guardsman assigned to his protection. Bavaria will be fortunate to have him."

de Tarso inhaled through his nose and his face fell. "Charles contracted an illness two months ago. He was not expected to survive, but his doctors performed a miracle. Regrettably, however, he did not make a full recovery. Charles will never walk again."
This was devastating news to Calavera. Charles had been one of the most athletic and robust men he'd ever met, like a hero out of Greek myth. The idea that he could be crippled was unthinkable. But worse... "If he cannot walk, will the people accept him as their Elector?"

"There is one chance," said the Baron. "Charles is being kept in hiding while he recovers, and the people of Bavaria are being told that he is on a voyage of exploration, from which he may not return for over a year."

Calavera nodded; this story was well in keeping with Charles' adventurous reputation.

"I have been in correspondence with Maximillian, and we have come to an agreement. I will send an expedition to New Spain, and upon its successful return our two countries will announce that Charles was a part of that expedition. He will be able to confirm this by having in his possession exotic samples of native craftsmanship. But there will be a tragic consequence to Charles' exploits: He will have sacrificed himself in order to save the lives of his companions, receiving a poisoned dart in the back that has left him paralysed for life. Maximillian and Charles will relate these events to the people of Bavaria, our accounts here in Esperanza will confirm his heroism, and rather than reject Charles for being a cripple, all of Bavaria will hail him as an exemplar of honour and bravery. Anyone who accounts him less than a man for his infirmity will find himself reviled throughout the entire country."

"That's diabolical!" Calavera said, remembering only in the next moment that he was addressing a superior.

Before he could apologise, Corzo's heavy hand fell upon his shoulder, reassuring him. de Tarso did likewise with an elaborate shrug. "I have been called worse, for less reason.

"The essential point is, Calavera, that these machinations will succeed. When we do Bavaria this favour, when we assure the lifelong reputation of Maximillian's intended successor, Bavaria will recognise us as a legitimate nation, in concert with Genoa. Two Catholic nations will have endorsed us, making our claims to independence indisputable.

"At the same time, we will have scored a victory over Cardinal Richelieu, the most powerful man in Europe. In certain less-public circles, this will make our country greatly admired."

"And speaking from a more practical perspective," the Captain said, "the Cardinal will assume we have taken possession of any number of items infused with the power of an ancient god. He will not know what those weapons may be, but his knowledge that we have them will argue strongly in favour of treading lightly with us."

"He knows what the serpent ring can do?" said Calavera.

"He does," the Baron said. "And no doubt upon your successful return his fertile imagination will cause him to believe we possess defences even more elaborate. For example, are you familiar with the Cauldron of Rebirth?"

"I am not."

"It is a Welsh tale that also found its way into Arthurian legend. Any fallen warrior placed into the Cauldron would rise again, an animated corpse, virtually impossible to defeat by virtue of being already dead."

Calavera crossed himself. "With respect, gentlemen, I hope that any bounty you wish for me to recover from New Spain will not represent such a flagrant and sickening violation of the
"laws of God."

"Nothing of the sort," said Corzo, "you have our word. It was merely an example." And he looked to the Baron for confirmation.

"I want nothing to do with that sort of power," de Tarso said, "whatever my reputation for... diabolism. Some power," and he fixed Calavera with his eyes so the Guardsman would know he was speaking an incontrovertible truth, "comes at too high a price."

"Thank you both," said Calavera. "I am satisfied."

"Furthermore," the Baron said, "lest you have any lingering concerns, my extensive research indicates the Cauldron, which did in fact exist, was destroyed several centuries ago, when a living man sacrificed himself by entering it, just as the legends describe."

"Calavera," said Corzo, cautiously, "earlier there was some disagreement as to the possible existence of more than one god..."

"I have been considering that question in the background during the length of our discussion," Calavera said, "and I have concluded that it is irrelevant. Whether magic derives from God, nature, or some other source, I have witnessed it firsthand. To succeed in my assignment, I need only to be aware that it exists, and to be willing to confront it when necessary, and harness it where feasible."

"Well put," said the Baron. "It is best to approach these powers on a case-by-case basis, for..."

But suddenly Corzo threw up his hand for silence. "Listen! Did you hear that?"

All three men remained perfectly still, their ears straining for any kind of noise.

Their attention was rewarded a moment later, when they heard the faint sound of screaming.

The Baron turned to Calavera. "A secondary advantage of this room's ventilation system is that we can hear, albeit faintly, everything that goes on in the catacombs."

"It sounds like the crypt is being breached," said the Captain.

"Without question, it is."

"How is that possible?"

The Baron snorted. "I cannot be expected to know everything."

The Captain shared a look with his Lieutenant which suggested the Baron certainly was content to let everyone think he knew everything, when it suited his purposes. Then his expression changed.

"Calavera, do you by chance have any pent-up tension you would like to release?"

The Lieutenant rose from his chair. "Captain, I have never followed you more eagerly than I do at this moment."

Then, as one, the two Guardsmen drew their swords.
HISTORICAL NOTE:
In 1628, when this story takes place, Cardinal Richelieu's personal soldiers were exclusively Horse Guard; he would not have "gens d'armes" until 1631. However, as a lifelong Canadian I cannot bring myself to portray troops clad in red, calling themselves Horsemen, as the villains. Therefore, for the purposes of this story, "Gendarmes" it must be.
- t!
**Chapter Summary**

*Being, in part, a demonstration of various examples of lethal cleverness.*

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**THE** Baron held up his hand for silence, and pressed his ear to the wall.

There was a long pause, during which Calavera kept the rest of his body motionless by tensing and loosing the grip on his sword. Finally the Baron said, "The intruders are coming from the Palace entrance."

Calavera looked to his Captain for explanation.

"No two traps are the same," Corzo said. "Therefore each one creates a unique sound when it's sprung."

"And," said the Baron, "I have just heard the unmistakable sound of Frenchmen opening the scorpion ceiling."

He moved away from the wall, and now Calavera could hear, too clearly, the sound of men shrieking in pain and terror.

The Captain shuddered. "There are moments, Calavera, when I am humbly relieved it is you, and not I, who will be seeking Yaxax'tun's temple."

The Baron sighed melodramatically. "It's going to take me a month to re-set all of those deterrents."

"And while you're doing that," said Corzo, "I will be clearing out the corpses - unless, of course, you would like to trade duties."

"*Gentlemen,* if you please..."

Corzo smirked at de Tarso. "Calavera is eager to discharge his own duties."

Instead of returning the expression as Calavera had been expecting, the Baron frowned and waved his hand dismissively. "Then by all means, go."

The Captain turned to his Lieutenant. "I trust I need not caution you to remain behind me."

"In this singular situation, Sir, I am content to allow you to precede me into danger."

Corzo gave him a curt nod and pulled the door open. Then he started down the corridor, at a swift but soundless pace, Calavera following. Neither man carried a torch, so when the Baron closed the door behind them they were in perfect darkness. Calavera heard the Captain slow his pace to a walk. "Stay close to me," he whispered, and Calavera understood this to mean he had the
Captain's permission to reach out and touch him to keep from separating.

Still whispering, the Captain said, "My apologies for the discourse between myself and de Tarso which delayed our departure. Beneath the words we were speaking, the Baron and I were disagreeing about whether or not he should assist us against the intruders. He was not content to stay behind, but ultimately he acknowledged the correctness of it."

"Thank you for explaining," Calavera whispered back. He'd suspected while it was happening that there had been something he wasn't perceiving, something functioning on a level understood by only the closest of friends. He found the answer fascinating, and was touched that the Captain was sharing it with him.

Emboldened, he assayed a further test of how far his superiors' new trust in him extended. "In addition to those in the Palace and the Cemetery, how many other entrances are there to these tunnels?"

"That is the Baron's secret, and therefore not mine to tell."

It was not said in a tone of reprimand, but Calavera understood he should not ask any more questions of that nature. He and Corzo were not friends, but they also had a relationship which transcended words.

Suddenly in the darkness Calavera felt the Captain's hand on his chest, and he froze, listening.

There were voices up ahead, speaking at normal volume. Clearly these people were not expecting anyone else to be present in the crypt. Calavera could make out that they were speaking French, a language he understood, but they were still too far away for him to identify more than an occasional word.

Corzo leaned in toward him and said, into his ear, as softly as he could, "If we hurry, we can reach them before they arrive at the Vulcan room. Hold on to my Tunic."

Calavera did as instructed, taking a very firm grip with his left hand, so the cloth would not pull out of his grasp when Corzo started moving. Then he gave the garment a quick jerk to inform the Captain he was ready.

Corzo began walking, briskly and silently, while Calavera held on and kept pace. As they proceeded through the blackness, the voices grew louder. After a number of turns, Calavera thought he saw a flicker of light, and Corzo abruptly stopped.

"They are around the corner, at the entrance to the Vulcan room. Wait here."

Calavera let go, and felt the breeze as the Captain walked away.

He strained to listen to the intruders, and was now able to hear complete sentences. They were indeed at the entrance to a room, and discussing how to avoid whatever potential threats it might conceal. Their torchlight was brighter now, creating a glow where the tunnel curved, bright enough so that Calavera could see the outline of the Captain clearly. Corzo changed his sword hand, drew his pistol, and stepped into the light.

With that, the narrow stone corridors were filled with the deep, booming voice of Emerald Guard Captain Martial Corzo, ordering the invaders, in his most forceful tone:

"Halt! In the name of the King!"
When his command was met with angered shouts and French cursing, Corzo ducked back around the corner. A pistol fired, and a ball smacked into the wall behind where he'd been standing.

The Captain briskly returned to Calavera, while behind him chaos reigned. There were insults, threats, commands for Corzo to surrender himself, and bellows that these tunnels were supposed to be unoccupied. Added to this were rushing footsteps, swords being drawn, and even, to Calavera's disgust, another pistol shot, utterly wasted.

Piercing through all that noise was one distinct voice, shouting urgently for his companions to wait, but the warning was too late, for a moment later Calavera heard even more shouting, and what must have been the sound of several hundred gallons of liquid splashing loudly onto a stone floor from a considerable height.

Then the tunnel around the corner erupted. Calavera heard a loud rush of air, and suddenly the light reflecting off the walls became much, much brighter. The shouting of imprecations was replaced by unintelligible shrieking and yelling. Gunpowder exploded, in pistols as well as in horns. Then the smell of burning flesh reached his nostrils.

Once again Calavera heard the distinct voice of the man who had tried in vain to avert the slaughter, presumably the invaders' leader. "We must leave, now!" he said, again in French. "He knows the dangers of this place better than we do: Even if he is just one man, he has us at a disadvantage!"

Calavera heard no voices raised in dissent. It may have been that the sound of thick flames and dying men drowned them out, but the Lieutenant thought it more likely that the others were accepting the wisdom of their leader's decision.

"They're leaving," said Corzo, his knowledge of the language surprising Calavera. Then he started forward, but Calavera stopped him with a gentle hand on the shoulder.

"If you please, Sir, I want to ensure the tunnel is empty before we round the corner."

The Captain muttered something ungentlemanly. "Of course. It wouldn't do to charge ahead and commit the same blunder as our enemies."

Calavera sheathed his sword, and removed his Tunic. To ease his Captain's self-recrimination he said quietly, "The order to withdraw was issued in French. If it is a ruse, it's a sophisticated one, for it means our enemy is assuming we know his language."

"I thank you for your intent, Calavera, but I am guilty of underestimating our opponent." Although the Captain was still displeased with himself, Calavera noted that his voice was less acidic. "Whoever he is, he's crafty enough to have come this far."

By this time Calavera had drawn his sword again, and draped the Tunic over it. Taking his pistol in his right hand, he held the sword in his left, away from his body and parallel to the ground. Then he started moving sideways, toward the corner of the tunnel.

As soon as the Tunic was exposed, a pistol fired, putting a hole through both sides of it. Had Calavera been wearing the Tunic instead of using it as a decoy, the shot would have pierced him in the chest.

But Calavera had been ready for this, and before the sound finished echoing through the corridors he stepped into the open, pointing his own pistol in the direction from which the shot had
The first thing he noticed was a man, standing alone. The tunnel was filled with thick smoke and bright flickering flame, and at least half a dozen blackened corpses lay on the ground still burning, but in spite of these distractions, Calavera's attention had immediately been drawn to the man with the pistol, even though most of his body was hidden behind the fire. What had caught the Guardsman's eye was the intensity of the other man's gaze.

His was an arrogant face; everything in its construction spoke of a man convinced of his own superiority. His hair, so blond it was almost white, was cut short and parted to the left. He wore a trim moustache, light brown in colour, and from the bottom of his lip to the bump of his chin grew a tiny triangle of the same colour. The piercing quality of his brown eyes was made more pronounced by their tiny size. The firelight danced on their dark surface. They were the eyes of a man who had fought his way through life's every obstacle, and his expression indicated he wanted to see Calavera dead.

His right hand still held his empty pistol in the firing position, directed at Calavera. He lowered it as he said, in the voice the Lieutenant had been expecting, "Well played. I could not, of course, have afforded to hesitate, in the event you came around the corner with your finger already tightening on the trigger."

The words were in French, but Calavera replied in Spanish, testing his foe's linguistic abilities the same way his own were being tested. "Who are you? How did you find this place?"

The Frenchman shook his head, ever so slightly, as though disappointed. "We shall no doubt meet again. When we do, perhaps you will gain the opportunity to ask me then."

He was taunting Calavera, knowing the Guardsman wouldn't kill him, because then he could not give the Lieutenant the answers he needed.

But Calavera decided to shoot him anyway.

He lowered his aim and fired at the man's legs. He couldn't see them through the flames, so he was likely to miss, but with the fire still raging between them it was the only way of preventing the man from escaping. And it did give Calavera the satisfaction of seeing surprise on his enemy's face.

But that expression disappeared almost immediately, when both men realised Calavera's shot had not found its target.

"I admire your tenacity," said the Frenchman, although his manner indicated he admired himself more for triumphing over it. "I believe your ball struck one of my fallen comrades, whose body I don't think is visible from where you're standing."

Calavera didn't see any benefit in responding. He shrugged and began to reload.

The Frenchman clucked his tongue. "Now, now. One attempt may be tenacious, but two smells of desperation."

His enemy's mockery was no doubt intended to distract him, but it wasn't going to work. Since Calavera's options were to shoot the man or let him escape, he was planning to aim higher this time. If he did score a hit, it might not be fatal, and even if it were the Frenchman might survive long enough to be interrogated, perhaps even by the Baron. That prospect gave Calavera some grim satisfaction as he drove his ramrod into the pistol barrel. Let's see the arrogant cock try
his taunting with a pistol ball in his lung.

But the cock had one more trick up his sleeve, or to be precise in his left hand, which had been hidden from Calavera's sight by the flames. The Frenchman raised it, and it contained a second pistol.

No doubt at this moment Calavera's enemy was enjoying the look of surprise on his opponent's face as much as the Lieutenant had on his.

Corzo tackled Calavera and the Lieutenant was aware of the gun's report and a projectile smacking into brickwork, but then he hit the wall and was aware of nothing but sudden agonising pain coursing through his body, some of it escaping through his mouth in a prolonged howl.

The sound frightened the Captain, who leapt off him immediately. "Calavera! Are you all right? Were you hit?"

It took the Lieutenant a moment to fight through the pain and catch his breath. As he was doing this he saw the Captain glance quickly down the tunnel before returning full attention to his Guardsman lying on the floor of the crypt. "Calavera?"

"The Frenchman..."

"Never mind him! He turned tail and ran as soon as he saw he was outnumbered. I can still hear his fleeing footsteps. Are you hit?"

"No, Captain. I believe you saved my life. The Frenchman is, as we saw with the Tunic, an excellent shot. The cause of my present agony is a severe bruising I received last night before encountering you and the Baron. In the recent excitement their pain receded, as often happens, but when your body carried me into the wall it was like being crushed in the fist of a giant. That being said, I wish to stress that your actions elicit nothing from me but the most sincere gratitude."

Corzo held out his hand to Calavera. "Can you stand?"

"I believe so." He slapped his hand into the Captain's and hauled himself upright. His torso hurt all over, so adjusting his weight was difficult, but once his legs were able to do all the work the rest was quite easy.

The Captain let him go, and as soon as Calavera's feet were stable beneath him he looked down the corridor. The flames were lower, but still not traversable. The tunnel beyond was empty.

"Don't let him trouble you for now, Calavera. After our business this morning is concluded, the Baron and I will find out the identity of this supercilious villain, and after squeezing from him every detail of what he knows of this place, how he learned it, who else he took into his confidence, and which master he serves - although I believe I can guess that last article - I think I'll make him a permanent resident of one of the sepulchers in these catacombs, perhaps without doing him the courtesy of killing him first."

"I assure you, Captain, I am perfectly fine."

"And it gives me no small amount of relief to hear it. But that is not the point."

Calavera could not say whether the Captain's uncharacteristically vigorous vengefulness was prompted more by the severity of what had nearly befallen one of his men or by the Frenchman's aggravating pomposity, but he was certainly not going to press that question any further, so instead he asked, "Shall we head back?"
"Not yet."

Corzo whistled, in a very high pitch, a series of notes which could only be some sort of signal. "I've just informed the Baron the situation is resolved and we'll be returning within the half-hour. As soon as the flames are low enough, we'll trace back the path the intruders took to get here, making certain these tunnels are once again empty. Then we'll bar the Palace entrance - every door into this maze can be made impossible to open from the outside - and return to the Baron's office."

"Is there much else for us to discuss?"

"Very little, in fact. Now that you know what the principal assignment is, you're only lacking a handful of particulars, after which I'll escort you to my office in the Stronghold. There, I will open my records to you, and leave you alone, to decide which Guardsmen you'll be taking with you to the New World."

"How many men will I be selecting?"

"Three."

Calavera suppressed a smile. The thirty minutes it would take to return to the Baron's office was more than sufficient time for him to choose those men. As soon as all three of them were reunited, he would announce that he'd made his decision.

Let him be the one to surprise them this time.

Chapter End Notes

Edited April 3, 2016, to repair the place where I got shafted by Word's bone-stupid formatting practices.
The Team

Chapter Summary

Beginning with a brief discussion concerning the founder of the Emerald Guard, proceeding through a more in-depth examination of two other members of Order, and concluding with the mention of one who is not.

**CALAVERA** needed only fifteen minutes to decide. He spent the remaining time creating scenarios in his mind, testing them against the team he'd constructed. He was quite satisfied.

The Captain, not comprehending the reason for Calavera's silence, was less contented. At first, to soothe his nerves about the catacombs having been discovered by an enemy, he'd tried to engage his Lieutenant in discussion, but it had become obvious rather quickly that Calavera was only answering out of politeness, and his mind was on other things. This was perfectly understandable, given everything Calavera had experienced in the last several hours, but when Corzo hazarded an attempt at direct discussion upon that topic, Calavera's response had been only that he was looking forward for the two of them to return to the Baron. Based on this cryptic statement, the Captain formulated an incorrect conclusion about the reason for his Lieutenant's preoccupied state of mind, and thus chose to leave his companion to his silent reflection.

And so, for most of the time it took them to wait for the flames to burn themselves out, and then to retrace the steps of the French intruders, ascertaining that every one of them had either fled or perished, neither man spoke to the other. It was only once they were on their way back, in the corridor leading directly to the hidden door of the Baron's office, that Corzo voiced what he had been thinking.

"de Tarso is a good man, Calavera. He has committed some abhorrent acts, it is true, although far fewer than his reputation suggests, and never lightly, and not a one with selfish intent. He bears the burden of those acts alone, so our country need not struggle under the weight of them."

Calavera stopped walking. "Captain..." but here he stopped, unsure what he wanted to say. It distressed him that this man he admired had so painfully misinterpreted his silence of the last half-hour. What must it be like, to be the oldest and dearest friend of the most reviled man in an entire country, particularly when that country owed its very existence to the man it so distrusted and feared? It was too personal a question to speak aloud. But the concern reflected by the torchlight in Corzo's eyes had to be satisfied to some extent, so Calavera said, "I will not pretend that the Baron is well-loved, but there is no man under your command who does not respect his devotion and sacrifice, even if we do not comprehend them to their full extent. I am both honoured and pleased to have had the opportunity today to experience a side of your friend that most people do not even suspect exists, owing to their own lack of imagination."

It took Corzo a few moments to answer, during which Calavera observed in the Captain's eyes him thinking of, then rejecting, several responses, settling at last upon, "Thank you, Calavera," and a simple nod, which were sufficient to convey everything he was feeling. Then the Captain abruptly turned and pushed his way through the secret door.
The Baron was sitting at his desk, reading. Sitting atop the desk was a bottle of Armagnac and three filled glasses. The Captain strode straight over and emptied one of them down his throat. Then he extinguished his torch, placed it in a sconce, and poured himself another helping. While he was doing this, he gave his concise report of the events since they had left de Tarso's company.

"Frenchmen, at least a dozen. They fled as soon as they realised they were not alone, except for their leader, who stayed behind to add an Emerald Tunic to his game bag. He intends to try again."

"Then we shall simply have to ensure we locate him before he has that opportunity," said the Baron. His offhand tone prompted a snort of disapproval from the Captain, but he ignored it.

Instead he waved toward the other chair. "Would you like to rest yourself, Calavera? Your Captain will remain standing for some time, pacing the room, I expect."

Calavera sat, and the Baron slid a glass toward him. de Tarso raised his own glass, Calavera and Corzo did likewise, and the Baron, fixing his gaze upon Calavera, said, "To the success of your endeavour."

The three men clinked their glasses together, then drank, deeply.

Calavera was not in the least bit surprised when the Armagnac turned out to be the finest he had ever tasted. In fact, he would have been rather disappointed otherwise. He took another sip, and said, "The Captain informs me there yet remain some small details to discuss. However, before we proceed, I would like to announce that I have decided upon the three men who will accompany me on the expedition."

The bark of laughter which escaped the Captain was loud and piercing, echoing off the walls in a manner to hurt the ears. In spite of that, it brought smiles to the faces of the other two, and when the Captain started to laugh, uncontrollably, from deep within his belly, the other two were unable to keep from laughing as well, although truthfully they did not try to resist.

When the waves of Corzo's laughter had abated sufficiently for him to be able to speak, he said, "By all that's holy, Calavera, is that what occupied your thoughts as we cleared the tunnels?"

"It was, Captain. I regret if it caused you - "

"Think nothing of it! I am delighted. When we were determining who would lead this expedition, both of us agreed it should be a man who was capable of surprising us. Well, I daresay you have!" He sobered for a moment. "Also, of course, I am reassured to discover my interpretation of your earlier silence was erroneous." Then he resumed laughing.

Calavera turned to the Baron, who saluted him with his glass, and smiled proudly. "Given that my friend now seems content to postpone his hunt for our trespasser," de Tarso said, as Corzo vigorously nodded his assent, "let us hear your selections."

Calavera saluted back, emptied his glass, and poured himself another. It was not a liberty he could have imagined taking the day before, but as he poured he watched the other two out of the corner of his eye, and neither man thought anything of it. When he'd replaced the cork in the bottle, he leaned back in his chair, took a sip (by God, could he now understand the Baron's predilection for theatricality!), and spoke.

"I made my choices based upon several criteria. Once I'd established those criteria, the selections came quite easily. The first criterion is that I must know the man, and know myself to be
compatible with him. Lieutenant Corrida, for example, has an impeccable reputation, but I have never fought at his side. If I were to discover, two days into our voyage across the ocean, that our natures are as oil and water, then we would have difficulty establishing the instinctive rapport that this assignment requires.

"Secondly, I want men who complement one another. A man who thinks too much like I do will only see what I see, and so will fail to see what I likewise cannot. In a group of four men, there should be four distinct viewpoints. Third, given that we will be required to learn about a foreign culture, understanding the way its people think so that we can both anticipate threats and endear ourselves to the local populace, linguistic ability is essential. I want only men who can both read and write; also, I insist that any man I choose be able to speak at least one language other than his mother tongue.

"As you can well imagine, these criteria narrowed my selection to the point that the final choices were fairly straightforward."

Calavera paused to allow his superiors to comment on his reasoning, but the Baron merely sipped his alcohol impassively while the Captain wordlessly raised his eyebrows in approval of Calavera's approach. And so the Lieutenant continued.

"My first choice is Lanza Dorado."

"An excellent selection," said the Baron, "and one we anticipated, for we know the friendship that exists between the two of you. Our one concern is that he is a very orderly man. How do you imagine he would have reacted to the test in the alleyway, suddenly confronted with a magical serpent?"

"Frankly, I expect he never would have been confronted with the serpent at all. During my trial, I understood that you were the one controlling the ring, but I wanted to see where it would all lead. In my place, Dorado would have identified you as the threat immediately, and stopped your throat before the serpent could grow beyond the size of a small dog."

"True," Corzo said, while the Baron shrugged and nodded his agreement.

"Further," said Calavera, "Dorado's rigidity is balanced out by my second selection, Turo Corvus."

"Ah!" the Captain said. "I had wondered if you would choose him."

The Baron regarded Calavera very carefully. "Corvus the Curse? Are you certain you want him at your side in such delicate - and vital - circumstances?"

Calavera returned de Tarso's gaze with the strongest displeasure the other man's rank permitted of him. "Turo Corvus is my friend, and my comrade-in-arms. We have killed and bled together. I would rather not permit any man to call him by that derogatory term, but I know he does not mind it, and so I let such disrespect pass, out of consideration for his goodhearted nature."

Corzo cleared his throat loudly. "The Baron meant no insult, Calavera. You have my word on that."

"I know he did not," said Calavera, pouring himself another helping of Armagnac even though he knew it was making him bold. "I merely wished to make my position on Corvus' worthiness unambiguous."

"That you have done," the Baron said, pouring his own third glass of liquor, whereupon
Corzo shrugged and followed suit. "But you can understand that your Captain and I must confirm that you've evaluated your selections thoroughly. For example, do you truly expect Dorado to accept Corvus onto your team, given that Corvus nearly killed him in Tudela?"

"I do," said Calavera without hesitation, "for, with respect, it was not Corvus who nearly killed him. Lanza is aware it was persons other than Turo who were firing the muskets at him."

"Just so," the Captain muttered.

"Am I to assume you endorse Corvus' actions of that night?" said the Baron.

"His solution is not the one I would have chosen," Calavera said, his forcibly neutral expression masking a profound understatement, "but as I have indicated, that makes his thinking complementary to my own. The Guardsmen were badly outnumbered, and they had not yet been able to warn the townspeople. Blowing up the sawmill informed the entire countryside they were under attack while considerably reducing the enemy's numbers. Corvus saved the entire town. And before sacrificing the building to that cause he conveyed his intentions to Dorado in plenty of time for Lanza to make his exit, which he did, without injury."

The Captain turned away, no doubt to hide his expression from Calavera. The Baron, a more accomplished diplomat, managed to maintain impassive eye contact with the Lieutenant. "And what are your views on his donning of nun's habit to infiltrate a cloistered order of Carmelites?"

"That is a very popular story," said Calavera, not making much of an attempt to conceal his contempt. "No doubt this says more about the maturity and refinement of the rumour-mongers than it does about Turo himself. What is often overlooked in the telling is that the Carmelites have close ties to the Bishop of Urgel, and that two days after the impersonation, four men were publicly executed for attempting to assassinate His Excellency."

The Baron and the Captain shared another one of their enigmatic looks, but this time Calavera understood it fully: Very few people had ever thought to connect the executions to Corvus' actions. His point made, the Lieutenant nevertheless added to it.

"Further, I find it revealing that despite his transgression, Turo has neither been ejected from our Order, nor, as far as I know, excommunicated."

"No," said Corzo, chuckling heartily, "he has not."

The Baron also allowed himself a crafty smile. "Corvus is an excellent choice. Are you aware that he understands the Mayan language?"

"I am," Calavera said, noting Corzo's mild surprise. "He and I spent three months patrolling the walls of Girona together. I passed many pleasurable hours learning of his life as a Conquistador."

Indeed, during that time Corvus had confided to Calavera many things: how he had become disenchanted with the Spanish army, how this had resulted in his resignation from their ranks, how those experiences had subsequently made him reluctant to join the Revolutionary army, and how it was only upon recognising the ideals of the Emerald Guard as matching those in his own heart that he felt moved to once again give his sword in defence of his country. And also how, both in the New World and in Europe, he had witnessed certain phenomena which not even a man of his relaxed temperament could bring himself to describe:
"If I were to tell anyone of the things I have seen," Corvus had said to him, "I would be burned at the stake."

"Esperanza does not burn people at the stake. It is a matter of law."

"I know. And yet, in my case, the good citizens of this country would be tempted to make an exception."

After everything the Baron and the Captain had shown him, Calavera at last fully understood his friend's reluctance. And yet at the same time he knew that Corvus' fears were groundless, for if anyone had wanted him executed for heresy, they would no doubt have suddenly discovered some very powerful men speaking on his behalf.

"One last question about Corvus," said the Baron, returning Calavera to the present. "If he had been the one tested in the alleyway last night, how do you think he would have reacted?"

Calavera could not withhold a chuckle. "I consider myself a reasonably intelligent man, and recently I have been commended for my perspicacity by two other men I greatly admire. All I can say in response to that question is that no wise man would fool himself into believing he can predict the actions of Turo Corvus."

"And this indeed makes him the perfect complement to Lanza Dorado, as you have said." Once again the Baron saluted Calavera with his glass. "I am now most eager to hear your third and final selection."

Calavera took a deep breath before answering.

"The third man I want at my side when I travel to the New World is not an Emerald Guardsman, for although he fought for our cause during the Revolution, and with distinction, his people are denied all rights of Esperanzan citizenship, including that of entry into our Order. This man is one of the noblest, bravest, and most skilful men I know, as well as my dearest friend in the world."

"His name is Saqer al-Farik."
AFTER a prolonged and profound silence, during which Calavera studied both men carefully but
could find no hint in their expressions of what either man was thinking, it was Corzo who spoke
first.

"There are... many things to say about this. And many ways to say them. I ask your
patience, Calavera, if my phrasing or the Baron's is not to your liking. Please give us the benefit of
the doubt, and trust that we are sympathetic to your viewpoint, even if our words may tempt you to
believe otherwise."

Calavera took another deep breath. He also had many things to say, things he had been
wanting to say to these two men, and to the King himself, for seven years, and he could feel the
words pushing at him, eager to get out. He was forcing them down, even though this meant acting
against his own sense of morality, because the words were swollen with rage, and surrendering to
that rage in this moment would be a mistake he would regret for the rest of his life.

"I will do my best," the Lieutenant said, very slowly. "Although I will find it difficult.
Should I falter, I hope you will extend to me the same benefit of the doubt."

"Let us speak honestly," said the Baron, "but neither bluntly nor passionately. The Fathers
of the Revolution made a promise to the Moors. In exchange for their participation in our
Revolution, our newly-formed country would officially recognise their religion, and extend to them
the full rights of citizenship we extended to any person born in Spain or France.

"We have not done this. We have broken our word to an entire people.

"But this is not the worst of it. What I am about to confide in you is the greatest shame of
my life. The King and the Captain might not have proceeded with the bargain, which I'd been the
one to propose, had they known what I recognised at the time: That once the country was formed,
we were not going to be able to honour that agreement."

Calavera squeezed his fists, digging his fingernails mercilessly into his palms. Only thus
was he able to restrain himself from interjecting.

"Would we have achieved victory without the Moors' assistance? I do not know. I doubt it.
But this speculation is irrelevant in the face of the facts we do know: That they did, indeed, assist
us, and that with their help we overcame. And once it was over, we ignored the debt we owed them
- on the surface. Not a day goes by that I do not devote some thought to how we may restore our
lost honour, and, more importantly than that, give the Moors what they have always deserved,
which, it is my unshakeable conviction, they should have been accorded without first requiring that
they earn it.

"I hope you understand, Calavera, why the Fathers have endured this stain of shame upon
our country. Not only would recognition of their religion be an affront that the Catholic nations could not ignore, prompting the war we hope to head off with your assignment, but in spite of everything they owe the Moors, the people of Esperanza are not yet ready to accept them. Too many of them are ignorant, and frightened. Do you disagree with that assessment? If your friend were to wear the Tunic, would your neighbours give him the respect he deserves? Would every Emerald Guardsman accept him as an equal?"

Calavera trusted himself with only the most rudimentary reply. "They would not."

de Tarso nodded. "The Law cannot change what is in people's hearts. As revolutionaries, we are living proof of that."

He would have continued, but Corzo indicated he had something to add.

"I know Lanza Dorado to be... uncomfortable, with their kind," said the Captain. "Are you certain you wish to force him to receive a Moor as an ally, and in turn to force your friend to fight at the side of one who does not fully accept him?"

"My friend's name, as I have stated, is Saqer al-Farik," Calavera said, then paused, both to allow the reproof to set in and to regain full control of his temper. "Despite Dorado's discomfort, of which I am aware, and which I assure you runs no deeper than that, he maintains an open mind. He will accept Saqer because he trusts me, and Saqer will do the same. They will quickly discover they have much in common, and after the first time they have fought together, each will think of the other as his brother, as I do of both of them."

The Baron nodded, but the Captain did not appear satisfied.

"We must be open with one another, my friend," de Tarso said to him. "You have an objection. Please state it."

The Captain took his own deep breath, as Calavera had, and for the same reasons. He knew what he had to say would be unpleasant to hear. "I heard al-Farik's name many times during the War. I know of his bravery, his ability, and his nobility. I would have been deeply honoured to accept him into the ranks of the Guard, and I, like the Baron, am ashamed that this cannot yet happen. He is a fine man. That being said, I oppose his inclusion in this endeavour. There is a spiritual bond that exists between all Guardsmen, a bond which al-Farik cannot share with anyone, not even you, Calavera. Notwithstanding that I am in part to blame for his inability to share in it, I consider this bond essential to the success of this venture. If I am outvoted, I will respect the final decision without hesitation, but I would entreat both of you to give this factor thorough consideration before casting your final votes."

Calavera wanted to reply immediately, to make it clear that his desire to have al-Farik at his side had not been shaken by Corzo's argument, but dimly in the back of his mind there was the knowledge that these words had been difficult for the Captain to say, and so, out of respect for Corzo's humility, honesty, and acceptance of responsibility, the Lieutenant waited to hear what de Tarso had to contribute.

When Calavera turned to face the Baron, all three men knew de Tarso's viewpoint would be the one to decide the issue. The Baron took a few moments to sort his thoughts before answering.

"Here is what I would like to see happen," he said. "Saqer al-Farik and Lanza Dorado will work in concert with Calavera and Corvus, putting aside their superficial differences in the name of something greater. Dorado's example, and his inevitable subsequent shift of viewpoint, will serve as inspiration to any Guardsmen who might feel as he does currently, and I trust that any who insist
upon retaining their contemptible prejudices will soon incur the wrath either of Dorado or of Calavera, who will instruct them in the error of their ways, by one means of another. This will be to the overall benefit of the Guard.

"As for the people, upon the successful return of our five champions, there will be a parade held in their honour. I was intending in any case to have some form of public declaration, to advise the rest of Europe, and in particular our adversary in France, that we have obtained treasures belonging to the god of an ancient culture. A parade will serve that function nicely.

"When the good people of Esperanza see, during this display of our national pride, that among our heroes is a Moor, without whose assistance success would have been impossible, the people will have no choice but to accept that noble race into our collective bosom. There could thereafter be no reasonable argument for the exclusion of Moors from the Emerald Guard, could there? After a Moor proved indispensable to the cause of this country, such an objection would be treasonous." The Baron savoured that last word, as though he would be pleased to carry out the punishment for treason personally.

"And then, at the end of the parade, on the Palace grounds, in full view of the entire country, the King himself will place the Emerald Tunic upon the shoulders of Saqer al-Farik, hero of the people. Following that, within the month, two Catholic nations will recognise our legitimacy, and thereafter any man who calls our acceptance of Moors an act of heresy will not have a leg to stand on. That is my vision of the future."

Calavera was stunned into speechlessness, but the Captain was able to reply, after a few moments to collect his thoughts. "I am glad to see that the passing years have done nothing to diminish your ambition, my old friend."

His tone was sincere, but something about the words sounded wrong to the Lieutenant's ears. There was something missing...

And then Calavera realised what it was. Ordinarily, the Captain would have chuckled when saying something like this to de Tarso. This time, there was no such levity.

The Baron must have noticed it as well. "You are still opposed to this course of action, my friend?"

"With regret," the Captain said, that regret weighing upon every syllable, "I am, yes. My reservations have not changed. I believe - respectfully, Calavera - that your personal ideologies, while commendable, are overriding your better judgments. But I have resolved to go along with your wishes, and I do, in the hopes that you will both prove me wrong."

"Then it is settled," said the Baron. "The three men who will accompany Lieutenant Calavera on his voyage are Lanza Dorado, Turo Corvus, and Saqer al-Farik. We will end our discussion for now, taking it up again at nine tomorrow morning in the Captain's office in the Stronghold. In the meantime, Calavera will speak to his three comrades - Corvus is expected to arrive this afternoon - while the Captain and I will investigate the recent intrusion into these catacombs. When we reconvene, in addition to sharing any information we have gathered about that, we will present you with the final details of your assignment. Do you have any questions at this time, Calavera?"

"I have, in fact, several points to raise, which I hope will not take too much time. The first is a request, albeit a rather firm one. I want my team to receive a demonstration proving the existence of magic. Perhaps not the same one I received, but I want all doubt erased from their minds before we set out on our journey."
"An excellent suggestion," said the Baron. "You may count on that happening."

"Next, I have a question about magic itself. Could I perform it? For example, could I learn to speak as you did, in the alleyway, with the same results?"

"Absolutely. The way I spoke is called intoning, and it is only a matter of dramatic emphasis. The successful execution of magic involves two factors: will and belief. Speaking in a profoundly deep voice, sounding unlike yourself, puts you in the frame of mind where you are outside your self-doubts, where you know anything is possible. Intonation is not necessary for the spell to work, but it makes will and belief easier. If I were to give you the words to speak, and place the ring on the floor in front of you, I have no doubt you would be able to give the ring life. After all, you have never lacked will, and I expect the issue of belief has been resolved once and for all, has it not?"

"It has," said Calavera, pondering in spite of himself the possibilities the Baron's answer opened up for him. He had no particular inclination to cast a magical spell, but it was a comfort to know he might be capable, should the need arise. "I have one last question. When you spoke of the parade celebrating our success, you said there would be five champions. Who is the fifth?"

The Baron smiled. Calavera was learning to understand the man's facial expressions; he knew de Tarso's answer would be unsatisfying.

"That is one of the discussion topics I am deferring to tomorrow. Perhaps, before we meet again, you will be able to deduce the answer on your own."
**The Recruitment Begins**

Chapter Summary

*IN WHICH there is much more discussion: friendly, revelatory, unsatisfactory, and involuntary.*

**LANZA** Dorado was unhappy. He was a loyal Guardsman, but he did not approve of any military hierarchy concealing important information from its lower ranks. It was his firm inner conviction that a soldier who knew the reasoning behind his directives would be better equipped to honour the spirit of those orders when the inevitable complications manifested themselves, and the original battle plan required modification. He understood that often there was a need for secrecy, but in the matter of dozens of the finest Emerald Guardsmen being summoned to San Rafael from every corner of the country, he could not believe that secrecy was a legitimate concern of those who were issuing the directives.

Or, more to the point, of the one man who was issuing the directives.

Another carriage arrived at the Stronghold, this one from Aragón, and rumoured to be the last from that province. It was expected that the first group from Cataluña would be arriving around two o'clock, but this was also rumour.

Dorado was not a man to be content with rumour, and spending the last several hours speaking to virtually every Guardsman in the Stronghold, asking for information about the summoning, had made him quite discontented indeed. He'd heard very little that he could accept as fact or reasonable deduction, and in the process endured all manner of rumour, gossip, speculation, exaggeration, and even some flagrant lies. He tried not to dwell on the latter; these men were his sworn Brothers.

The carriage came to a halt, and Guardsmen descended upon it like seeds in a funnel, some to greet their fellows, many to satisfy their curiosity about who was next to join the ranks of the summoned elite, others to ask the newcomers if they had heard some detail or whisper which might shed light on the mass summoning, and most to do some combination of all three. Dorado stood at the top of a flight of stairs, observing the courtyard from above. He also wanted to greet his comrades, ascertain which additional men had earned the honour of being called, and especially discover whether they possessed any new information, but he knew he would have more than sufficient time to do all three once the crowd dispersed. Also, he expected to be dissatisfied with their responses to his questions, and he was in no hurry to experience more of that.

"Lanza!"

One of the new arrivals had looked up and recognised him. Now he raised his arm and waved, weaving through the crowd to get to the stairs, all the while looking straight at the man he wanted to meet more closely.

Dorado smiled. He knew the man well, and this was typical of his cleverness. In presenting a clear destination, he'd made himself able to ignore his comrades without appearing discourteous, while making certain that no one would commit the unthinkable effrontery of impeding his progress, despite their urgency.
The crafty Guardsman ascended the stairs and presented himself before his friend with his arms open wide. "That was a clever manoeuvre," Dorado said by way of greeting.

The man laughed, removed his hat, and bowed. "Thank you." He rose, and before replacing his hat he shook his hair from side to side, dislodging some of the sweat that covered it. As long as Dorado had known this man, he'd never been able to figure out how his comrade was able to perspire twice as much as any other man, nor how simple moisture always managed to turn his straw-coloured hair dark as coal. He expected he would never learn, either. "Welcome to San Rafael, Benton."

It was Dorado's habit, and the habit of most Guardsmen, to address fellow members of the Order by their Christian names, but for some reason he had never been able to develop this habit where Sean Benton was concerned. This was not due to the man's nationality. There were other Englishmen in the Guard, men who, like Benton, had formed part of the military force sent by their homeland to support the Revolution, and had decided to stay on once the country they had helped create became a reality. Take for example Michael Risebrough: Dorado had never had difficulty addressing him by his first name. And it was not a matter of syllables, either, for there were several Juans who had never presented him any trouble, but Sean was always Benton.

If it bothered him, he'd never given any indication. For Dorado, that was significant consolation, as was the knowledge of Benton's genial nature. He was one of the most even-tempered men Dorado had ever known. And, without question, the finest horseman.

From their elevated position, Benton looked out over the Guardsmen assembled in the Stronghold's courtyard, no doubt coming to the realization that the superior quality of the men with whom he had shared his carriage had been by no means anomalous.

"So... " he said, his tone confirming Dorado's evaluation. "How long have you been here?"

"Not much longer than you."

"And what have you learned?" For Benton knew him well.

"I have not learned a great deal," said Dorado, regretting that some of his irritation was slipping out into his tone. "Nobody can tell me anything, but I know The Baron must be involved."

"What makes you so certain?"

"Nobody can tell me anything."

Benton nodded sagely. "A tautology, but not an invalid one."

Dorado was about to inform him that Calavera was even now meeting with the Baron and the Captain, and might return with some answers, but he reconsidered, for this information might have been offered in confidence.

After a few moments of companionable silence, during which both men stared out over the courtyard, lost in their respective thoughts, Benton said, "It has been a long journey, my friend... "

"Of course. I apologise that my reception has not been more welcoming."

The very same apology Calavera had made to him that morning!

But of course the ever-accepting Benton required no apology. "Not at all, Lanza. I know where your mind is taking you. If any man is able to follow that road to its end, I can think of no better person for the undertaking than yourself... excepting, perhaps, Diego Calavera. He must
"I have," said Dorado, trying to keep his voice neutral. "We have combined forces on the problem, and are approaching it from different directions."

"Diego Calavera and Lanza Dorado attempting to outflank Baron Vincente de Tarso. For centuries, military historians will study this conflict, regardless of the outcome."

Dorado laughed, a loud bark of released tension. He was a big man, and many heads turned suddenly at the sound. He pretended not to notice. "As soon as I have anything to tell you, Sean, I will." He'd forced himself to speak his friend's given name, and it had not been as difficult as he'd expected. Perhaps he might be able to develop the habit after all.

"I know you will, Lanza." Benton bowed his head deeply. "But for now..."

"Do what you must. I will always be near to hand." Everyone would be, until someone deigned to finally reveal the cause of all this.

Benton went back down the stairs, and retrieved his belongings from the carriage. Then he walked toward the barracks, casting one look and a wave in Dorado's direction.

The Guardsman returned the wave, and watched Benton walk away until he disappeared from sight. Then Dorado resumed observing the courtyard.

And out of the corner of his eye, he saw Diego Calavera, standing at the entrance to the Stronghold. He was staring in Dorado's direction, half of his body positioned behind the great stone archway, his arms at his sides. The posture was clear: He was trying to catch his friend's eye while drawing as little attention to himself as possible. This eliminated all doubt in Dorado's mind that concealing Calavera's meeting from Benton had been the correct decision.

Dorado made eye contact with Calavera, and the Lieutenant stepped further to the side, completely concealing himself from the sight of any of the Guardsmen in the Stronghold. Dorado descended the stairs, walked to the archway, turned, and walked past Calavera, who fell into step with his brisk pace.

"I see you are looking once more like yourself, Diego. That and your circumspection lead me to conclude you have learned much more than you knew when last we spoke."

"I have. When I arrived, you were in discourse with Sean Benton, but I kept myself out of sight until the two of you parted company. What I have to say is for your ears alone. But it may be that our security has been penetrated already. Have you managed to uncover anything?"

"Nothing," said Dorado with disgust. "I spoke to everyone who had the time, and nobody knew more than you and I. Too many of those who suggested otherwise were guilty of spreading falsehoods, to an extent which in my opinion does not befit members of the Emerald Guard."

"In your opinion, Lanza, no lying whatsoever, for any reason, befits a member of the Emerald Guard."

"I stand firm in that opinion."

"You stand firm in everything, my friend."

"Calavera, I do not mean to be curt with you, but I have spent my morning asking the same questions to dozens of men, none of whom knew any more than I did, but too many of whom saw
fit to illustrate this to an extent I found exhausting. I am, to put it succinctly, in a foul mood, and the
only thing which can rectify that is to have it confirmed that there is a purpose to the current
upheaval within the Guard, and that in fact the reason for the mystery surrounding it is likewise
legitimate, and not merely the self-indulgent prank of a bored misanthrope."

"Very well. I have been put in command of a secret expedition which will be traveling to
New Spain in order to discover the ancient temple of a native god and recover the artifacts stored
within, some of which will be used to keep our enemies at bay and the rest of which will be given
in trade to powerful Catholic nations that will in exchange recognise Esperanza's claim to
legitimacy, thus strengthening and solidifying our country."

Dorado stopped walking, so he could absorb all of this. Calavera stopped as well, after a
pace or two, and waited for his friend's response.

This response was proving elusive. There were many different questions demanding
priority within Dorado's mind, and it was difficult to choose which should be addressed first.
Eventually he settled upon the ones closest to him. "Is that why all of these elite Guardsmen have
been summoned?"

"It is. The Baron and the Captain told me to choose three men to accompany me. There is
some urgency to the affair, and so they wanted my companions available immediately once I'd
decided upon them."

"Am I one of those you selected to take part?"

"Of course."

"Who else?"

"Turo Corvus."

Dorado could not believe his ears. "Is there perhaps a second Turo Corvus in the Guard?"

"Let us hope not."

On that, Dorado agreed! "We will have to travel together, across the ocean. You intend to
trap me on a ship with Turo Corvus? You want to trap him on a ship with me?"

Calavera shrugged. "Why not?"

"I can think of several reasons why not!"

"Yes," said Calavera softly, patiently, "you can. And do you imagine that I have not also
thought of them, and rejected them as immaterial?"

It was precisely as Benton had indicated earlier: For all Dorado's considerable aptitude in
solving problems of logic, Calavera was better. The tall man laughed. "Oh, I have missed you,
Diego!"

Calavera smiled back. "So am I to assume you have no objection?"

"None."

"You bear him no ill feeling after the events of Tudela?"

"All was forgiven once my hair grew back."
Calavera laughed, and made a show of examining his friend's long mane, impossibly straight and impossibly black. "You have always been very proud of your hair, Lanza."

"Yes, and with excellent reason." Dorado smiled as he said it, to make it clear he was jesting, but in fact he was exceptionally proud of this aspect of his appearance. And Calavera knew it: He'd been speaking truthfully, his levity notwithstanding.

Dorado continued. "And so who is the third and final Guardsman you have selected among all those called to San Rafael?"

Calavera cleared his throat, to give Dorado an opportunity to brace himself. "My third choice is not a Guardsman at all. It is my friend Saqer al-Farik."

"The infidel?" Dorado said before he could think better of it.

The grimness that suddenly came over Calavera's face confirmed Dorado should have spoken more carefully. When he spoke, the Lieutenant's voice was quiet, and very calm. "Saqer is not an infidel. In fact, I have never met a man more faithful to his religion."

"My apologies, Calavera. My reaction was impulsive, and the term exceedingly ill-chosen, but you have my word I meant no offence to either yourself or your friend."

"I do know it," said Calavera, his manner immediately becoming companionable again. "It is already forgotten."

"Thank you. But since the matter has been raised, I have often wondered how a man as pious as yourself could have become so close to a man of a differing faith."

"We do not differ as much as others may think. You will remember the time he and I were buried by the cave collapse in the French Basque." Dorado remembered it very well, for he'd commanded the group that had dug them out. "Saqer and I were trapped together for two days, in perfect darkness, uncertain whether we would ever survive to see daylight again. Our talk naturally turned to spiritual matters, and we came to the conclusion, after a time, that once you allow for individual viewpoints influenced by one's respective culture, his god and mine truly have no quarrel."

"I am content to take your word for that," Dorado said. He did not devote much of his time to contemplation of such matters, and thus considered Calavera a reliable authority on the subject.

"If Saqer agrees to come along," said Calavera, "will you be able to accept him?"

After a few moments of honest introspection, Dorado said, "I will. But your question was conditional: Do you imagine he might refuse?"

"It is possible that he will. I sincerely hope he does not."

"And what if he does?"

Calavera looked so uncommonly distressed at the prospect that Dorado was sorry he'd asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea. I chose my team based upon their complimentary virtues. Without Saqer, too many essential qualities will be missing."

"In that case, perhaps you should go and ask him immediately."
"But I've not finished telling you everything."

"You've told me enough for now; my curiosity is satisfied. When Corvus arrives, you can explain the remaining details to all of us at once." Dorado placed his hands on Calavera's shoulders and looked him in the eye. "I wish you success. Truly."

"I know, my friend. Thank you."

*****

Shortly thereafter, Calavera presented himself at the lodgings of his dear friend Saqer al-Farik.

"My friend, come in! It has been too long." And the Moor ushered Calavera inside.

"We last saw each other three days ago, Saqer."

"Of course, but any period greater than two days that I must spend without the joy of your company is too long. Make yourself at home. I will prepare some tea."

When he was at home, al-Farik preferred to sit in enormous cushions rather than chairs, and there were several of those arranged on his floor for that purpose, although he did keep some chairs at hand for visitors of more conventional sensibilities. At first, Calavera had only essayed the cushions out of respect and open-mindedness, but eventually he had come to appreciate them. Overall he still preferred to sit in chairs, but when visiting al-Farik their rigid frames always seemed too uncomfortable to contemplate.

But this time, the Guardsman placed himself in a chair, indicating to al-Farik that the subject was serious. For this reason the Moor elected to remain standing, so he might reach the kettle more easily once it started to boil.

"You look very troubled, Diego. Reassure me by expressing what is on your mind."

There was no other way but to do it directly. "Saqer, I have a favour to ask of you."

"Then why do you hesitate? You know I would never refuse you anything."

"The favour is not entirely for myself."

al-Farik's face changed instantly. He was beginning to suspect the reason for his friend's hesitation. "Go on."

Calavera took a deep breath. "I have received a special assignment from the Emerald Guard. It is something unique, and of crucial importance. I was given licence to select the men I feel would be most likely to bring about the success of this endeavour. You were one of the men I chose."

As fortune would often have it, the water in the kettle chose that moment to begin boiling. Without a word, al-Farik attended to it. When he returned, he also sat in a chair.

"I am deeply sorry, my friend," he said, "but I must refuse."
Calavera was surprised, saddened, indignant, and guilt-stricken all at once. "But you don't know any of the details!"

"The details do not matter; I already know enough. Will this assignment of yours be for the good of the country?"

"Yes."

"And who was it that issued your orders? Corzo? de Tarso? King Guillermo himself?"

"The Baron and the Captain," Calavera said softly, anticipating with shame what his friend's next words were going to be.

"I recognise that this is important to you, and I do not refuse lightly. But those men, and this country, have betrayed all of my people, not least of all myself."

"I am aware of your feelings on the matter, and I hope you trust I would never ask this of you without careful consideration." The importance of his assignment weighed heavily upon him, and he desperately needed to have al-Farik along, but despite all of this Calavera's viewpoint sounded feeble, even to his own ears. "Believe me, my friend, I have learned more about the Baron than most people ever will. He is more keenly aware of this country's debt to the Moors than any man alive, the dishonour of it preys upon him, and he deeply regrets - "

"Diego, forgive me for interrupting you, but none of this matters. I cannot buy food, with the Baron's regret, from a merchant who refuses to sell it to me."

He has a plan to solve all of this. Upon our return, he will make it clear that you were indispensable to the success of the endeavour, and therefore to the entire country. He will induct you into the Emerald Guard in a public ceremony, after which no man will dare to speak poorly of you and your people, because to do so will be regarded as treasonous."

al-Farik bowed his head. His shoulders lifted, then dropped. When he finally spoke, he did not look up. "It sounds like an excellent scheme. I suspect it might even have been successful. But this is yet another of the Baron's promises, and he has yet to honour the last one after seven years. You tell me that this thought is a torture to him, and I trust you and believe you, but it still changes nothing."

"I want to be a part of something so important to you. I want to help you, my friend. But I cannot. This country, and the Fathers of the Revolution, made a bargain with my people. We honoured our end of the bargain, and we can not enter into another agreement with them until they have made good on their word as given the first time. It is a matter of honour, Diego. I am truly sorry. Please do not press the matter any further."

Calavera wanted to hang his head, but he would not do this man the discourtesy of looking away from him. "I understand. I am not surprised. I respect your decision, and the moral truth from which it derives. It was wrong of me to place you in such a difficult position. Forgive me." He stood up. "I won't impose upon your - "

"I forbid you to leave," al-Farik said, his tone deadly cold. The Moor stood up, turned his back on the Guardsman, and walked away a few paces.

When he turned back to face Calavera, Saqer al-Farik was smiling, and holding aloft two glasses of tea. "I cannot let my guest leave without the refreshment I have promised him, can I?"

Calavera smiled back. "Is that also a matter of honour which I cannot disregard?"
"It is that," said al-Farik, handing him a glass. "It is a matter of friendship as well, which transcends almost every other consideration."

He raised his glass. "To the success of your endeavour."

Calavera was deeply moved by his friend's sincerity and generosity. He returned the salute. "To the realization of all our hopes for a brighter future."

"Amen," said al-Farik, and the two of them drank.

Just like that, as it had always been in similar circumstances, the toast proved sufficient to eliminate the tension between them. While they finished their beverages, they chatted comfortably together, and were even able to share in some hearty laughter. But Calavera made no attempt to sit back down, and the moment his tea was finished his impatience, which al-Farik knew very well, began to show itself despite his best attempts to hide it.

"You should be on your way, Diego. I expect you have much to do today."

Calavera tried valiantly to conceal the relief on his face, but he knew he was not succeeding. "I do. Thank you for your hospitality. And if I should not have the occasion to see you before I depart on what promises to be a very lengthy journey, know that my thoughts are always with you."

al-Farik showed him to the door. "And I feel likewise. Until I see you again, take care, my friend."

The door closed gently behind him, and only when he heard it shut did Calavera allow his tensed body to display the desperation he was feeling at al-Farik's refusal. His shoulders sagged and he tilted his head skyward, exhaling with his eyes closed. As he walked away from his friend's door, his feet felt like lead and his knees like rubber.

He had not wanted to burden al-Farik with the consequences of his refusal, for Calavera truly could not fault the Moor for his reasons, and he felt enough regret for what he had done on behalf of a nation which had treated al-Farik and his people shamefully, but now the Lieutenant's worst fears had been realised.

al-Farik had refused to join him on the expedition, and Calavera had no idea who could replace him. There were so few men who fit his criteria, and any he could think of who did would not properly complement the other three.

He was so distracted by these thoughts that he almost missed hearing the whisper that came out of the alleyway. As it was, he'd already passed it before he realised the whisperer had spoken his name.

"Diego!"

"Lanza? Is that you?"

The alleyway was little more than a narrow slit between two tall buildings, only wide enough for two men to stand abreast if neither of them was Dorado. When Calavera peered around the corner he saw that selfsame Guardsman, standing sideways, facing a man dressed almost as fashionably as a Noble, but in far inferior materials: therefore someone from the Palace. The man in question had a bruise on his head, his back to the wall, and Dorado's knife at his breast. When he saw Calavera his crossed eyes made an attempt to focus. "Lieutenant!" he said very loudly. "I have -" but then Dorado clamped his other hand over the man's mouth, his thumb pressing painfully
"He was waiting for you outside the Stronghold, Diego," said Dorado, no longer whispering, but talking quietly enough that he could not be heard outside the alleyway. "I noticed him watching you from the top of the stairs. When you and I began our walk, he followed us - quite well, in fact; if I hadn't already identified him he might have gone unnoticed. He's had some practice at this. After you and I parted company, he continued to follow you, and I followed him."

Calavera was unhappy with himself for having failed to notice the man, but his consolation was that he'd been preoccupied with whether or not Saqer would accept his offer - and not without reason, as it had turned out. "I would like to know who he is and what he wants."

Dorado eased his grip on the man's face, but did not yet remove his hand. "If you speak too loudly," he said, in a tone which permitted no alternative, "I will knock all the air out of your lungs." Then he let go of the man's mouth, and closed that hand into a ready fist.

After an initial failed attempt at hoarse speech and a few painful swallows, the man was at last able to speak. "I work for the Baron."

"That explains his skill in the arts of deviousness."

"Lanza, let the man explain himself."

"I'm not a spy! I do, occasionally, observe people, on His Lordship's orders, but my duties primarily consist of keeping his records. I was staying out of sight this time because of the personal risk I'm taking, but I needed to warn you, Lieutenant: Your life is in grave danger. There's a very dangerous man in San Rafael who wants to kill you!"
The Clerk's Interrogation

Chapter Summary

_IN WHICH visitors are villainous, directives are disregarded, and enemies are engaged._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for _notes_

_UPON_ encountering Calavera for the second time that day, Dorado had noticed the fresh hole in the centre of his friend's Tunic, and he'd seen enough such holes in his time to recognise what had caused it. Out of politeness he'd declined to mention it, deciding that Calavera would tell him about it when he judged the time to be appropriate.

It was for this reason that Dorado was not entirely surprised by his captive's revelation that Calavera was being hunted, nor by the Lieutenant's failure to respond with surprise or urgency.

"Tell us your name."

"Luis Sierra," said the man in response to Calavera's demand. And then, since neither Calavera nor Dorado said anything further, and Sierra was intelligent enough to be in the Baron's employ, he offered more information. "I am, as I intimated, a clerk in the Baron of Girona's service. He has confided several of his secrets to me, including the existence of a hidden door within the Palace which leads to a series of underground tunnels. I have never been inside of these tunnels; I have certain clear directives as to when and how I am to use them, should the need arise.

"Last night, when I returned home from the Palace, I arrived to discover that my house was empty. No candles were lit, and the hearth was cold. I have a wife, and a young daughter; their absence was greatly distressing. But I'd barely had time to assimilate these details when a stranger entered my home. He neither knocked nor announced himself, but simply opened the door and stepped inside. This plus the mocking look upon his countenance was sufficient to indicate that my family had been stolen away, and that this intruder was the man responsible."

"Describe him," said Calavera, startling Sierra, who'd become so lost in his memories that he'd forgotten he was being interrogated by two Guardsmen.

"He was... His hair was blond, almost white, and short. He wore a light brown moustache and a very small beard. His eyes were... I do not remember; I'm sorry. He was French, but his Spanish was impeccable."

"His eyes were brown," Calavera said. "But the rest of your description was more than sufficient. Continue your story."

"He revealed that he'd taken my wife and daughter, because he knew I worked for the Baron. He wanted me to betray His Lordship, or else... " Sierra could not bring himself to repeat what the Frenchman had no doubt threatened.

"Go on," said Calavera, gently. He nodded to Dorado, who stepped back to allow the
Sierra sighed deeply, obviously greatly comforted that the Guardsmen, who must surely by now have deduced the extent of his treachery, were willing nevertheless to treat him more gently now that they knew the circumstances.

"He wanted to know where the Baron stores his deepest secrets, and his most private researches. He did not expect me to know for certain, but he knew well enough the extent to which His Lordship trusts me that he expected I had some inkling where such a library might be."

"And so you told him about the secret door," said Calavera, sparing Sierra the shame of repeating his betrayal. Dorado understood that the Lieutenant was taking pity on the man, whose crime, if one could even call it that, had not been born of selfish motives: He was a simple assistant trying to preserve the lives of his loved ones.

"I was hoping he would die!" Sierra shouted desperately, prompting Calavera to indicate he should speak more quietly. "His Lordship warned me the tunnels contained terrible dangers for the unwary, and I was gambling that if the Frenchman were to trespass down there, he would not return, and I could beg the Baron's forgiveness and entreat him to locate my wife and child."

"It was a reasonable scheme," said Calavera, his tone now indicating a hint of admiration. "You had no reason to suspect the man was not acting alone."

"Precisely!" Sierra said, once again agitated but remembering to moderate his volume halfway through the second syllable. "The Frenchman asked me more questions, and I answered as incompletely as I dared. His eyes... He knew I was not telling him everything I knew, but he seemed entirely confident he would succeed in spite of that.

"When he was finished his interrogation, he opened the door and admitted a second man. They spoke in French to one another, but I understand the language, so I learned there were several more of them. They'd been expecting His Lordship's library to be somewhere outside the Palace - which, in effect, I expect it is - and so their leader had not been prepared to enter that building, and would have to devise a means of doing so. Naturally he didn't intend to construct his plan in front of me, so the second man was instructed to guard me until he returned.

"It was a very long evening, during which I didn't know whether the Frenchman had made his attempt, or whether he was still plotting. I slept very little, and when I did I dreamed only of my family: hidden away, imprisoned, frightened.

"Early in the morning a third Frenchman arrived, to relieve the second one. My former guard was given instructions to return to where these men were staying, and rest after being awake the entire night. The plan was ready, and their leader was taking most of the rest of their comrades into the Palace immediately. I was both relieved and more distressed to hear this: Whatever fate intended, some of it would soon be decided.

"At this time, it remained my wish that everyone in the tunnels would be killed, and that somehow afterward there would still be hope for my family's rescue. I expected that if my guard's Captain did not return after a lengthy interval, he would return to his fellows. I doubted he would leave me alive in that scenario, but I was prepared to accept this, if somehow my wife and daughter would manage to survive.

"The two of us waited for several hours. I tried to keep count of how many times the clocks chimed, but I lost track when I suspected I'd missed one instance. After that I became too distracted, through anxiety and insufficient sleep.
"At last the leader returned, his external appearance terribly dishevelled compared to when I had last seen him. I could see he was livid, but he was managing to remain controlled. He threatened to kill me, for withholding the information that there would be Guardsmen inside the tunnels. This came as a great shock to me; I insisted that I had not expected this in the slightest, and my sincerity must have shown through my fright, for he believed me. Then he demanded I identify the Guardsmen who had confronted him: a Lieutenant, with curled shoulder-length hair worn loose, his moustache and beard trimmed with the precision of a watchmaker."

Dorado snorted. "That describes you rather efficiently, Diego."

After sparing a grimace for his comrade, Calavera indicated that Sierra should resume.

"We've never met, Lieutenant, but I know your reputation, and there are many Guardsmen I've only seen in passing who I can recognise by their descriptions. One of my duties is to be observant. So I knew it was you, and it was clear to me from the Frenchman's disposition that if I pretended I could not satisfy him, he would kill me, and possibly my family as well. Forgive me, Lieutenant Calavera, but I felt I had no choice."

"You didn't. There is nothing to forgive," Calavera said, and he meant it.

Sierra was so pitifully grateful to hear this that for a moment Dorado feared the clerk would fall to his knees and kiss Calavera's hand. Perhaps the Lieutenant feared the same thing, because he prompted Sierra to continue.

"The Frenchman asked me for more information about you, but I have little to none, so he quickly gave up. Then he told me he and his compatriot would be taking their leave. I was free to do what I liked, provided I make no attempt to return to the Palace and warn the Baron of what was happening. He had men guarding the entrances who knew what I looked like, and had orders to kill me on sight if I approached.

"He was about to depart, then, but I demanded news of my family. He told me they were unharmed, and being treated well, but they would remain his prisoners until his business was concluded. He said if I attempted to locate them, they would be killed to protect his secrets. Then he simply left. After waiting a few moments, I opened my door, inspected the streets to make certain he and his comrade were gone, then hurried to the Stronghold to warn you. But you were not there, so I waited outside for you to arrive."

"However, I met up with Dorado, and you wanted to warn me when I was alone."

"I was frightened. I didn't feel that..."

"You didn't feel you could trust anyone," said Dorado, doing his best to emulate Calavera's gentle tone. "Given what you'd endured, that was a perfectly reasonable concern. But you did trust someone - without being aware of it."

"I did? What? Who - ?"

"Lanza," Calavera said, his tone simultaneously admonishing and forgiving his friend's bluntness, while also reclaiming control of the discussion because of it. "Señor Sierra, you were specifically told to avoid the Palace so you would have nowhere to go, and likewise instructed not to warn the Baron so it would occur to you to warn me. It was expected you would leave your home and seek me out, and when you did, one or more of the Frenchman's team followed you. Do not look so distressed; your enemy is exceptionally clever. Further you should take it as a compliment that in spite of your fear and lack of experience in matters of mortal risk the
Frenchman expected you to be concerned enough for my safety to take action. Your actions were brave and honourable."

This provided some consolation to Sierra, but suddenly something else occurred to him. "If I'm under observation, then when I started to follow the two of you, they identified your friend as well." He turned to Dorado. "I've put you in terrible danger!"

"When my friend Diego Calavera's life is threatened, there is no other place for me to be."

"Lanza..." Calavera spoke softly, but his tone put Dorado on the alert. "How close did Sierra come to Saquer's home?"

At once Dorado understood the reason for his friend's manner, and it filled him with dread. "He stopped in front of the building, and looked inside the window."

"No!" said Sierra, also coming to realise what was happening. "I'm so sorry, I never -"

"Hush," Dorado said, not unkindly, but firmly enough that the command was obeyed. Then he waited for his Lieutenant to tell him how they would proceed.

Calavera's decision was swift. "Take Sierra to the Stronghold and present him to the Captain. Corzo was with me when I confronted the Frenchman; the fact our enemy didn't ask who he was means the Captain was recognised. Advise him of the danger, and tell him you and I have spoken about the assignment. He will know how best to proceed from there.

"If he decides upon a course of action that requires more men, recommend Benton. The two of you can communicate in English. I do not know whether or not our enemy understands that language, do not assume he doesn't, but if that is the case it may give you an advantage."

Dorado nodded. Calavera returned the nod, then started running toward the home of Saquer al-Farik.

Dorado watched him go, and as soon as Calavera rounded a corner he grabbed Sierra by the arm and started walking quickly after him. "Come."

Sierra was understandably perplexed. "But the Stronghold is in the other direction!"

"I know. I've been there."

"You said you would take me to the Captain!"

"I said nothing. There wasn't time to argue." Indeed, if Dorado had begun to argue, Calavera would have specified that his directive was an order, at which point Dorado would have been honour-bound to obey.

Sierra stopped struggling and matched Dorado's brisk pace. He jerked his arm so the Guardsman would release him, and Dorado immediately complied.

"You are a good man, Luis Sierra. I never say such things lightly."

"Thank you."

Although Dorado could still hear the shame in the man's tone, he sensed that his and Calavera's words were helping a great deal to restore the clerk's self-respect.

They were one street away from al-Farik's home when Dorado stopped and grabbed
Sierra's arm again.

Dorado could feel the man's questioning urgency, but the clerk didn't speak, which was good, because the Guardsman needed to concentrate.

He smelled smoke.

When he and Calavera had met for the second time that day, Dorado had noticed, in addition to the new hole in the Lieutenant's Tunic, that Calavera smelled like he'd been near a fire. The odour was less pleasant than wood smoke, leading Dorado to conclude the fire had been caused by burning oil. It was a distinct aroma, and now he was smelling it again - but Calavera would not be the cause.

This meant that the smell belonged to someone else who had participated in the events of Calavera's morning. It was neither the Captain nor the Baron; they would have identified themselves the moment Dorado had stopped walking.

Which meant this odour must belong to one of the Frenchmen who'd trespassed into the Baron's tunnels.

And now that he was no longer in motion, Dorado could locate the origin of the scent.

The enemy was behind him.

*****

As he ran to his friend's home, Calavera hoped his instincts were mistaken, although he was pretty certain they were not. The fact that Dorado's impulses had led him to the same conclusion reinforced Calavera's grim certainty. The Frenchman had wanted more information about him than Sierra had been able to provide, so it stood to reason that he would seek this information from someone Calavera had recently visited.

From the direction of al-Farik's home came the sound of a gunshot.

The Moor did not possess a firearm.

A second discharge sounded.

Then a third.

Calavera would dearly have appreciated the comfort of a weapon in his right fist, but that would have slowed him down, and he could not bear the thought of arriving one second later when his friend was in danger.

Even less so when he was the one who'd brought the danger to al-Farik's door.

Calavera rounded the final corner and was three doors away from his destination. Townspeople were scrambling into their homes, or running away down the street, no doubt frightened by the sounds of shooting. One concerned citizen off in the distance was calling for the Watch.

al-Farik's door opened, and two men Calavera had never seen before hurriedly exited. The
Lieutenant stopped running, set his legs, and drew his pistol, all the while remarking with some satisfaction that three shots indicated three assailants, suggesting one was no longer capable of retreating from his friend's home.

The two men noticed him. Aside from them and the Guardsman, there was no one else remaining in the street. They turned to face him. Calavera took aim. Then, following the example of his beloved commander in the catacombs, the Lieutenant shouted:

"Halt! In the name of the King!"

They reached for their swords.

Calavera shot the faster one in the chest.

He spun around and fell face-first into the dirt.

His companion, weapon in hand, glowered at Calavera and started striding toward him.

The Lieutenant replaced his pistol in his belt and unsheathed his own blade. He'd refused to draw it during the brawl in the tavern, it had been useless against the golden serpent, and he'd been disappointed in the catacombs when the Captain had triggered the Vulcan room and made using it impossible.

This time, Calavera promised himself, his sword's thirst was going to be satisfied.

Chapter End Notes

As of this instalment, the Official Word Minimum Per Chapter is **1800**.
Violence In The Streets

Chapter Summary

A shot is fired;
A knife is tossed.
A sword is thrust;
A life is lost.

**CALAVERA'S** sword whistled through the air, meeting the other man's blade with a ringing sound that echoed loudly against the walls of the deserted street.

He was an experienced swordsman and, like Calavera, the unusual force of his first swing was both a challenge and a warning.

The other man wanted blood as badly as Calavera did.

This pleased the Lieutenant no end.

He let the other man come to him, and his opponent was happy to oblige, stepping forward and thrusting for Calavera's chest, then his shoulder, next trying a short cut to the wrist, then quickly lunging for his belly, which forced Calavera to hop backward out of range.

His enemy intended to press forward, but he hesitated.

This saved his life. If he'd lunged again, Calavera would have skewered him.

The Lieutenant's adversary realised it. He smiled.

Calavera lunged at him; he parried easily and swung for the Lieutenant's hip. The Guardsman's sword whistled again as it sliced through the air, smacking the attack aside.

Then came the sound of more whistling, in the distance. It was pitched high, intended to carry across many city blocks. The first whistle was met by a second, further away. But it would not be distant for long.

The Watch was on its way.

*****

Dorado threw Sierra roughly to the ground, dropping to a crouch over him and drawing his pistol.

A shot sounded behind him, and a ball smacked into the wall where he'd been standing. Covering Sierra with his body, Dorado twisted his body to return fire.
Just in time to see his attacker duck behind a building.

As Dorado rose, his aim never wavering from the corner where his foe had disappeared, he patted Sierra's back. "Stay here. Make no sound."

The clerk mumbled something brief which sounded like assent, so the Guardsman left him, and advanced, slowly, upon the corner of the building.

Dorado did not hear the sound of a ramrod packing a pistol.

But some men carry two guns with them.

He stopped, the better to listen. No breathing, no whisper of fabric on a wall, no sudden shuffling of boots on the ground.

High-pitched whistling in the distance.

Something came around the corner. Dorado tensed his finger -

No! It wasn't a man; it was a pistol.

Then the man himself came around the corner, a knife in his right hand, his arm raised to throw it at Dorado.

The Guardsman allowed the thrown pistol to strike him awkwardly in the chest so he could re-aim his own weapon.

His enemy continued his turn, and ducked.

Dorado fired, and his shot went high. At the same time the Frenchman launched his knife - straight toward Luis Sierra.

The clerk screamed.

Dorado desperately wanted to know how badly the man was injured, but he didn't dare look away from such a cunning enemy. He stepped back and drew his sword. The Frenchman - for there was no mistaking him from the description - rose quickly and did likewise.

The rallying whistles of the Watch continued in the distance.

The Frenchman held his sword in a position of defence, with his body turned sideways, and began quickly backing away. He intended to depart before the Watch arrived.

"Sierra!" Dorado called. "How badly are you injured?"

The clerk tried to speak, but started coughing. Since his charge was conscious, Dorado took several long paces toward the Frenchman, closing the distance between them, hoping Sierra's wound did not require immediate attention.

"My arm!" Sierra said at last. "The knife is stuck in my arm!"

But Dorado didn't hear the man's second sentence, for he was already advancing upon the Frenchman, who instantly changed his direction and met the Guardsman's attack with one of his own. Their swords met once, twice, a third time, and then the Frenchman stepped back and threw sand into Dorado's face.
He must have scooped it up in his left hand after throwing the knife, before standing and
drawing his sword with the right. Dorado hadn't noticed the closed left fist because the man had
been retreating with only his right side facing his opponent, a common defensive manoeuvre.

All of this came to Dorado in an instant as his eyes burned and watered and the Frenchman
pressed his advantage, striking and striking while all Dorado could do was desperately deflect the
attacks and furiously try to blink the dust out of his tortured eyes. Another attack came, Dorado
blocked it, and the Frenchman shoved, knocking him to the ground.

Certain to always keep his sword between himself and the Frenchman, Dorado allowed
himself to fall heavily. He landed on his tailbone and his left elbow. Jolts of pain shot through
them - but he kept his sword raised.

The Frenchman stepped forward and stood over him. Dorado was on his behind, but he
held his sword at the ready. And his vision had returned.

It was not the outcome the Frenchman had most wanted, but it was certainly satisfactory.
"Well fought," he said, his haughty tone conveying both genuine praise and supercilious mockery.
"I look forward to completing your humiliation at a later time." He stepped back, sheathed his
sword, bowed his head to Dorado, then turned and ran, away from the sound of the Watch's
whistles.

*****

Calavera's opponent was a fine swordsman, although not quite a match for the Lieutenant,
and with the sounds of the Watch's whistles growing ever nearer, he knew time was on Calavera's
side as well.

The Lieutenant was beginning to pity his foe. He did not mind killing a man by virtue of his
own superior skill, but he felt the external pressure of approaching Guardsmen was an unfair
advantage.

"Tell me where Luis Sierra's family is being held," he said, focusing only on defence while
he made his offer, "and I give you my word you will be neither executed nor tortured."

His adversary's first reaction was surprise that Calavera had spoken in French. But he
quickly recovered and gave his decision. "When the Watch arrives they will find nothing but your
bleeding corpse." And he attacked again.

Calavera parried, parried, then parried and riposted, which the man easily knocked aside
before thrusting again, but he stepped too far forward and Calavera sidestepped the man's blade,
using his own to slash his opponent across the shin.

The Lieutenant circled further to his enemy's right side. The other man's injured leg kept
him from turning fast enough.

Calavera thrust his sword into the side of the man's neck.

The Lieutenant hurriedly withdrew it, before his foe's collapse would have made it more
difficult, and without staying to watch his opponent die he ran to Saqer al-Farik's home and looked
through the window.
The table and one chair had been knocked over. A man, clothed like the two Calavera had killed in the street, lay face-down on the floor. al-Farik's face was bruised and bleeding, and his left hand was pressed against a bleeding wound in his side, but he was standing, his right hand clutching the back of the remaining upright chair for support.

"It's me, Saqer," Calavera announced before opening the door.

"Come in, my friend," said al-Farik, smiling despite his considerable pain.

Calavera entered and helped him into the chair. It occurred to the Guardsman to comment that in this precise situation such rigid furniture was more practical than a large cushion, but he had more important topics to discuss. "Are your injuries severe?"

It hurt al-Farik to breathe, so he spoke in measured cadences. "The marks on my face are of little concern. The wound in my side is not fatal, if treated in time. I will be told to remain in bed for several days, which I will ignore, resulting in a shorter recovery period than anticipated. Every movement of my torso and left arm will hurt for a week, and after that I will only experience pain when I bend forward, when I twist too far around or too quickly, and when I cough. That will take a month to fade away, although afterward I will still feel the occasional sting in exceptional circumstances. My strength and mobility will be fully restored in less than three months."

"You seem unaccountably certain of all this."

al-Farik raised his shirt on the right side, revealing a round scar in the same place as the wound on his left. "There is something to be said for symmetry."

"Are you able to stand? Shall I take you to a physician?"

"When the Watch arrives, we can send for Domínguez. That will save me the agony of walking. Let me instead tell you what happened. You needn't remain standing over me; help yourself to the other chair."

Calavera complied; he knew better than to argue with his friend, whatever the man's condition.

"They entered without knocking, and drew their pistols. They spoke Spanish, well enough, but with distinct French accents. They demanded to know if you had a family, and who your closest friends were. I did not believe it was a good idea to tell them. My refusals were impolite - after all, they had entered my home uninvited.

"They struck me several times about the face and body, until one man allowed his zeal to overcome his caution and I took control of his pistol, shooting one of his comrades."

"Is the man dead?"

"You come into my home and insult me?"

"My apologies, old friend. These men have taken a mother and child hostage; we need to know where they are being held."

al-Farik nodded, accepting the apology in the same spirit of demi-seriousness with which he'd protested Calavera's 'insult' in the first place. "It is regrettable I did not know this; I would have aimed lower.

"In any event, there was a struggle, in which I was shot at twice, once successfully,
whereupon they elected to depart before the Watch arrived, leaving me for dead. The next thing I heard was your voice, and a pistol shot. I expect when the Watch arrives they will find two dead Frenchmen in the street?"

"They will."

From outside Calavera and al-Farik heard Dorado's voice loudly issuing commands. "You tend to this man. Keep his arm motionless. You and you, come inside with me. The rest of you, keep lookout. These men have allies, who may return in strength." Then his voice changed, and he called out, even more loudly, "Calavera?"

"Dorado!" the Lieutenant answered, shouting to be heard on the other side of al-Farik's door. "All clear! Saqer has been injured!"

The door flew open and Dorado burst in, walking straight toward the injured Moor. "My deepest apologies, this is my fault. I knew Diego was being followed but I didn't think to check whether the clerk was himself under observation - "

"Lanza, for the love of God," said Calavera. "If you hadn't noticed Sierra, neither of us would be here to help Saqer at all."

Dorado looked to al-Farik, desperation in his eyes. The Moor smiled back at him.

"I accept whatever apologies are necessary, with pleasure and enthusiasm."

"Thank you," said Dorado, with such relief that Calavera wished the Baron and the Captain could have been present to witness it: Lanza Dorado taking responsibility for the well-being of Saqer al-Farik. That would have dispelled all of their doubts about his ability to accept a Moor as a comrade.

Not that their reservations mattered any longer. Even if Saqer hadn't already refused to go along on Calavera's expedition, he was no longer fit to travel.

Two Watchmen entered, and one of them went straight to al-Farik, his eyes wide. "Saqer, are you all right?"

Praise God, another man Calavera could trust with the life of a Moor! "Do you know Domínguez, the physician?" the Lieutenant said.

"I certainly do," said the Watchman, then noticed the design of Calavera's Tunic and added, "Lieutenant."

"Bring him here immediately. Tell him al-Farik's been shot in the side." Then, for the benefit of the other Watchman, he added, "Saqer saved the physician's life during the Revolution."

al-Farik chuckled at Calavera, though it hurt him. "You needn't be concerned for me where these two men are concerned, my friend. They have been guests in my home. We have played Pachisi, and shared exaggerations of past exploits together."

Calavera looked at the Watchman who had not gone immediately to al-Farik's side, standing guard at the door. "My apologies, for not giving you my full trust."

"Not at all, Sir. You were thinking of your friend. Perhaps, someday, caution in such matters will not be necessary."
"Perhaps. Thank you."

He nodded, then he and his friend departed to bring the physician.

"You also must go," said al-Farik to Calavera. "I expect you need to advise your superiors of these latest events."

"That can wait until Domínguez arrives."

"Nonsense." al-Farik looked up at Dorado. "You have another injured man with you, do you not?"

"We do," said Dorado. "A clerk to the Baron of Girona. His wife and child have been taken. He has a knife buried in his forearm."

Calavera remembered that he'd heard Dorado instructing a Watchman to keep someone's arm motionless; he'd forgotten that until now. "How serious is the injury?"

Dorado shrugged. "We won't know until we remove the weapon." He tried to conceal it, but his tone indicated he believed it was quite serious indeed.

"There, you see?" said al-Farik. "You have attempted to conceal the truth from me, Diego. You are no longer welcome in my home."

Calavera rose from his chair; he'd been out-maneuvred.

"You are permitted, however," al-Farik said, "to visit me again, prior to departing on your special assignment."

"You have my word."

"Then I look forward to receiving you again."

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Calavera exited al-Farik's home, greeted the Watchmen outside, and immediately took charge, ordering them to remain on guard until their fellows arrived with Domínguez. Then he inspected Sierra's arm, and shared a look with Dorado: The injury was likely very severe, but for the time being neither of them would share that information with the clerk. Then Calavera, Dorado, Sierra, and two Watchmen hurried to the Stronghold together, as quickly as the pain in Sierra's arm would allow.

On the way, Calavera told Dorado what had befallen him since they'd parted company, and Dorado related his encounter with the Frenchman. This reminded Calavera of something he'd been meaning to ask Sierra.

Getting the clerk's attention, he said, "When you were relating the events of last night to us, you said the man guarding you was awaiting the return of his Captain. What prompted you to use that specific word?"

"They used it," said the clerk. "Once, when the guard was relieved. The new arrival said, in French, that their Captain had formulated a plan for getting into the Palace."
"Thank you. You have been exceptionally helpful."

The remainder of the walk passed in silence, but the moment they passed through the archway of the Stronghold, Calavera again began issuing instructions. "You," he said to one of the Watchmen who'd accompanied them, "take this man to the physician. Watch over him; he is a personal clerk to the Baron of Girona himself, and for this reason has been marked for death by enemies of the Crown."

Sierra gazed at him gratefully. "Godspeed," Calavera said, and squeezed the man's shoulder to give him support. He would need it.

Then the Lieutenant turned to the other Watchman. "Find the Sergeant of the Watch. Tell him everything that has happened. Advise him that our enemies are French soldiers, under the leadership of a Captain." The other man hurried to comply, and Calavera turned to Dorado, who was smiling slyly.

"Our enemy outranks you, Calavera," he said.

"Not in my country, he doesn't," said the Lieutenant tightly. "And while we are discussing military hierarchy, Guardsman, I recall you disobeyed my instructions earlier when I told you to escort Sierra directly to the Stronghold."

"My apologies, Lieutenant, but I believed you were not yourself, that you were acting in haste, out of concern for your friend al-Farik."

"And on what evidence did you base that conclusion?"

"You expected me to abandon you to face danger alone, and neglected to phrase those demands as a direct order."

Calavera was about to shout at him... but then realised he couldn't. So he laughed instead, from deep within his belly. The release of tension felt wonderful.

"Lanza..."

"I know, Sir. Ever at your service."

"Yes. Yes, you are." Calavera brought himself back under control. "I would like you to find Benton. Will you do that for me?"

"With pleasure."

"Thank you. The two of you will find me in the Captain's office."

Dorado nodded, and hurried away. Calavera headed toward Corzo's office. He was mounting a flight of stairs when yet another carriage arrived at the Stronghold, this one from Cataluña. He waited to see who was inside.

Turo Corvus was the second man to disembark. But he would have to wait for now. Calavera continued up the stairs, and when he reached the top he discovered the Captain walking in his direction.

"Calavera! Is that Corvus who just arrived?"

"Yes, Sir."
"Good, then your entire team is here at last."

Calavera was about to inform his Captain that they were still short one member, but Corzo continued without pausing for breath.

"However, before you talk to him, there's someone I want you to meet. We had a visitor at the Stronghold this morning, and he claims to know you!"
"I demand that you release me immediately!"

"Yes, I know," the Captain said. "From what my men tell me, you have been demanding that since you were escorted to this room,"

"And with good reason," said the prisoner. "This is an outrage!"

"Is it? You have chairs, a table, a pitcher of water, sufficient ventilation and sunlight - are you being maltreated?"

The prisoner opened his mouth to shout again, but paused, took a breath, and regained control of himself. "Captain. When I presented myself this morning, seeking to join your number, I was welcomed, I daresay enthusiastically. During my subsequent examination, the Lieutenant charged with my evaluation seemed more than satisfied with my skills, unless I am much mistaken. And then you arrived, and under your orders I was placed under arrest."

"Not precisely," said the Captain. "You merely have been deprived of liberty for a short period."

This was too fine a distinction for the prisoner to tolerate. He pounded his table and resumed shouting, more loudly than before. "You cannot do this without reason! I demand to know the justification for my incarceration!"

At this moment Calavera, who had been listening outside the door, revealed his presence by entering the room. "Do you deny," he said to the Captain's prisoner, none other than the honourable young man from the previous evening's tavern brawl, "that last night you knowingly assaulted a member of the Emerald Guard?"

The young man stared at Calavera, with his mouth half-open and a rush of conflicting emotions playing across his face: relief, shame, righteous indignation, concern. The Lieutenant found the reaction most satisfactory.

He wondered whether the Baron's tendency toward theatricality was contagious, like a plague.

Calming himself once more, the young man sat down at the table. "I was under the impression I had been forgiven that transgression."

"You were," said Calavera, stepping up to the table but not seating himself. "The reason for your detainment is somewhat more complex than that."

The Captain remained in the background, deciding the Lieutenant was best qualified to handle this situation.
"You are saying I am *not* being detained for striking you?" asked the young man.

"That is correct. Your behaviour last evening has absolutely nothing to do with your present circumstance."

"Then why did you mention it when you entered?"

"I needed for you to calm yourself."

The young man nodded at that, acknowledging his anger had gotten the better of him.

"I expect that last night I dealt you some lingering injuries. I hope they have not proved too discomfiting to you today."

Behind Calavera, the Captain snorted, evidently remembering Calavera's shout when Corzo had tackled him.

"Thus far today my bruises have provided me with some general aching and one instance of terrible pain." This made the young man unhappy, and Calavera permitted himself some pleasure at this regret before continuing. "But just recently I was involved in a rather serious altercation during which I was able to forget them entirely, so I believe they are well on their way to becoming irrelevant."

"I am pleased to hear it."

Now Calavera sat down. "The Captain informs me you wish to join our Order."

"That is correct. Or, rather..."

Calavera understood the pause: The young man did not want to admit that recent events had caused him to have second thoughts. The Lieutenant waited for him to continue, in whatever manner he chose.

The young man's decision was to veer slightly away from the topic for the time being. "It is important to me that you understand, when I presented myself this morning at the Stronghold, seeking to become a member of the Emerald Guard, I only used your name as a point of reference. At no time did I imply you endorsed my request."

"Of course." Calavera already knew the man well enough that this clarification had been unnecessary.

"I did not, of course, know you were a Lieutenant. Last night, when identifying yourself to Mendoza, you omitted that particular detail."

Calavera shrugged. "I saw no reason to elaborate. If my being a Guardsman proved insufficient to make him withdraw, knowing my rank would have made no difference either."

The young man smiled ruefully, and in his eyes Calavera saw the same would have been true for him.

"When I mentioned to your comrades this morning that I had made the acquaintance of Guardsman Diego Calavera, my failure to identify you as a Lieutenant elicited some surprise. Nevertheless, I was given leave to demonstrate my qualifications, and as I have said, I believe I was doing quite well. Then the Captain arrived. He asked me to confirm I'd mentioned your name this morning, which I did, specifying again that you and I had only just met, and once more making
it explicit that my request did not come with your endorsement. However, for reasons yet to be explained to me, the Captain ordered me brought here, against my will."

Corzo cleared his throat, an unambiguous warning that he would not long tolerate having his honour questioned, even by implication.

Calavera knew the young man well enough to understand that the message had been received, but he also knew that, in the face of perceived injustice, he would not give way. As the young man had done a few moments earlier, Calavera shifted to a less barbed topic. "What is your name, sir?"

"You did not ask it last night."

"I believed I would never see you again. And you asked my name because you knew I would."

And only then, upon speaking those words, did Calavera truly understand the full extent of the honour this young man was bestowing upon him: In the brief time they'd known each other, the Lieutenant had so impressed the young man that he'd chosen to join the Guard. Calavera was an inspiration to him. The immensity of it made him grateful he was sitting down.

"My name," said the young man, rising and extending his hand, "is Alejandro de Torre."

Calavera also stood, and shook his hand warmly. "I am pleased to know you better. Your name is familiar to me; may I enquire if you've ever had any relations within our ranks?"

"I have. My brother Antonio was a Guardsman, and before him our father Andrés served in the Revolutionary army."

Calavera had no voice for a moment, and so it was Corzo who spoke for both of them. "We knew both of those men. Their deaths were a great loss to this country, and their lives shone like a thousand stars."

de Torre lowered his head. "Thank you. I know that, coming from yourself, such esteem would have meant a great deal to both of them."

Calavera excused himself with a gesture and walked over to Corzo so they could speak without de Torre hearing. "Captain, even though this has been a day defined by danger and betrayal, I believe this man to be what he claims."

"I would like to believe that as well, but our enemy is especially clever."

"He is. And I have much to share with you which will only reinforce that opinion. But not only do I already know this young man to possess a strong moral character - as we would expect, given his heritage - but the events of the last twenty-four hours make it impossible that he is a spy for our French adversary. In the first place, I encountered him in the tavern before you and the Baron coerced me into the alleyway. Prior to that, was there anyone other than the two of you who knew I had been selected to lead the expedition?"

"Not even the King himself."

"Then the Frenchman certainly could not have known. And further, based upon events I am eager to impart to you, I am as certain as I can be that our enemy only learned my name after the confrontation in the catacombs, by which time de Torre was already here, was he not?"
"He was. Yes, you have convinced me." The Captain turned to his former prisoner. "You have my personal apologies, as well as those of the Emerald Guard, for the manner in which we have treated you since my arrival. I cannot, for reasons of security, explain to you fully why you were detained here, but you have my word that any man who appeared today petitioning us for membership, who was unknown to us, and who used Calavera's name, with or without his correct rank, would have been subjected to the same amount of suspicion and caution."

"I accept your apology," de Torre said. "It was obvious from the moment I arrived this morning that there is much going on, and also that most of it is shrouded in secrecy."

"You are free to go," said the Captain. "I hope," and he paused, for the answer was important to him, "that our behaviour has not poisoned your desire to join the Guard, that you will return to the Lieutenant on duty in order to complete your examination."

It took de Torre only the tiniest moment to reach his decision. "It is a soldier's duty to accept certain hardships without explanation, and you were quite correct earlier in your evaluation that despite my incarceration I was being well-treated. Further I believe sufficiently in your honours that I require no convincing that everything done today has been to make the best of difficult circumstances. I will complete my examination."

"I am pleased to hear it. From what I have seen, we will soon have the privilege of accepting you within our ranks."

de Torre nodded to the Captain; all was forgotten. But to Calavera he gave a look of confusion, and only then did the Lieutenant realise he'd been staring most intently at the young man, lost in thought.

These thoughts came to a conclusion. "Do you speak English?"

de Torre was quite understandably puzzled by this question, as was Corzo. "No, I do not."

"That is most regrettable," said Calavera, considerably more disappointed than he would have expected.

He and de Torre nodded to one another, and the latter departed.

Then the Lieutenant turned, and realised the Captain was glaring at him, an impatient frown upon his face.

Evidently he was beginning to understand just how many new tidings Calavera had to impart to him.

*****

Lanza Dorado knew Sean Benton rather well, but one needed only a passing acquaintance with the man to know where to find him within the Stronghold of any city. And so it was that after parting company with Diego Calavera, Dorado went directly to the stables, where indeed he heard the voice of the Englishman, loudly involved in one of its most common behaviours, the advocacy of better treatment for horses.

"You have to think of yourself as an innkeeper. If a man came to your door, exhausted and
covered in perspiration, would you give him any less than your full care and attention?"

"No, but - "

"Then how can you handle these horses with such disregard?"

"There are simply too many - "

"Too many? Are you trying to thin their ranks?"

"Of course not!"

"Just as a man requires sleep, food, and comfort, so does a horse. And these are the horses of the Emerald Guard. If - "

"If we do not treat them as they deserve, they cannot serve our country in her hour of need."

Benton whirled around, intending to rebuke the man who’d interrupted him, but when he saw it was Dorado his ire turned immediately to mirth. He removed his hat, shook out his damp hair (although as far as Dorado could tell it made no difference), covered his head once more, and then said, with a grin of self-deprecation, "Do I honestly say it as often as that?"

"Honestly? Yes, you do. Fortunately, it is always the sentence you employ to end the discussion, so as soon as anyone speaks it, the subject concludes."

Benton was not pleased with that answer, but he could not dispute the truth of it.

Dorado stepped over to the anxious stable hand, using his height to full advantage. A moment ago the boy had seen the new arrival as his ally and rescuer, but now, forced to look up at the Guardsman in a fashion which hurt his neck, he was not so certain.

"My friend is right. You have been trusted with the care of the Emerald Guard's horses. It is an honour, and a responsibility, not given lightly. Nothing less than perfect diligence is satisfactory, and there are no acceptable excuses."

"I understand." The boy was on the verge of tears. That had not been Dorado's intent at all.

"Sean, do you have anything you would like to say to this young man?"

Benton stepped forward as Dorado stepped back. "It is clear to me that you are very capable, and that you care for your charges. Your only mistakes stem from your haste, which is perfectly understandable given the tumult of the last few days. You lack experience; with that experience you will learn to give impeccable care with much more efficiency, and you will no longer find circumstances such as these intimidating. I have faith in you."

This time the boy did cry, but with relief. Benton patted him reassuringly on the shoulder, and then the two Guardsmen left him to his work.

Exiting the stables, they were greeted by the pleasant afternoon sunlight, but Dorado remained grim. Benton tried to console him.

"You and I, my friend, we have very high standards regarding certain things."

"Including the proper treatment of others."

"You merely miscalculated. All three of us are victims, in our respective ways, of the
current mood within the Stronghold."

"That mood is about to get worse."

"What do you mean?" said Benton, but then he heard the approaching hoofbeats, and underneath that the rumble of carriage wheels.

This was not another group of Guardsmen arriving from a distant province. Whoever these people were, they were in too great a hurry.

"Clear the Courtyard!" someone shouted, with the authority of a Lieutenant in his voice. The lingering Guardsmen, understanding that the new arrivals would need room in which to properly come to a halt, quickly complied.

Dorado and Benton mounted the stairs to where they had first greeted each other. From this vantage point they were able to identify the approaching vehicle as the personal carriage of the Baron of Girona, surrounded by six mounted Guardsmen, two in the back and four clearing a path in front.

"The Baron is rushing," Benton said.

The statement seemed simple, but it summarised a deep concern they both shared.

After a few moments of quiet contemplation, Benton broke the silence. "When you came to the stables just now, were you looking for me?"

"I was."

"Is this approaching thunderstorm likely to have something to do with the reason?"

"I hope so. Otherwise there is a new crisis, and this day has had more than its share already."

The four lead horsemen galloped into the Stronghold, and immediately split into two columns, leaving room for the carriage, which followed close behind and came to a shuddering stop, while the two horsemen in back also parted to rein in on the sides.

The carriage door opened, and the Baron stepped out, followed by two Guardsmen, who reached into the carriage and pulled out a fourth man. This man had an empty scabbard, blood on his forehead, and his hands tied behind his back.

The Baron searched the faces gathered around the Courtyard, and when he spotted the Captain, standing beside Calavera, he quickly began striding toward them, with the prisoner and his two personal escorts following closely behind. The crowd parted, giving the group a generous amount of space in which to proceed. The Baron directed some gestures over his head toward the Captain; Dorado took them to mean that he wanted a private room for himself and his prisoner, where the Captain and the Lieutenant would also be in attendance.

Corzo moved away immediately to prepare the room, but Calavera stayed where he was and also searched the crowd. He caught Dorado's eye and nodded to him, then tilted his head to the side, indicating Benton.

"Sean," said Dorado, finding the name more natural every time he spoke it, "it appears you are now a part of the maelstrom."
"TURO Corvus," said Calavera to the four Guardsmen playing Whisk at a table. "Have you seen him?"

One of these men believed the very mention of Corvus' name was inherently comical. Moved by his mirth, he spoke before the others.

"You're looking for Corvus the Curse, Lieutenant? No, we haven't seen him. What has he done this time, filled the Baron's chamber pot with lobsters?"

Of the other three, one man's face registered disapproval; he did not like to hear a fellow Guardsman spoken of with such contempt. The other two were known to Calavera, and he to them. They unconsciously shifted their bodies away from their jocular companion, and instead of an opinion of their companion's words their faces indicated concern for what might happen next.

One of these quickly interjected, to head off calamity. "Sir, I overheard Corvus and the others of his carriage being told that they would be quartered in Barracks Room Three."

"Thank you," said Calavera, nodding to him, and to the two who had not yet spoken. Then he walked over to the fourth man, stood directly above him, and looked down upon him, in every sense of the term.

"As for you, my pleasant fool, if you are ever so careless as to insult Turo Corvus within my earshot again, I will have you ejected from the Order on the basis of your disrespect for a fellow Guardsman. Once that is done, I will challenge you to a duel and pierce my sword through one of your limbs for casting aspersions upon a friend of mine."

The offender abruptly lost his state of self-amusement and darted his eyes quickly from Calavera to the faces of his companions, seeing in all of them the same thing he himself believed: That having thus given his word, the Lieutenant would make certain to do as he'd threatened.

He opened his mouth to apologise, but Calavera had already turned his back on him, and was walking to Barracks Room Three.

"Diego!"

In all the years they had known each other, Calavera had gone looking for Turo Corvus many, many times, but on none of those occasions had he ever been the first to espy his friend; always it had been the other way around. And always, for some unfathomable reason, the Lieutenant never remembered this tradition until he heard his friend's voice, calling him from a direction in which Calavera was not looking.

He turned in that direction now, and there was his friend, scurrying toward him.
"Turo! It is good to see you, my friend."

Slowing his advance only to such extent that he would not knock his friend to the ground when they collided, Corvus threw his arms wide, smashed his chest into Calavera's, and slapped his arms around his friend's shoulders, squeezing tightly. "Diego Calavera, my dear friend, when we are too long parted, I am incomplete."

Calavera's bruises howled in protest at this abuse perpetrated upon them in the name of brotherly love, but he managed to keep himself from exclaiming, and gave outlet to his sudden agitation by returning the embrace, tightly.

Also, he was every bit as pleased to see Corvus. He could not imagine traveling to New Spain to seek out the temple of an ancient civilization without him.

Corvus broke the embrace, and gave his friend a fond inspection, but his face suddenly grew puzzled. "There is a gunshot hole in your Tunic."

"Yes."

"It is very recent."

"Much has happened recently. I am eager to share it with you."

Corvus' eyes widened with anticipation. "There is something you want me to do. Name it. Anything you ask."

Calavera led Corvus out of the way of curious eyes and ears.

"Ah," said Corvus, "this has something to do with what has been happening here in the last few days."

"It does."

"And it is a secret, hidden from all but those who have been selected from among the finest here assembled."

"It is."

"You have been appointed to lead. And I am one of your chosen."

"Turo, might I please have the privilege of telling you myself?"

"Of course, of course."

And then Calavera told him, and, as was so often the case, Corvus did that which was not expected of him, which in this instance was to remain silent until Calavera had finished.

"I am honoured that you want me at your side."

"It is nothing less than what you have earned."

"Who else will be accompanying us?"

"Lanza Dorado."

"Dorado?"
"Yes. He is an excellent man."

"There is no doubt of it. But..."

"He has forgiven you for the incident at Tudela."

"Tudela? Where I saved his life?"

Corvus looked so bewildered as to why Dorado might harbour some ill-will over being nearly incinerated that Calavera wanted to laugh, at his friend's unique view of the world, and at himself for briefly having forgotten about it.

"If not Tudela, then what is your reservation?"

"Dorado, he... frightens me. Somewhat."

Again Calavera wanted to laugh, and this time stifling it was even more difficult.

"My friend, Lanza frightens everybody. But look into his eyes; you will see the truth of him in there."

"I will," said Corvus, nodding sharply. "Thank you. And who else shall be with us on this most extraordinary journey?"

"Alas, that I do not know. There is a fifth man, who has already been chosen, but whose identity has not yet been revealed to me, although I believe I know who he might be. The Baron and the Captain gave me leave to select three men. I chose yourself and Dorado, but the third man refused."

"Refused? You are a Lieutenant, under the direct orders of the Captain and the Baron themselves. How can a Guardsman refuse?"

"The man I chose was not a Guardsman. It was Saqer al-Farik."

Corvus understood immediately. "Ah. Well. That must have been very difficult, for both of you."

"It was."

"So you are left without a fourth man."

"For the time being. The Baron and the Captain approved my initial choices, but they do not yet know about Saqer's refusal. Fortunately, since then I may have found his replacement, so when I advise our superiors of the vacancy it may also transpire that I inform them I have a solution. And further, there is another man... but that circumstance is complicated, and I should not discuss it."

"As you think best."

"And now, regrettably, we are awaited at an interrogation."

When earlier the Baron had arrived at the Stronghold with a prisoner and indicated to the Captain that he wanted Corzo to prepare a room for them, Calavera had asked the Captain's leave to seek out Corvus and recruit him. The Captain had agreed, and informed Calavera that when he returned with Corvus he could find everyone in the room which had recently held the unwilling Alejandro de Torre.
So this is where the two Guardsmen now directed themselves, and neither man was surprised to discover that the door was closed, with a Guardsman at attention on either side. Calavera knew both of them: the brothers Delgado, Roberto and Emilio. Their skills were neither exceptional nor mediocre, but their loyalty and devotion were without equal. For this reason, from the very moment there had been an Esperanza, these two men had been the primary Guardsmen responsible for protecting the Baron of Girona. Calavera could not think of any men better.

"Greetings, Lieutenant," said Roberto.

"The Baron is expecting you," said Emilio.

Roberto knocked loudly on the door, and Emilio lifted the latch and opened it. Calavera and Corvus stepped inside, and the door closed behind them.

The interrogation was well underway. The central table, which still held de Torre's water pitcher, now also held various sharp metal instruments, some of which bore signs of having already been used. The Baron's captive was tied to a chair, naked, and in addition to the wounds he'd borne when he had first arrived, his body now bled from at least a dozen new openings. The Baron's face was a mask of controlled calm, the Captain and Dorado wore pictures of forced neutrality, and Benton looked like he wanted to be ill. He was continually running his fingers over his palms in order to remain otherwise immobile.

When they heard the two men come in, everyone turned to Calavera and Corvus. The Baron looked displeased with the Lieutenant, but when he saw Corvus his expression softened, demonstrating that he understood and accepted the reason for Calavera's late arrival. He tilted his head, indicating he wanted a private discussion with the Captain and the Lieutenant.

Those three men moved to a corner of the room, while Corvus stood beside Dorado and Benton, none of them speaking.

"Dorado has explained to me, in brief, much of what has happened," said the Baron. "Our French enemy did not lie to Sierra when he told him there were men guarding the Palace, ensuring he could not return. The man in the chair is one of them, who was seen behaving suspiciously outside one of the Palace gates."

Calavera had always suspected there were men assigned to watch the Palace from without on behalf of the Baron; this he took as confirmation.

"He has already confessed - proudly and without coercion - to being one of the Gendarmes of Cardinal Richelieu of France, as we had already suspected. I am now seeking to learn where they are keeping Luis Sierra's family, and what their ultimate purpose is, here in San Rafael, neither of which, of course, he is willing to impart to me."

The Baron glanced over his shoulder at Benton, and when he turned back his face bore a scowl for Calavera.

"Benton has been good enough not to say so, but he does not have the temperament for what the present circumstances require. In fact, I intended to bar him from entering, but Dorado informed us that his presence was at your request. He also indicated that Saqer al-Farik was seriously wounded, and would not be able to join your team. Do you propose to make Benton his replacement?"

"I do." And this was perhaps not the most appropriate time for Calavera to say what he felt obliged to add, but there might not be another time. "However, Your Lordship, there is something I
must clarify. It would be dishonest of me, and disrespectful to both yourself and my friend, if I were not to correct your apparent misapprehension that Saqer will not be participating in the expedition because of his injury. In truth, the matter had already been decided beforehand: He refused, as a matter of honour."

de Tarso's scowl turned into a glare, and then the Baron's face grew pensive. He looked Calavera over, from head to toe and back again, as though deciding something.

"Very well," he said. "I thank you for your honesty. We will treat Benton as the likely fourth member of your team, assuming the Captain has no objection."

"I have none. Benton is a fine man."

"Then let us return to our latest unpleasant task without delay. Every moment we waste puts Maria and Claudia Sierra's lives in greater hazard."

The Baron returned to the instruments on the table, the Captain positioned himself two steps behind him, and Calavera moved to stand beside Dorado, Corvus, and Benton. To the latter, he whispered, "You need not look upon this, if you wish to turn away."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Benton, Calavera at once noting his unusual formality of address, "but I chose not to speak out against this. Therefore I must face it."

Calavera patted his shoulder, in respect as well as support.

Meanwhile the Baron continued his grisly business. He was precise, almost delicate, but the howls he drew out of his subject spoke of intense agony sufficient to make one yearn for death, and the lesser tortures of the fires of Hell.

In a very short matter of time, the man in the chair's inarticulate shouting turned to yelling, begging in his native French for the pain to cease:

"Stop! Enough! For pity's sake, I will tell you everything! We are holding the woman and child in a wine cellar, under the tavern in the Calle Arenque. Please, no more!"

The Baron whirled around and tossed the needle-like implement he'd been using onto the table, then with the same hand pointed a finger at Corzo. "Captain! Take these men and go there at once. Slaughter anyone who stands in your way without the slightest hesitation, and bring me back that woman and child!"

Corzo headed straight for the door. He did not signal the other Guardsmen to follow him, for there was no need: They were already making haste for the exit.

None of them, not even Calavera, had ever heard the Baron shout before.

As soon as the door closed behind them, the Captain said, quietly but clearly:

"Remain here."

The Guardsmen stopped, as much from astonishment as anything else. Their Captain smiled weakly at them.

"With the interrogation thus concluded, the Baron will express regret that the torture had been necessary. He will untie the man's hands from behind his back, and pour him a glass of water, which the man will have no reason to refuse, believing that the Baron has accepted his lie about
the wine cellar. Then, in casual tones, and in French, the Baron will lament the cruelties brought
about by warring nations, and impart his dream that one day all the nations of Europe will co-exist
in peace and harmony. The Gendarme will agree, not wanting to risk displeasing the Baron, and he
will drink his water, likely without prompting, because his throat will be very dry. He will embrace
and adopt the Baron's conciliatory manner, but at no time will it occur to him to wonder why his
legs have not been untied. Then, when the Baron sees that the powder he sprinkled into the man's
water has taken full effect, they will begin joking together, united in the Brotherhood of Mankind.
The Baron will casually mention the tavern's wine cellar, and how clever it was of his new friend to
send his Guardsmen in the wrong direction. He will ask no questions, but he will lead the
conversation, and the man in the chair will soon willingly divulge everything the Baron wishes to
know."

Having concluded his explanation, he waited for comment, but none of his Guardsmen had
anything to say. Benton, whose face was pale and damp, looked as though he did want to speak, but
was afraid to open his mouth for fear the contents of his stomach would seize that opportunity to
exit his body.

Corzo looked at him gently. "Despite his terrible pain, our enemy - a willing participant in
the taking of a mother and daughter, I might add - still had the presence of mind to lie to us. A man
like that can only be tricked if the torture is sufficient to convince him that we believe it will
work."

"I understand, Captain," said Benton, albeit not without some difficulty. "Nevertheless, may
I request that we move on to some different topic?"

At this the Lieutenant asked Corzo a question with his eyes, but the Captain answered with
the tiniest shake of his head. He did not think Benton should be told of the journey to Yaxax'tun's
temple until after he, Calavera, and the Baron had discussed his candidacy properly. Calavera
bowed his eyelids, indicating acknowledgment, and turned his thoughts elsewhere, to a person they
had visited more than once in the last hour.

Time passed in silence, and after a rather short interval the Baron exited the room and
approached them. "There is a cabin, North of the city, in the centre of a dense forest. It is rumoured
to be haunted."

"I know it," said the Captain. "It was built before I was born, by an eccentric and reclusive
ornithologist. Nobody knew it existed until a young couple from a nearby village stumbled upon it,
while trying to elope. By then, the man had been dead several years, leaving the cabin, as you
might expect, in a state the lovers found most ruinous to their romantic escapade. That is likely
how the stories of haunting began."

"The cabin *is* haunted," the Baron said. "The Gendarmes have been occupying it for almost
two weeks. Their leader, a Captain by the name of Sébastien Coléreaux, has been given command
of twenty Gendarmes and tasked with obtaining a certain journal in my possession," and here he
looked meaningfully at Calavera, "so that the Cardinal can have it for himself. There is more to the
story, and it somehow involves stars, in a fashion I have not yet determined, but for now we have
enough information to locate Sierra's family." He fixed Corzo with an uncharacteristically
passionate expression and said, with a tone to match his visage, "Bring them back, Martial, or by
God I will declare war on all of France!"

Then he went back into the room, leaving more silence behind him.

Corvus spoke first. "He swore to it! He was exaggerating, surely - he would not declare war
on France, would he?"
The Captain shrugged. "If Sierra's wife and daughter die as a result of the Cardinal's actions, the Baron will have Richelieu assassinated as a matter of principle. It amounts to the same thing."

Calavera spoke up, shattering the Baron's spell with the curt voice he employed for issuing orders. "Sean, procure for us the five most capable horses in the stables. Inform anyone who interferes that they are defying the Baron himself. Lanza, Turo, gather provisions. We require food and water for seven, as well as remedies in the event the Sierras have come to harm."

"And muskets."

"Yes, Lanza. Thank you. I will meet all of you in the courtyard in ten minutes."

Calavera waited for them to hurry away, but they did not. "Go! What are you all waiting for?"

Behind him the Captain cleared his throat. "Perhaps they feel these orders require the sanction of your superior officer?"

Calavera was shocked at himself; his thoughts had moved so fully into the future that he'd neglected the present. "Captain! My apologies - "

Corzo waved the inconsequential slight away; there were more important matters at hand. "Go," he said to the others, and they quickly set about their assigned tasks.

As soon as they were gone, and once he'd ascertained that the Delgados could not hear him, the Captain said, "You already think of yourself as their leader. Who could fault you for that?"

"Captain," and this was not easy for Calavera to say, "when I assumed command of those men just now, it was in anticipation of something I feel I must ask of you."

It took the Captain merely one small moment to guess what that was. "You wish for me to remain behind."

"If you please, Sir. I feel this would be an ideal opportunity for us to begin working together as a single unit."

"You are quite right. Although of course I am disappointed I shall not have the opportunity to once again make the acquaintance of Captain Sébastien Coléreaux of the Cardinal's Gendarmes. Ah, well. I shall have to content myself with inspecting the tavern in the Calle Arenque. Perhaps our prisoner was not lying entirely, and I will discover some of the enemy hiding there after all."

"Be careful, Captain. It may be a trap."

"Calavera," said the Captain with mock condescension, "you are speaking to the man who is going to be clearing bodies out of the Baron's catacombs, remember?"

"Of course," Calavera said, his tone every bit as serious as Corzo's, and no more. "Now, if you please," and he began walking, indicating that the Captain should accompany him, which he did.

"Where are we going?"

"There is one more item I wish to discuss."
"I am discovering, Calavera, that with you there always is."

"You will recall that I asked Benton to provide five horses?"

"Yes, because there were five of us going to the cabin, or so I thought, but of course that was before... " He stopped walking. "Calavera, this route will take us to the area where we determine whether new applicants to the Guard are suitable for admission."

"Yes."

"But a moment ago we agreed that the men you would take to the cabin would be only those who were also accompanying you to New Spain."

"Yes."

"Do you perhaps have in mind a modification to the plan the Baron and I devised for you that you would like to propose to me at this time?"

"Frankly, Captain, Saqer's refusal leaves a great hole to be filled."

"And you believe this hole to be the size of two Guardsmen, not only one?"

His tone indicated that the implication of this belief might be somewhat insulting to the Order of the Emerald Guard.

"It is not as simple as that, Captain. There are qualities and viewpoints that I feel are essential, and... With respect, Captain, Saqer was the first man I decided upon for the assignment. The other two fell into place around him."

The Captain said nothing. He required Calavera to say more.

"Captain, leaving aside considerations of what comes later, is there any harm in allowing de Torre to come with us to the cabin right now?"

"He is inexperienced and untrained."

"And if the supervising Lieutenant were to assure us that in his studied opinion the man will not be a detriment?"

"Then I will have no objection." He leaned forward, so Calavera could not undervalue the conviction in his eyes. "But if you wish to take five men with you to New Spain, and one of them a new recruit, you had best be prepared to make a strong case to the Baron, and to myself."

Calavera recalled that he'd already been told he would be taking along a fifth man, but decided it would not be prudent to remind his superior of that at this time. "Thank you, Captain. I only hope to continue to merit the strong faith you have in me."

"I know," said Corzo, his face softening again. "Now let us proceed; the rest of your men will be waiting."

When they arrived at their destination, in order to save time, the Captain went to speak to the supervising Lieutenant while Calavera found de Torre.

The young man waved as Calavera approached. "I assume from your demeanour," the Lieutenant said once he was close enough, "that your examination is complete, and you are soon to become an Emerald Guardsman?"
"Yes," said de Torre, "I have been advised I am to receive that honour and privilege."

"Good." Calavera extended his hand. "My congratulations."

They shook hands warmly, then Calavera said, "I have several important questions to ask you."

"Do they pertain to my ability to speak a foreign language?" de Torre asked, remembering how he and Calavera had last parted.

"Yes. Are you, in fact, able to speak another language?"

"I am: French."

"Excellent. Are you able to read in French?"

"No," and for a moment Calavera was crestfallen, but then de Torre continued with, "my literacy extends only to reading my mother tongue."

This made Calavera excited once more, but there was one final question to ask. "Are you able to write in Spanish as well?"

"I am. May I ask what this is about?"

"Believe me, it would be easier for us both if you did not just yet. I see the Captain is walking toward us. Let us go meet him."

When he saw them approaching, the Captain gave Calavera one long, slow nod. The supervising Lieutenant was, indeed, sufficiently convinced of de Torre's abilities that he believed the young man qualified to hunt Gendarmes in a forest with experienced Guardsmen. For his part, Calavera had never doubted it, although he could not say why.

The Captain also shook de Torre's hand. "My congratulations," he said, shifting his tone between syllables so Calavera would understand he meant it in several ways. "Now, please excuse us for a moment; there is something I would like to speak to the Lieutenant about in private."

"Of course," said de Torre, and Corzo took Calavera aside.

"I recall, Calavera, that one of your criteria when selecting your team for the assignment was that you had to know each man personally, to ensure compatibility."

"Captain, you are quite correct. And although I only met him last night, I promise you, I know this man."

Corzo nodded; he needed no further assurance than that. "Then let us return to the Courtyard. On the way, I will give you directions to the haunted cabin, and you can attempt to explain to de Torre everything that has been going on today."

When they reached the Courtyard, Benton was tightening the last of the saddles, and Corvus was staring up into Dorado's face.

"What are you doing, Turo?" Dorado asked him.

"I am looking into your eyes." He turned abruptly to Calavera.

"You are right; they are very gentle."
Dorado glanced at Calavera in confusion, then at Corvus with mild concern, and finally back to Calavera. He leaned forward and said to the Lieutenant, quietly:

"Sometimes, he frightens me."

"Do not worry, my friend. You will have a long voyage across the Atlantic to become accustomed to him."

Before Dorado could reply to that, Calavera stepped back and addressed the group. "Gentlemen, I would like to introduce you all to Alejandro de Torre. He presented himself this morning at the Stronghold, and soon will be joining our ranks."

The other Guardsmen applauded, then each introduced himself and shook de Torre's hand. That done, the Lieutenant signaled for them to mount their horses.

Calavera caught Dorado smirking at him.

"What thoughts are sifting through that tightly-meshed mind of yours, Lanza?"

"It occurs to me that since our enemy is a Captain, he outranks you, Diego."

Calavera snorted. "All men are equal before God, my friend."

"In that case, let us waste no time ensuring that Coléreaux meets Him."

Once everyone was mounted, the Captain clapped his hands together loudly for attention.

"Guardsmen, and Guardsman-to-be, you are about to do your country great service, more than most of you know. I will not give you words of encouragement, for you know what to do, and how it is to be done. I will therefore say only this: I am fiercely proud of each and every one of you."

As he said this last, he looked his latest recruit directly in the eyes, so the young man would know he was included in this praise, that as far as Captain Martial Corzo of the Emerald Guard was concerned, Alejandro de Torre was one of them now.

"Now go. Rescue the family of Luis Sierra, and bring to justice the men who stole them from their home - for God, Esperanza, and Saint Rafael."

As one, the five men on horseback raised their left fists and repeated the Emerald Guard Salute:

"God, Esperanza, and Saint Rafael!"

Then they spurred their horses forward and rode out of the Stronghold, in spearhead formation:

On the far left, Alejandro de Torre.

To his right, Lanza Dorado.

On the far right, Sean Benton.

To his left, Turo Corvus.

And in the centre rode Diego Calavera, Lieutenant of the Emerald Guard, with fire in his
eyes, steel in his spine, and joy in his heart.
Involving, among other things, witchcraft, whistling, and a whisper.

"LIEUTENANT! We've lost our right flank!"

de Torre's warning did not entirely come as a surprise to Calavera. They had departed the main road an hour ago, and ever since had been riding through a meadow. Calavera had seen the two boys off to his right, playing in the tall grass, and for a moment he'd expected at least one of Corvus or Benton to break from the formation and ride toward them, but then he had spotted trees on the horizon, and for the next several moments had been focused on determining whether those trees constituted a simple copse, or else the forest that was their destination. Now that de Torre had returned him to his more immediate environs, however, he heard two horses cantering away to his right.

He slowed, and signaled to the other two that they were also to head toward the boys, who were by now running in their direction, shouting excited greetings.

Calavera turned his horse and rode after Corvus and Benton, but de Torre caught Dorado's eye and they remained behind for a moment.

"I recognise that I am not a Guardsman," said de Torre, "and therefore I have not yet familiarised myself with the customs of the Brotherhood, but given that you are a military organization, is it not required that prior to breaking riding formation the lower-ranking men seek the permission of their superior?"

"They didn't need to ask his permission; they knew he would have given it."

"Anticipation of the officer's acquiescence. Is that the standard protocol?"

"For the most part. It has always been Calavera's protocol. Trust and responsibility: Where you have one, the other follows."

"Thank you."

"Not at all: If you were concerned, it is good that you asked. Also, it was proper that you should take one of us aside rather than voice dissent; that demonstrates temperance. The only criticism I have involves your referring to the Order in the second rather the first person. Hereafter it would be more pleasant to my ears if you were to employ the pronouns 'us,' 'we,' and 'ours' when referring to the Guard. Nobody will find that presumptuous, merely expedient."

"I will henceforth. Thank you again."

de Torre hoped the opportunity to follow Dorado's recommendation would arrive quickly; he found himself very much looking forward to using those pronouns.

Meanwhile, Corvus and Benton were reining in their horses, for the two boys were scampering through the tall grass as fast as their legs could take them, giving no thought to the
The dangers represented by approaching hoofs. As they watched the boys, both of whom appeared to be eight years of age or thereabouts, cross the remaining distance between them, the two Guardsmen observed them carefully:

The one in the lead, with short hair as black as coal, was staring at Benton's horse with a purity of adoration only possible in the very young. The other boy, whose hair was longer and the colour of wet sand, was casting his eyes from their Tunics to their scabbards to the muskets in their saddles and back again.

"So," said Benton, "you'll take the fairer one?"

"Most certainly, yes."

They dismounted, and crouched down slightly, to greet the boys on more even terms. The darker one was the first to arrive, shouting ahead, "May I pet your horse? He's a beautiful horse! May I pet him?"

"Of course," Benton said, in a soft voice he hoped would encourage the boy to calm himself somewhat. "Gently, now, gently."

When the boy touched the horse, his caress was soft and delicate. Benton was pleasantly surprised; he'd never known a boy able to curb his excitement so quickly.

By now the other boy was greeting Corvus. "May I touch your sword?"

"You may touch the hilt, but only if you promise not to pull on it."

"I promise."

"Then you may do as you please," Corvus said, lifting the end of his scabbard to make the sword handle easier to reach.

"Do you like this horse?" Benton asked his boy.

"Of course!"

"Would you like to keep him company for a while?"

"Can I?"

"If you promise you'll take good care of him."

"I will, I will, I promise!"

"In that case, young sir, I would like to ask a favour of you. My friends and I are riding toward the forest."

"The haunted forest?"

"Is there another forest in the direction we are traveling?"

"Well... no."

"Then I guess the haunted forest it is. We mean to enter the forest, but I don't think we can take horses with us, can we?"
"Oh, no. The trees are far too thick."

"Then we are going to have to leave the horses behind, and they are going to need someone to take care of them."

"Me! Me! Can I take care of them? I promise to feed them, and brush them, and... "

Corvus' new friend had finally finished squeezing the handle of his sword for all he was worth. "May I now touch your musket?"

"I believe your parents would be upset with me if I allowed that."

The boy looked crestfallen. It was a very heart-wrenching expression, obviously well-practiced.

"But if you wish, you may wear my Tunic for a moment."

"Yes! Yes!"

It was astonishing how quickly young boys recovered from abject despair. The boy held out his hands eagerly. Corvus removed his Tunic, and with a comically sombre expression placed the garment formally upon the boy's shoulders. It flowed over him, gathering on the ground, and covered him so thoroughly it appeared as though the Tunic were rising out of the soil, like a wave bearing the boy's head aloft.

"Now, my friend, I would like to ask you about the forest."

"The haunted forest?"

"Yes."

"I am not allowed in there!"

"Of course not, of course not, your parents are very wise. But... if you were to stumble into the forest, purely by accident of course, and if you were to happen upon a cabin hidden in the trees... "

"The haunted cabin!"

"But of course, what other kind of cabin would you expect in a haunted forest? If you were, through no fault of your own, to discover this haunted cabin, and perhaps to remember how to return to it... "

"We don't have to remember! We left trail markers!"

The boy slapped both hands over his mouth, horrified at having thus betrayed himself.

"Well," said Corvus, "then you have done the Emerald Guard a great service. For we are on a secret assignment, for none other than the King himself. But since it is a secret, I am afraid I cannot tell anyone about these markers, not even your parents - and neither can you. Are you prepared to make this sacrifice for your country?"

The boy nodded vigorously, his hands still firmly clamped over his mouth.

"Good. It is a noble sacrifice you are making; I am proud of you."
And so it was that when the Guardsmen resumed their travel Northward, Benton and Corvus each had an extra rider on their mounts, and when shortly they arrived at the forest, the boys were sent home with the horses, tasked with the responsibility of taking good care of them for the night and returning with them on the morrow no later than noon.

It was too late in the day for the Guardsmen to expect to locate the cabin and return with the Sierras in daylight, and attempting to traverse the forest in darkness would have been far too dangerous, even if their charges were well. For this reason the plan was to find the cabin before nightfall, and, in order of preference, capture, kill, or drive off all the Gendarmes, then spend the night in the cabin, tending to Maria and Claudia Sierra as best they could, departing at first light and making their way back to where they and the boys had parted company the afternoon before.

There were many potential pitfalls to this plan, and Calavera could read all of them on the faces of his men, but also he saw their recognition that this was the best of many dubious options, and their resolve to make the best of the situation.

But before they entered the forest, Calavera had one last warning to share with them. He waited until the boys leading their horses were out of earshot, then waited for them to traverse that same distance again before he finally spoke. By this time, the other four were expecting grave tidings. He did not disappoint them.

"Brothers, I have one last caution for you before we enter these woods. As most of you are aware, the Gendarmes' purpose in coming to Esperanza is to steal a particular journal from the Baron. This is the journal of a late hermetic magician named Guillaume Henri. Some of you may not believe in magic, but I have witnessed it firsthand. I saw a ring, once owned by Guillaume Henri, and to all appearances perfectly ordinary, turn into a giant golden serpent. This was no trick of the eye, for it attacked me, and when I struck it with my sword I felt the impact to my elbow. I see that some of you are still sceptical. Brothers, whether or not you believe I was deceived somehow, I charge you, exercise even more caution within these woods than is your custom. For if I was beset upon by an inanimate object given life, and our adversary seeks a journal owned by the same man who once owned that object, then it may very well be that our enemy presents a danger far beyond that of even the most skilled soldier."

"I don't believe in witchcraft," said Dorado, "but you are not a man easily fooled. I'll take extra care."

"That is all I ask."

And, since none had anything further to add, they entered the forest.

The trunks on the ground and leaves above proved every bit as thick as they had been led to expect. The Guardsmen traveled in constant serpentine motion, never walking more than two paces before a tree blocked their path, and the meagre light by which to see these trees was provided only by the occasional needle of sunshine which managed to pierce through the canopy. Calavera was a capable navigator in the woods, but without the expertise of Corvus he would not have been surprised to discover suddenly that the five of them had been tunneling into the earth.

"There!" said Corvus, so suddenly and loudly in the dense silence that it made Calavera jump slightly - as well as most of the others, he was gratified to notice. Corvus was pointing at three sticks lying on the forest floor, one atop the other, seemingly having arrived at that configuration through chance. "It is one of the boys' markers." He adjusted his finger to point in another direction. "The cabin is this way."

Dorado frowned at the unassuming pile of twigs. "Are you certain, Turo? If this is intended
to be a forest marker, it is the worst I have ever seen."

"That is because you are not seeing it through the eyes of an eight-year-old boy, my friend."

Dorado had no reply to that. If any man was capable of putting himself in the mind of a young boy, Corvus would be that man.

They changed course, following the direction indicated by the sticks, continually manoeuvring around the trees and returning to their original bearing as best they could. Occasionally Corvus would notice another marker, and they would press onward in the new direction.

The afternoon passed, and the forest grew darker. Calavera began to worry they would not reach the cabin before nightfall.

"Listen!" said Dorado, startling him again. "Do you hear that?"

Calavera concentrated, and he could hear what sounded like moaning, so faint it was almost ethereal, like... but he would not give voice to that suggestion, not even in his own mind.

And so it fell to Benton to speak the word aloud. "Ghosts? If the forest is haunted, one would expect them."

"If the forest is haunted," Dorado said, "and the stories are not simply fanciful rumour."

"Ordinarily," said Benton, "I would assume the sound to be caused by the wind through the trees. But it cannot be that this time, for not enough wind penetrates this far into the forest."

"How much wind is necessary for a flute?"

It took the others a moment to realise who had spoken, for de Torre had remained silent most of the afternoon, preferring to observe the way the others interacted before contributing himself. But now they all turned toward him, and although he was facing them, his finger was pointing upward.

As one, the other four looked up, and saw, suspended from the trees, three whistles carved out of wood. There was no wind, as Benton had noted, but there was the gentlest of breezes, so light one had to concentrate to feel it, and it was just sufficient to spin these whistles around, and cause them to emit, ever so quietly, a sound which sounded like faint moaning.

"There are your ghosts, Benton," said Dorado, instantly regretting that he'd regressed to using the man's last name again. "It is usually the case that what seems, at first, to be a supernatural phenomenon, has, once one looks carefully enough, a perfectly rational explanation."

But Benton barely heard Dorado's words, for his eye had spotted something through the trees up ahead. He walked toward it, and saw it was a sign, posted at eye level, written in Spanish with an elaborate script:

\[\text{Lieutenant Diego Calavera:} \]

\[\text{If you have come this far} \]

\[\text{you may be, after all} \]
an adversary worthy of my talents.

As reward for your perseverance

I give you a token of my esteem

although I expect it will do you no good.

Yours most sincerely,

Captain Sébastien Coléreaux.

"Bloody cheek!" said Benton, reverting to his mother tongue so as to properly express his contempt. He strode disdainfully up to the sign.

And something pressed into his shin.

There came a rustling sound from behind him.

"Benton!" de Torre shouted, and launched himself toward the Guardsman.

He was almost in time. The trap, released by a wire strung low to the ground, and consisting of a spike tied to a bent sapling, snapped out of concealment, and would have pierced Benton through the chest, but as de Torre tackled him to the ground it only managed to get under Benton's Tunic and puncture him in the side, hurting so intensely the man could not even cry out.

"Stop!" shouted Calavera, for Dorado and Corvus had been about to rush forward. "Look around - there may be others."

The three of them spent several moments making certain this was the only such lethal device in the area, and then they approached their fallen comrade. He was lying on the ground, with de Torre sitting beside him, holding his head in his lap. With one hand de Torre was stroking Benton's forehead, and with the other he was trying unsuccessfully to block the flow of blood, which poured out from under Benton's arm to soak into the soil of the forest floor.

Benton was already looking very pale, and was having difficulty catching his breath.

"Help us, quickly!" said de Torre. "Get the bandages, and a poultice. He's losing too much blood."

"No," Benton said, swallowing back a cough. "Don't waste... what we have. It isn't going to... do me... any good."

In his anguish, de Torre looked like he wanted to strike him. "Nonsense! I won't hear such resigned talk. There is always hope. Your injury is clouding your judgment - "

"Alejandro."

de Torre snapped his head up to Dorado, startled by the man's use of his Christian name.

"Sean Benton is the most optimistic man it has ever been my privilege to call friend. If he insists the bandages would be wasted, it is because he knows."

de Torre opened his mouth, but no sound came out.
"Diego..." Benton said, his voice rough. "Bend your ear... to me. I want to ask... a favour."

"Anything," said Calavera, dropping to his knees and putting his head to Benton's lips.

The dying man whispered his request into Calavera's ear, softly enough that not even de Torre could hear what he said. Calavera nodded his promise, and rose.

Tiny flecks of red liquid itched upon his ear, but he ignored them.

"It is strange," Benton said, his voice now just a whisper. "I somehow always imagined... that when my time came... I would be on horseback."

Calavera chuckled. "That was impossible, my friend, for astride a horse, you've always been invincible. I doubt not that if we were to put you in a saddle at this moment, you would remain immortal until you dismounted."

Tears coursed down his cheeks. He ignored these as well.

Sean Benton smiled at his friend. "I think... you may be right. They say... that Death... rides a pale horse. Do you think he would mind if..."

And then he was no more.

Nobody spoke for several moments, each man contemplating the loss of their comrade in silence. Then de Torre slowly stood up, laying Benton's head gently upon the ground. He looked to Calavera.

"What shall we do now?"

Calavera took a deep breath. "I want you and Lanza to carry his body away from this area, concealing it and protecting it from the elements. Tomorrow we will return this way and take him back with us to San Rafael. Turo, I want a word with you in private."

Corvus moved to stand beside Calavera, while de Torre and Dorado prepared to lift the body.

"There is a wound on your arm," Calavera said to de Torre. He'd noticed it before.

de Torre seemed embarrassed to acknowledge it. "When I was trying to shove Benton out of harm's way, the point caught me as well. It is nothing; the bleeding has already stopped."

"Very well," and Calavera indicated that he and Dorado should proceed with their solemn task.

After they had moved a goodly distance away, Calavera said, "Turo?" quietly.

While Benton was being carried off, Corvus, deducing what Calavera wanted from him, had examined the device which had killed their friend. Now he stepped in close to deliver his findings.

"Your suspicions are correct. The point of the spike has been dipped into some kind of liquid. I am not going to taste it, of course, but the smell is unforgettable to me."

"Our young friend has been poisoned. Not very much, but enough to do the trick. Unless the Gendarmes have the antidote, and we manage to retrieve it from them, he will not live to greet the sunrise."
Chapter Summary

*IN WHICH temper is tempered, leaves are left, and a clearing provides little clarity.*

THE surviving Guardsmen divided Benton's belongings among them. When Dorado, who already had the musket slung over his shoulder, also claimed Benton's pistol, de Torre stiffened for a moment, then turned away.

Corvus noticed this. He also noted how many times de Torre glanced over at the sign Sébastien Coléreaux had posted on the tree, the sign which had been meant to draw a Guardsman toward it, his eyes looking straight ahead, oblivious to the death which lay directly in his path. Corvus did not like the look in de Torre's eyes when he regarded the sign; he'd seen that look many times before.

And so, just as they were ready to depart, Corvus approached Calavera and said, softly, "I think you should say a few words to our young friend. He has the haunted look about him."

Despite being in a forest itself reputed to be haunted, Calavera needed no clarification that Corvus' words had nothing to do with the supernatural. He nodded, and walked over to de Torre, while Corvus took up position beside Dorado, who understood immediately what was taking place. He had also noticed de Torre glancing toward Coléreaux's sign.

"You seem troubled," Calavera said, once he was close enough.

"Of course I am troubled," said de Torre, trying to keep irritation out of his voice and failing. He looked meaningfully down at the patches of Benton's blood which stained his clothes. "I have just watched a comrade die; it is a troubling thing."

"There is more on your mind than loss."

"Of course there is! The man who murdered Benton is - "

"de Torre."

It was a complete sentence, implying warnings of several varieties, and reminding the young man of who he was. de Torre had been very near shouting, and their task required that every man be able to maintain control. Further, Calavera would not tolerate such a raising of the voice from any man, let alone a subordinate. For this reason, he'd addressed de Torre by his surname, and in his tone of command, hoping that it would return the young man to himself.

And it succeeded. de Torre unclenched his fists, and adopted a more humble posture and tone. "My apologies, Lieutenant. I did not realise you were speaking to me as my superior officer."

Calavera was tempted to ask how else the young man might view him, and was hoping the answer would be as a mentor, but now was not the time to indulge his pride; only strict discipline would get them through this forest to their destination.

He said, more gently than before, "We are in hostile territory. The enemy is expecting us,
and has had time to fortify his position. Every question I ask, every directive I issue, even every opinion I seek, has only one purpose: our success and survival."

Having said that, Calavera decided this was as good a time as any to say to all of them something he had been wanting to announce while they were dealing with Benton's body and his possessions. He raised his voice, so the others would also hear.

"Our comrade, Sean Benton, died, or rather, was killed by the enemy, because he made a mistake. I say this not to disparage him, for we all knew him to be an exemplary soldier and Guardsman, but to remind you of the deadliness of our enemy. He is every bit our equal, clever and skilled. In an ordinary conflict where the two opponents are evenly matched, the victor is he who perseveres, who refuses to surrender in his heart, and therefore outlasts his adversary. This is not such an engagement: It will not be won; it will be lost, through error. Simply, if Coléreaux makes the first mistake, we will succeed; if we make the first mistake, we will die. Therefore we must be vigilant. As we proceed, look to every direction: where you will step, what your body may touch as you advance, and what will be overhead as you pass underneath."

"That will make our progress very slow," said Dorado.

"Yes, but I would rather we discover the cabin at nightfall with four men, than we arrive any earlier with fewer." Calavera turned to de Torre, no longer concerned with keeping their discussion private. "Now, what else is on your mind, other than the death of a friend and comrade?"

"This!" de Torre said, pointing an accusing finger at Coléreaux's sign. "This... travesty. It isn't soldiery, it's base mockery, it's... " but he was at a loss to better express his indignation.

"It's a tactic, like any other," said Calavera calmly. "As with putting the sun at your back, forcing the enemy to advance uphill toward you, or playing those infernal Scottish bagpipes, the intent is always the same: to put the enemy at a disadvantage."

"You've listed three valid manoeuvres. This is a contemptible, dishonourable trick."

"Is strict adherence to honour more important than survival? If you have a dagger, and your enemy has turned away from you to grasp for a pistol, will you wait for him to turn around and face you with it, or will you stab him in the back?"

de Torre had a ready answer for that - or so he thought. Just as he opened his mouth to speak it, however, he began to have doubts.

Calavera nodded, expressing his understanding and sympathy. Every man who wore the Tunic, at one moment in his life, had been forced to weigh for himself honour versus survival. The Lieutenant offered his own decision about the matter: "It is not just a soldier's right to take advantage of his enemy's vulnerabilities, but his duty. In this instance, Coléreaux is trying to create vulnerabilities for us, by playing on our emotions. And it is working. Lanza, for example, desires nothing better at present than to shoot Coléreaux through the chest with Benton's own pistol."

"It would have a poetic symmetry to it," Dorado said, without the slightest defensiveness.

"But if he is over-eager when the moment comes, he will make a mistake - will you not, Lanza?"

Dorado snorted his assent. "The Frenchman fooled me twice in the space of one short engagement."
"You see? And you do not know Lanza as I do, or you would be shaken by this concession."

"That is true; he is a very proud man."

"Thank you, Turo. Alejandro, do you understand?"

"I do. You want me to remain in control at all times: observant, aware, and alert." He smiled playfully. "Precisely as though I were facing three men alone in a tavern brawl."

"Just so," said Calavera, unconsciously pressing a hand to his ribs. "Now, is everyone ready to proceed? Turo?"

"The trail continues this way."

"Excellent. We do not know whether or not Coléreaux is aware of these markers. We must assume he is, and that he has laid his traps along the boys' trail. But if he is not, his traps might be anywhere. If you see something which arouses your suspicions, draw it to the attention of all of us. We will travel in single file." He turned to Dorado and Corvus. "Which of the two of you wishes to lead?"

The two Guardsmen looked at one another, conferring with their eyes. It was not an easy decision: Dorado was the more perceptive of them, but Corvus the more intuitive. Also, the man in front would be the one most exposed to risk, and neither wanted to leave his comrade in that position.

de Torre watched their wordless discussion, excited to be understanding it fully. It seemed to him that neither man was willing to commit, but that the Lieutenant was going to wait until one of them did. de Torre had remained silent for most of the time he'd spent with these men he greatly admired, deferring to their experience and wisdom, but now he had a suggestion, and although he was hesitant to propose it, he knew that there must come a time when he was comfortable enough to do so. Also, he aspired to be an Emerald Guardsman; how could he deserve that honour if he stayed silent out of fear of embarrassment?

"They should proceed side-by-side."

The others whirled to face him, displaying various forms of surprise.

He was committed now.

"Although it might be more desirable to proceed in single file, both to maintain a good pace and to expose only one of us to danger at a time, these are counterbalanced by our need to perceive whatever traps have been laid for us. Dorado and Corvus – that is to say, Lanza and Turo - will complement one another in that regard. We will perhaps move more slowly, but more surely, and more safely."

His argument thus completed, nothing remained for de Torre but to search the faces of his comrades to determine whether they agreed or disagreed - or worse, if they felt he'd spoken out of turn.

Dorado and Corvus turned to Calavera, deferring to him. The Lieutenant waited a few more moments, during which he carefully scrutinised de Torre's face, while revealing nothing of his own thoughts, before delivering his answer.

"I disagree with your conclusion," and de Torre felt as though the Emerald Tunic, not yet
upon his shoulders, were being ripped away from him. But then Calavera's straight mouth turned upward into a grin. "I believe that if we were to proceed as you have suggested, we would, in fact, move more quickly."

Calavera turned away, both to give de Torre a moment to compose himself and to make it clear there wasn't the slightest humiliating intent in his jest. Corvus gave the young man an elaborate salute and moved to claim the forward position, but Dorado walked over to de Torre.

"You appear to be confused about something."

"I am," said de Torre, who hadn't realised it until Dorado asked the question. "Earlier, the Lieutenant was displeased with me for - " But Dorado held up his hand; he knew the rest without needing to be told.

"Calavera will not abide rudeness, but he encourages disagreement - provided the point is well-made. He is an exceptionally intelligent man, and because of this he recognises that he might be mistaken. He admires you because of your conviction and forthrightness. All three of us have been eagerly anticipating the moment you would finally shed your sense of humility before established Guardsmen and make your voice heard. Welcome."

de Torre shook his head, overcome with wonderment. "In the short time I have known Lieutenant Calavera, I've assaulted him in a tavern, insulted him in the Stronghold, and most recently been petulant with him."

"You should make an effort to see none of those events are repeated," Dorado said, nodding. "but I give you my word he has already forgiven you for those missteps, provided of course you have learned from them. Someday he and I shall have to tell you of the day we met, how our lifelong friendship was cemented when one of us drew a knife on the other."

de Torre searched deeply into Dorado's eyes; he was not jesting in the slightest.

Meanwhile, Corvus was having a private conversation with Calavera about de Torre. "Do you believe it is best, for the time being, to conceal from him that he has been poisoned?"

"I do."

"I am of the same opinion. There is no sense in provoking him any further. Nor Lanza, for that matter."

Calavera's eyes widened at the implication. He had not taken Dorado's vengeful tendencies into consideration, and perhaps he should have.

Corvus was still speaking. "When we see him begin to sweat profusely, or exhibit weakness of some sort, that will be the time to advise him of what is happening. He will still have plenty of time in which to make his peace with God."

"Turo," said Calavera through clenched teeth, "I mean to save that young man, do you understand me?"

"Of course." He was about to voice his concern that this might not be possible, but the look in Calavera's eyes made him keep it to himself.

With that question settled, Calavera said, loudly enough for all to hear, "Shall we be on our way?"
They all took their positions, Calavera third and de Torre in the rear, and continued on toward the haunted cabin.

In a very soft tone, which acted as a caution about limiting the amount of noise they created henceforth, Calavera said, "Be alert for any Gendarmes in hiding, waiting to attack us from behind. If you do see the enemy, you are authorised to fire upon him, but under no circumstances are you to rush his position." He caught de Torre's eye as he said this.

The young man replied, with an elaborate smirk, "Of course not. Such impetuousness might lead you straight into an enemy trap."

"It can happen to the best of us," said Calavera, remembering the Vulcan room in the Baron's catacombs.

They proceeded in silence. None of them knew how much further it was to the cabin, and they did not want to risk alerting the enemy to their approach.

The dense leaves of the forest absorbed most sound, making everything deathly quiet, and the thickness of the canopy overhead made it impossible to determine the sun's position in the sky, so the passage of time was impossible to estimate. It might have been as few as fifteen minutes, or as many as thirty, before Dorado and Corvus hissed

"There!"

simultaneously, both pointing at the leaf-covered ground straight ahead.

"Gentlemen," said Calavera very softly, "is something the matter with those leaves?"

"Some are muddy on the top and some are not," Dorado said. "They've been disturbed recently."

"Also," said Corvus, "leaves would never fall naturally into a pile of that configuration."

Calavera turned to de Torre. "Do you see that large stone?"

"Yes."

"If you were to throw it from here, how certain would you be to hit that suspicious pile of leaves?"

For his answer, de Torre simply bent down, lifted the stone, held it for a moment to get a sense of its weight, and then launched it toward the pile, striking the leaves with the force of a thrown javelin.

The stone and the leaves around it disappeared.

Corvus found a stick on the ground, and carefully advanced toward the pile. He poked some leaves; they sank into the ground. He slapped them vigorously with his stick, and they vanished beneath the blows, until Corvus had revealed a square pit dug into the forest floor, three yards long on each side and five yards deep, with sharp stakes thrust into the dirt at the bottom, pointing upward.

Both Corvus and Calavera noticed that the tip of each stake was discoloured, as though they had been dipped into liquid which had since dried.
If Dorado and de Torre likewise noticed, neither thought to comment upon it.

Having thus avoided one of the Gendarmes' traps, they skirted the pit and resumed their journey to the cabin, Corvus and Dorado examining the path ahead of them perhaps even more carefully than before, and Calavera surreptitiously observing de Torre for signs that the poison was beginning to cause him distress. The young man was perspiring, but no more than anyone else.

The group paused once, for ten minutes, to rest their legs, drink water, and eat some cured meat. Most of this time passed in silence, both because they had developed the habit of communicating through gestures and because they had no idea how close the enemy might be.

After the pause, they soon came upon another trap, again hidden by leaves. This time Calavera did not ask de Torre to throw a stone at the pile, for on a branch high above it was a wasp nest. Calavera could imagine the net buried underneath the leaves, released by a catch to carry a man roughly upward, smacking into the nest and causing him to be stung perhaps as many as a hundred times by the enraged insects.

There might not, in fact, have been a net underneath that covering, but whatever the nature of the peril, Calavera was certain the wasp nest must be involved, and he had no desire to disturb it, for in his experience wasps driven to aggression searched for the nearest target, guilty or innocent, and so any nearby man presented an excellent opportunity for them to vent their spleens.

Calavera indicated they were to proceed, but Dorado went up to him and said, "I understand your reluctance to trigger this trap, but I am concerned that when we exit these woods we might be in a hurry, and if that turns out to be the case it would be a shame to trigger it then."

"I have considered that," said Calavera. "When we depart the cabin tomorrow morning, we shall simply have to make certain that we are not in haste."

"An excellent notion. But you need no reminding there is a very clever man at the end of our excursion into the centre of this forest, and he has desires of his own."

Dorado did not receive any answer to that, nor did he expect to. He resumed his place at the front, and the four of them continued onward.

After what seemed like an hour, although none of them could truly say, the forest grew brighter, and they slowed, knowing they must be nearing the clearing where they would find the cabin.

Calavera motioned for all of them to gather around him, and they did. He pointed to Dorado, then to his own eyes, then toward the general direction of the cabin. Dorado nodded, took two steps away, and dropped to the ground, crawling slowly and silently away from them on his belly, staying as low as he could.

Calavera pointed to the other two, and again to his eyes, then to the forest around them, and each man turned to face away from the circle, looking to see if there were any Gendarmes in the forest around them.

Now that there was more light surrounding them in the forest, they were able to determine the time of day, and they judged it to be an hour before nightfall. The shadows were getting muddier, and the colours more gray.

They waited for Dorado in silence, each man straining his eyes ahead of him so he would not miss the slightest hint of a threat.
Unlike Calavera and de Torre, who only glanced upward occasionally, Corvus spent a quarter of his time examining the trees and leaves above him.

After what seemed like a half hour, Dorado returned, and the four of them crouched together in a circle to discuss their situation.

"It is as dire as we might have expected," their scout said. "The clearing is not large, but it is large enough that any man running toward the cabin will be in plain sight for five seconds."

He paused to allow them to consider this estimate. With armed sentries posted at every window, which was surely the case, five seconds of exposure would be four and a half seconds too many.

"We must take them by surprise," said Calavera. "If we give them even a moment to think, rather than merely react to our attack, they will use the Sierras against us."

"Or kill them outright," Dorado said.

"If they are even still alive," said de Torre. "Would it not be more convenient for Coléreaux simply to have killed them already? That way they could cause him no nuisance, but Luis Sierra would continue to labour under the impression he had a hope of them being returned."

Calavera shook his head. "That would be wasteful. As long as they are alive, our desire to keep them from harm puts us at a disadvantage."

"For example," said Dorado, "all of our problems would be solved if I could just throw a lit barrel of gunpowder through one of the cabin's windows - but none of us could live with the consequences to the hostages."

"I have a plan."

It took a moment for the other three to realise it was Corvus who'd spoken. When they did, Dorado replied first:

"Does it involve setting anything on fire?"

"Of course not! Why would it? In a forest? That would be madness."

"Yes."

"Turo," said Calavera, "is this plan of yours likely to get one or more of us killed?"

"No. Not necessarily. I hope not."

Dorado gave de Torre a look which indicated that with Corvus this form of catechism was perfectly natural. His intent was to calm the young man's concerns, but he was not the least bit successful.

Calavera persisted. "Is it, in your estimation, less likely to result in casualties than charging a fortified position over exposed terrain?"

"Yes, certainly."

"In that case, unless anyone else has a proposal..."

de Torre shrugged; Dorado looked heavenward.
"... let us hear your plan."
The Plan

Chapter Summary

*IN WHICH some men ascend and then descend, while others descend and then ascend, all to gain the upper hand.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**ORNITHOLOGY** is the study of birds.

Diego Calavera looked up, squinted to see better in the fading light, and found the tree he was seeking.

The cabin in the middle of the dense forest had been built by an eccentric ornithologist, and following his death it had lain undiscovered for some time.

Lanza Dorado leaned three muskets carefully against his tree. The fourth he left on his shoulder, making certain it was not so loose it would fall off easily, nor so tight he could not bring it to bear in an instant.

Any man who is so devoted to the animals he studies that he chooses to live in the centre of them, isolated from his own society, will not simply be satisfied with sitting inside his cabin, notebook in hand: He will want to be as close as possible to his beloved creatures.

Alejandro de Torre checked for the eighth time that the rope was coiled properly around his shoulder. Then he gripped the tree's lower branches and began to climb.

The Gendarmes led by Sébastien Coléreaux, being foreigners, might have been aware only of this "haunted" cabin's existence, but not of its origins. When preparing their defences, they might not have thought to look upward as carefully as Corvus had.

They might not have seen the platforms.

Turo Corvus gingerly placed one foot onto his platform, and pressed down firmly. Finding it would hold, he stepped off the branch and onto the wooden structure completely, albeit still very cautiously lest his earlier assessment prove false. Then, once he was certain he was on solid footing, he removed the coiled rope from around his shoulder and began to unwind it.

When devising a plan by which the Guardsmen might approach the cabin in relative safety, Corvus had tried to put himself in the mind of the original occupant of the cabin. Although he was not himself an ornithologist, Corvus was no stranger to the thinking of eccentrics, and he reasoned that the man would have built observation platforms high in the trees. And so, when waiting for Dorado to return with his scouting report, he had searched the trees for such platforms - and found them.

From that discovery, he deduced there would be many such platforms very close to the cabin, and this was the foundation upon which he'd formulated his plan.
The light was better up in the trees than it had been on the forest floor. de Torre supposed that astronomers would say the sun had already set, but on his platform, constructed at the top of the tallest tree East of the cabin, there was enough light for de Torre to make out Dorado standing on his platform in the West, the top of his head silhouetted against the blue-gray sky.

On the ground, the light had been merely gray. And in the cabin there were no lights burning, so between those walls everything would be black for the first few instances, until his eyes adjusted, whereupon he would see everything as grayish-black.

"The first thing you will see," Calavera had told him, "is movement. Your eyes will get their bearings from there, and adjust. When you fire, close your eyes. These are the only conditions under which that is acceptable, of course."

de Torre had remained silent, attentive, but Calavera had paused before introducing the next topic he wanted to discuss. "Have you ever killed a man before?"

"I have not."

"Well, you have probably heard it is not easy. In a sense, you are fortunate that you will not be able to look into the eyes of your first victim before pulling the trigger. Aim for the movement, think of it as a target, and you should be fine."

"If it is any consolation, I do not think of him as a 'victim' at all, but as an enemy."

After a pause, Calavera resumed speaking, with the tone de Torre had come to understand Calavera used with him when he'd said something ill-advised that the Lieutenant felt obliged to address.

"The first man I killed was by the sword, with the sun high and bright above us. I stepped forward as I ran him through, and we looked into one another's eyes. In his I saw the pain and surprise first, then the knowledge of what had happened to him, and finally his regret for all the things he would never be able to do again: hold his wife, look upon his child – this speculation came instantly. I saw in his eyes that he was no more nor less than a man serving his country, as much a victim of war as he had wanted to make me."

Into the ensuing silence, de Torre had said, permitting some jest to enter his tone, "If you recall, Sir, you introduced this subject in order to make my first kill easier for me."

Calavera had chuckled, nodded, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Aim for the movement," he'd said while indicating they should rejoin the others. "I have no doubt you will make us proud."

Now, from his tree in the South, Calavera raised his arm high and waved his hand. Dorado did likewise in the West, then Corvus in North. de Torre waved last. Everyone was ready.

It was time.

Corvus grasped his rope, three feet from the canteen tied to the end of it, to give it weight, and began swinging in an easy circle. As the rhythm became more comfortable, he let the rope out a little, and moved his arm so the arc swung over his head. Then he sped the movement up, faster, faster, faster - and let go.

Calavera saw the weighted rope soaring over the cabin toward him. It was an excellent toss, aimed straight for his chest. He stepped aside, so the projectile would not hit him, and caught the canteen as it passed so it would not strike the platform and alert the guards inside the cabin. He
positioned the rope over a Y formed by two strong branches, then he tugged, and felt resistance. The rope was taut; Corvus was ready.

Calavera jumped off the platform and out of the tree, holding onto the rope.

When he saw the North-South rope tighten across the clearing, de Torre let go of his own swinging rope, and watched it soar from East to West, passing in a smooth arc over both the other rope and the cabin beneath it. de Torre listened intently for any sound of alert from the cabin, but there was none. Apparently the men inside who were watching at the windows were not thinking to look upward.

de Torre's throw was not as true as Corvus' had been, but Dorado was tall and did not have to lean too far over his treetop to catch it. Maybe one twig snapped as he caught the rope, two at most, but he quickly leaned back and regained his balance, so it did not matter. He placed the rope across a Y formed by two branches, and tugged; the rope was taut. Whispering a silent prayer to whatever gods looked over the force of nature walking among men as Turo Corvus, and gripping his rope for dear life, Dorado hopped out of the tree.

Corvus dove forward, away from his platform and toward the cabin. For a moment the rope slackened, but then Calavera dropping on the other end caused it to tighten, and Corvus bent his legs forward, turning his leap into a swing. He and the rope arced downward in the darkening sky, and then he landed, striking the cabin's roof with the soles of both feet. He bent his knees to lessen the impact, but the sound was still much louder than he would have preferred.

Holding tightly with both hands, Calavera suddenly felt the rope jerk to a stop, and he heard the sound of Corvus hitting the roof. It was loud enough to alert the men inside the cabin, but they'd anticipated this, and it was now Calavera's responsibility to give the Gendarmes something more urgent to occupy their attention. He let go of the rope with his right hand, drew one of the two pistols attached to his belt, aimed at the window to the left of the cabin's door, closed his eyes, and fired.

In the silence of the dense forest at sunset, the pistol shot sounded like a cannon.

There were cries from within the cabin, but then a voice Calavera recognised as Coléreaux's ordered them to be silent, to maintain discipline, and to fire only when they could see their target.

Meanwhile, the man guarding the window to the right of the cabin door fired in the direction Calavera's shot had come from, but the ball passed harmlessly overhead, because by then Corvus, feet planted firmly on the roof, had already begun lowering Calavera to the ground.

The bruises on his torso ached, but the pain only made Calavera feel more excited, more alert, more alive.

Beginning his own swing toward the cabin roof, de Torre bent his abdomen as sharply as he could - and his throat caught. As he arced forward, he fought the urge to cough desperately, and tried to keep his attention on his destination. His feet struck very heavily, and he fell forward, landing painfully upon his face and elbows - but he maintained his grip upon the rope that held Dorado at the other end. He could no longer resist coughing then, and he did it as quietly as he could, doubling over while he played the rope quickly through his hands.

Dorado knew from the double-jerking on his rope that de Torre's swing onto the roof of the cabin had not gone as smoothly as they both would have liked, but he was being lowered properly, if a little quickly, so whatever difficulty the young man had encountered, his resiliency was overcoming it.
Dorado was fairly certain that Calavera intended to name de Torre as Saqer al-Farik's replacement for their voyage across the ocean, although he had yet to say anything about the assignment to the young man. Arriving safely at the base of his tree, all rational expectation to the contrary, Dorado decided he was all for it.

He had been placed at the West of the cabin because that was the side of the building which contained the fireplace and chimney. For this reason there were no windows, but knowing their enemy the Guardsmen had reasoned that embrasures would have been cut through the wall on either side. Dorado had in fact located these embrasures prior to beginning his climb, and now he slung the musket off his shoulder and took aim at the one more difficult for him to hit, on the left of the chimney stones.

He fired, and beneath the enormous sound it made, he heard a man cry out. But he did not pause to listen; he was already reaching for one of the muskets he'd leaned against the tree.

The man at the embrasure on the right returned fire, and it was an excellent shot: It would have struck Dorado square in the chest had he not been standing behind a tree while doing his shooting.

Before that man could withdraw his weapon from the embrasure, Dorado placed a shot directly above the barrel. The musket dropped to the forest floor.

As soon as Calavera felt his feet kiss the ground, he let go of the rope and drew his second pistol. His first shot had not been very important; it was intended primarily as a noisome distraction from the boots on the roof, and as a signal to the other Guardsmen. This shot, although still being fired from a pistol, had the advantage of a much firmer position, and thus a greater opportunity of eliminating one of the enemy. Calavera would not squander it.

The Gendarme at the right window had another musket ready, and made the mistake of showing too much of it in the dim light. Calavera fired, and his target gave a shout Calavera knew well. As the Lieutenant had predicted, the first mistake had proven fatal.

This shot, like the first, had also been a signal. Calavera now was to count five and then fire his musket, the more accurate firearm, into the left window. As he prepared his weapon, he counted to himself:

"One..."

de Torre stood up, but the action made him lightheaded, and he lost his footing on the slanted roof. Corvus grabbed him tightly, saving him from toppling off the cabin.

"Two," he counted in his head. He had to compose himself, quickly!

A musket barrel appeared in the left embrasure, and Dorado fired. He would have preferred not to wait before filling the openings with death, but there were innocents inside the darkened cabin, and he could not risk hitting them.

However, as expected, the Gendarmes kept replacing their fallen comrades at the embrasures, because the lack of large openings made the Western treeline difficult to see from within the cabin. Thus it was most likely that the Guardsmen would rush the cabin from that direction - assuming, of course, that they attacked from the ground.

"Three..."

Corvus brought his face close to de Torre's and studied him carefully.
de Torre nodded in reassurance. He knew his appearance did not betray the slight dizziness he still felt, yet nevertheless Corvus' expression indicated deep concern.

de Torre assayed a smile; Corvus smiled back. Neither man was entirely convincing, nor convinced.

"Four..."

The wound on de Torre's arm itched, but he would not scratch it while Corvus was watching. Besides, he was perspiring rather heavily; surely the irritation was nothing more than the sting of salt.

Calavera heard Dorado fire his fourth and final musket. That meant there were four dead men on the West side of the cabin, plus the fifth Calavera had shot with his second pistol. It was not a large building; Coléreaux's forces must have been reduced considerably by now. He crouched and brought his musket to his shoulder.

"Five."

Despite the dimness, Calavera aimed this shot at the head of the shape in the left window, because he could not risk that his victim would remain standing; the next part of Corvus' plan required the man to drop to the ground immediately. Calavera closed his eyes, pulled the trigger, and dropped the musket to the right while rolling to the left.

A shot from the other window tore through some leaves where Calavera had been crouching.

At the Five count, Corvus and de Torre took their positions, bending their knees and holding the edge of the roof. The moment they heard Calavera's musket, they jumped from the roof, Corvus swinging into the cabin through the left window, and de Torre dropping to the ground directly in front of the door.

Corvus landed safely inside the cabin, rolling forward in a somersault across the floor to the other wall. As expected, everything was almost black within the building, but he was still aware of movement all around, as the Gendarmes were aware of him. Corvus did not speak French, but he knew the expression which meant "Hold your fire!" and that was shouted from the Southeast corner, as luck would have it the location in this single-room cabin furthest from his own position. Coming out of his roll, Corvus drew his sword, and turned to confront his unseen foes.

His firearms now empty, Dorado hurried, as fast as he could without hitting a branch or tripping over a root, around the edge of the clearing to Calavera's position. Two of his comrades were now in great danger, and he could do nothing for the moment to help them. When agreeing to the plan, Dorado had expected he would hate this part of its execution. He'd been right.

The refining of the plan had brought to light one previously unknown detail from de Torre which had pleased the others no end: The young man was ambidextrous. For this reason, he'd been given the three pistols which had not been assigned to Calavera. Crouching in front of the door, he drew two of them. The man in the window on his right clumsily adjusted his position to try and bring his musket to bear, but de Torre aimed, closed his eyes, and shot him. When he opened his eyes, the dead man was leaning half out of the window. Keeping low, de Torre moved under him, and pushed upward, tossing the man back into the cabin. He heard a satisfying grunt as the corpse hit someone within.

Drawing his last pistol with his right hand, de Torre spotted movement within the cabin,
from the direction where he'd heard the noise. He fired toward it with the pistol in his left hand.

But he'd forgotten to close his eyes.

In the flash which blinded him, de Torre saw several things. Almost directly in front of him, the man he'd aimed at shouted and clutched at his wounded arm. Far on the left, Corvus, crouching so de Torre would not have fired at his movement, slashed a man across the shins. And on the right, very close to him, de Torre saw a man's face, eyes wide between the thin black strings of his long curly hair. As the pain forced his eyes shut, de Torre fired at the face, but in his heart he knew he was wasting his last pistol.

He ducked behind the window, and waited for the return shot. But none came.

This was only a small relief, for his eyes stung so badly he could barely open them, and he felt as though his skull were expanding and contracting. All this could not have been caused by a simple muzzle flash:

Something else was wrong with him.

Corvus felt his sword bite into his opponent's legs, and the man hissed and bent forward, so Corvus thrust upward, feeling his sword sink deep into the man's body. The Gendarme's musket clattered to the ground, no longer needed.

As Corvus withdrew his sword, he heard footsteps, running heavily toward the cabin from outside. A moment later the heavy wooden door was smashed to splinters by a battering ram. After the briefest pause, the ruined door opened outward on its hinges, revealing an empty doorway: The two men who had driven the battering ram, Calavera and Dorado, were staying out of sight of enemy fire. But no fire came.

In fact, the cabin had fallen deathly silent.

It stayed that way for another few moments. Corvus' eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he saw that there were only two men remaining upright. He was one of them, and the other was holding his left hand to his right bicep. This Gendarme moved as quietly as he could to the Southeast corner, where he descended through a hole leading down into a cellar.

Calavera's voice cut through the night.

"Coléreaux! Are you still alive within?"

"I am," came a voice from the cellar. "Well played, Lieutenant. When I heard your man enter through the window I knew the cabin was lost." He spoke in Spanish, as Calavera had. "I have, of course, retreated to the obvious fallback position."

Calavera called again. "Maria Sierra! Can you hear me?"

After a brief pause, a woman's voice answered, "Yes. I am here."

"Are you or your daughter hurt in any way?"

This time the pause was longer. "As the wind pushes the sand down the mountains, the goats enjoy the grass between the rocks."

"Good," said Calavera, and Corvus understood why the woman had paused before speaking: She had been thinking over her choice of words. The Baron must have taught Luis Sierra
some kind of speech cipher, and he'd passed it on to his wife, most likely while she'd been helping him commit it to memory. Ordinarily the Baron would have been furious at Sierra's carelessness, but Corvus imagined he would not mind how circumstances had played out, with her passing secret communication to Calavera despite being held prisoner.

"Where are you?" Calavera asked from outside, still addressing Maria Sierra.

"We have them in the cellar," said Coléreaux, his tone betraying irritation at being excluded from the conversation, however briefly. "You cannot enter safely, and we cannot exit safely, but nor can you attempt to drive us out without causing harm to the Sierras. And so you see, in spite of your best efforts, I have forced you into a drawn match."

Crouching outside the cabin, Dorado chuckled softly, and whispered to Calavera, "He seems awfully proud of himself, for a man who held the superior position and lost it."

Calavera smiled back. "I don't believe it will gain us anything to remind him of that fact."

He looked past Dorado's shoulder at de Torre. The young man was trying to appear as though he were perfectly healthy, but even in the growing darkness Calavera could see signs of distress upon him. He spoke again to Coléreaux.

"You have a proposal. Speak it."

"We will release the Sierras to you, unharmed, and surrender ourselves into your custody, on the condition that our persons will not be abused in any way, for any reason."

"I accept your terms."

"I require that you give me your word: We will not be abused in any way, for any reason."

Calavera was mildly insulted by Coléreaux's need for assurance, but then he remembered the interrogation at the Stronghold. Benton, for one, would have endorsed Coléreaux's surrender condition whole-heartedly - had the man not killed him.

Before agreeing too quickly, Calavera considered what Cardinal Richelieu's motives had been in sending these Gendarmes to Esperanza. The Baron would surely want to question these men, to see how much of a threat the Cardinal presented to his plans for the temple of Yaxax'tun, but on the other hand, the Baron had made it clear as crystal how desperately he wanted Luis Sierra's family returned safely. If the Lieutenant refused Coléreaux's terms, he was certain the Gendarmes would fight to the death rather than face interrogation and torture. And he was equally certain that this lack of mercy for themselves would extend to the Sierras.

There would be no interrogation either way, and so it was really a choice of sparing everyone or sparing no one, which was no choice at all.

"You have my word."

"Then we have a compact."

Calavera heard the sound of a flint lighting a torch, and an orange glow appeared in the corner of the cabin. After some scuffling, Corvus announced, "The Sierras have just exited the cellar. They appear to be doing very well."

Calavera stood and entered the cabin, Dorado and de Torre following. In the light from the cellar, Corvus was already tending to the Sierras. Maria cautioned her curious daughter to look away from the bodies littering the floor, and then Corvus took over, asking them whispered
questions about their health and pretending to pull a coin from behind Claudia's ear. Meanwhile de Torre sat down heavily on a bench, his face pale and covered in perspiration.

Taking positions on different sides of the cellar, Calavera and Dorado faced the opening. "Throw your weapons out."

After some activity below, a hand rose from the hole, holding aloft three belts and placing them on the wooden cellar panel, which lay flat beside the opening. Calavera pulled the panel away from the cellar, then inspected the weapons. Each belt held a sword in its scabbard, and two had pistols attached to them.

Calavera looked at Maria Sierra for confirmation. She nodded. "One of them is injured in the arm; he did not have a pistol on his person."

Calavera drew one of the pistols and inspected it. It was loaded. Coléreaux must have assumed, because there had been five each of musket and pistol shots, but only four Guardsmen, that they had reloaded some of their weapons very quickly; otherwise he might have risked shooting his way out. Whatever the Gendarme's reasons, Calavera was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He pointed the pistol at the opening.

"Now, send up the injured man, and only him, with his arms raised above his head."

The injured Gendarme had some difficulty climbing the rough ladder using only his feet, but he did his best. Once he was out of the cellar, Calavera motioned for him to sit in a chair, and Dorado quickly tied his ankles to it. Then he tied the man's left arm to his chest, and his trunk to the back of the chair. When Dorado was done, Corvus came over immediately to attend to the wound in the Frenchman's right arm, causing relief and gratitude to spread over the man's pained face.

"Send up the next man, in the same fashion."

This man turned out to be the tallest Calavera had ever seen, taller even than Dorado. Several times Calavera expected one of the man's feet to rise out of the hole, but somehow there was always more of his body to come. Finally, however, he fully emerged, and presented himself proudly in front of Dorado, his back straight as a ramrod, making him stand at least two inches taller than the towering Guardsman, possibly even three.

Dorado hated him on sight.

The Gendarme's hair was as black and as long as Dorado's, but where the Guardsman's was thick, straight, and worn tied back, this man's hung loosely about his face, curled and thin like the trail of a wet earthworm. His eyes were dark and sunken deeply into their sockets, his nose was long and pointed like the beak of a gull, and his cheekbones were sharp as slate cliffs. As he allowed Dorado to tie him to his chair he regarded his counterpart with the purest contempt, making it clear he was only permitting this indignity from Dorado out of deference to his Captain's bargain. Dorado's return look expressed his similar profound regret that things could not be resolved differently.

Either of these men would have crawled bare-chested over broken glass for the tiniest opportunity to test himself against the other. Calavera would not want to be between them when it happened.

At last Dorado was finished, and Calavera released the breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. "Now you, Coléreaux."
Calavera heard the man's boots on the ladder, then saw the torch crest the cellar opening, followed by the man's hands. As soon as the Frenchman's arrogant face entered the room, and he was able to look around, he stopped climbing and did so, his face thick with disdain for any potential consequences. When Coléreaux's eyes lit upon de Torre, who by now was half-asleep on his bench, trembling slightly and occasionally scratching at his arm, the Frenchman's face broke out into a wide grin.

"There he is! My associate told me that he'd seen a man with a very pale and sweaty face at the window." He turned to the Lieutenant and switched to French. "Are you aware he's been poisoned, Calavera?"

Also in French, Calavera answered, "I am."

"Is he?"

"I am now," said de Torre, his French accent very good despite his difficulty in breathing.

For the tiniest instant Coléreaux's face betrayed surprise and frustration. He recovered expertly, but Calavera still noticed. He smiled widely at his adversary.

This did not have the desired effect, however: The French Captain simply smiled back as though de Torre had not spoken. "In light of your need, Lieutenant, and my ability to satisfy that need, I have another proposal for you:

"I will provide you with the antidote to the poison - which I promise you is not in this cabin for you to find - in exchange for your word that once you have it, my men and I will be free to go."

Chapter End Notes

Edited June 23 2015 to repair a catastrophic omission, in two places. - t!
The Cardinal's Men

Chapter Summary

**IN WHICH a child shrieks, an adult screams, a woman whispers, and a young man rasps.**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**DORADO** saw Calavera's face change.

He could not determine whether Coléreaux had also noticed, for the light was dim, and the Frenchman's face displayed nothing but supercilious triumph. Dorado suspected that would have been his expression in any circumstance save Calavera firing a shot into his breast.

Dorado had seen this look on Calavera's face before.

The Lieutenant's tone confirmed his concerns. "Turo, light some candles."

Busy with his patient, Corvus had not yet perceived the change in Calavera.

"But this man's arm - "

"**Now,** Turo."

As he moved toward the table, Corvus caught Dorado's eye. They exchanged a look of mutual understanding.

There were three candlesticks on the table; Corvus rearranged them and lit the candles. The silence in the room was thick; it made the soft, dry rasp of de Torre's breathing stand out.

When Corvus was done, Calavera pointed at Coléreaux. "Step up two more rungs. Then remain motionless as Dorado takes the torch from you."

Coléreaux smirked. He understood that Calavera was forcing himself to remain calm, which meant his enemy was struggling with the last bargain he'd proposed. This pleased the Frenchman very much. He raised himself out of the cellar opening slowly and deliberately, as would a King whose rule was absolute.

Calavera made a fist with his left hand. Dorado seized Coléreaux's torch as quickly as he could.

"Douse the torch, Lanza."

There was a pot of sand in the corner nearest him, so Dorado stuffed the torch into it.

At no point thus far had Calavera looked away from Coléreaux's arrogant face, nor had his pistol's aim strayed from the Frenchman's torso. Now he waggled the weapon, ever so slightly, to indicate that Coléreaux was to move forward once more.
"Sit in that chair. My man will tie you to it."

"Is there really any point to that, Lieutenant? We both know - "

"As my prisoner, you will comply with my every order immediately and precisely, without complaint. Any deviation from this will be seen as an attempt at resistance and escape, which will nullify the terms of your surrender."

And with that, every person in the room, including the child, now understood that a part of Calavera wanted the terms nullified. This was finally enough to make some humility appear on Coléreaux's face. He did as instructed.

Dorado bound him to the chair as tightly as the terms of their arrangement permitted.

Only once his enemy was immobile did Calavera permit himself to relax, however little. He placed the pistol in his belt, walked over to the mother and daughter, leaned forward and, making an effort to speak softly, said, "Señora Sierra, during your captivity, were you mistreated in any way?"

"No. In fact, the moment we arrived at this place the Captain ordered his men to treat us with care and respect, promising severe consequences otherwise."

Calavera straightened up, nodding. He held this posture for several more moments, deep in thought.

Meanwhile Dorado searched the three prisoners thoroughly for any concealed weapons they still might have upon their persons. He confiscated a dagger each from both Coléreaux and the tall man, and placed them on the table.

"This will hurt," said Corvus. "There is nothing I can do."

His patient screamed.

"There. The ball is out; the pain will recede." Corvus grabbed a bottle of brandy from the table and held it carefully to the man's lips. "This will help." The man drank. "If nothing else, it will enable you to sleep through the worst of the agony. And if you are lucky, it will make you care less about the discomfort when I stitch you."

As Corvus prepared to do this, Calavera took a candlestick from the table and descended into the cellar.

Dorado returned to the other two prisoners. He leaned his hand upon the dark-haired man's shoulder and bent forward until their noses almost touched. "Some might consider your failure to volunteer those weapons a violation of our agreement."

"It was a simple oversight. I apologise." Neither his tone nor his sharp features contained a hint of remorse.

"What is your name?"

The Gendarme remained silent, staring into Dorado's eyes with a gaze that spoke of violent aggression, held in check only by tremendous force.

But Dorado smiled at this futile defiance. "Your refusal to cooperate by answering even a meaningless question such as this casts grave doubts upon the sincerity of your apology."
The change in the Gendarme's expression would have gone unremarked by most men, but Dorado noticed. With pride and dignity, the captive replied, "I am Lieutenant François Carandini of the Cardinal's Gendarmes."

"What is an Italian doing in the service of France?"

"I have the honour of claiming heritage from both countries. My father was an Italian gentleman; my mother is a French Countess."

"But you're not yourself a Count, are you? And even if you were, here in Esperanza you are nothing but my prisoner."

Carandini chuckled. "I ceased being your prisoner the moment my Captain offered to exchange our liberty for your comrade's life. You will have no choice but to release me, and until then you must look after me. That makes you little more than my vassal."

Dorado rose and turned away, furious with himself. Worse than losing the exchange was the knowledge that he'd allowed it to happen by giving in to pettiness.

Meanwhile Calavera's business in the cellar was concluded. The Gendarmes had stored most of their provisions down there, and the Lieutenant had brought everything up and placed it along the Southern wall.

"Turo, is your surgery completed?"

"Just a moment; my patient is having one last sip of brandy. Yes, now we are done."

"Good. You and I will place the corpses in the cellar. Lanza, gather the weapons we discarded outside."

The other two nodded briskly but did not speak. Calavera's mood was still black.

Dorado took the torch with him, and since he was familiar with the two trees he and Calavera had used in the siege of the cabin, his task did not take him very long. When he returned, his comrades had only one more body to move.

As he placed the weapons on the table, Dorado looked down at the bench upon which Alejandro de Torre was lying. The young man's eyes were closed, and his breathing was deep and regular, but he did not appear to be sleeping comfortably.

Dorado turned to the Sierras. "I apologise for the extent to which we have ignored you, but after determining you were unharmed our most urgent priority was to organise ourselves. We will be spending the evening here, and leaving at dawn."

Maria Sierra smiled gently and shook her head. "There is no apology necessary, Guardsman. Claudia and I understand that you all have many concerns more vital than any sense of abandonment we might feel." Her gaze slipped to de Torre for a moment. She inhaled deeply, and when she looked back at Dorado her face was expressionless, but her eyes betrayed her.

"These men took us out of our home in order to force my husband to assist them. Their Captain was livid when he returned unsuccessful. He would not answer my questions about Luis. Is he...?"

"Your husband cooperated with them for a time, but at his first opportunity he attempted to subvert their plans. He acted bravely and nobly. He has been injured, but he is expected to"
It was not the complete truth, but the rest was speculation.

Maria Sierra placed her hand on Dorado's forearm. "Thank you." Then she turned to her daughter. "Did you hear? Your father has been very brave, and now he is out of danger!"

They embraced, and Dorado moved away to give them what privacy he could.

Coléreaux snorted loudly, putting an end to the brief tranquility. "I see you brought five muskets with you, Lieutenant. Was this a counting error? Or is it perhaps the case that there were, at first, five of you walking through the forest? Was there another man in an Emerald Tunic? Did he, perhaps, intercept the message I left for you?"

This was more than Calavera could bear. He strode over to Coléreaux and snatched him tightly by the collar.

"Are you proud of your cleverness? Of your brutishness? Do you take grotesque pleasure in the little traps you set for us in the woods? Perhaps there is another trap waiting for us where you've hidden the antidote? Because if there is, all the bargains which keep me from treating you as you deserve will be shattered, and I will not hesitate to end your sickening existence, not honourably as a soldier, but roasting on a spit, until your skin crackles and blackens and - "

Claudia Sierra shrieked.

Then she started sobbing, and her mother held her, stroked her hair, spoke to her soothingly, and with her body shielded her daughter from Calavera.

The Lieutenant, jolted out of his blind rage, turned to his two friends. Although neither of them had been surprised by his sudden violence, they could not offer him any support. Dorado, predictably, looked stern. But Corvus was frightened for his friend Diego, and that was worse.

Without a word, the three of them moved away from the Frenchmen, so they could talk privately. Calavera spoke first, desperate to reveal that which had been preying on his mind.

"Just this morning, I had my pistol on him. It was pointed directly at his chest, and he just smiled at me, because he knew I could not kill him, and so he knew he was going to escape. I tried to wound his leg, but it was a desperate gamble, and it failed. As he knew it would, and so he smiled even wider. He escaped - of course - and he returned to this forest, where he set his traps for us. Benton died because I let Coléreaux go, and now he is my prisoner again, for the second time in one day, and once again he knows I will have to release him - who will he kill after that? Because he has bested me again, because he knows I will let him go again, and all the while he is smiling at me - "

Calavera was stopped abruptly by a sharp tug on the leg of his trousers. He started, and looked down.

de Torre was staring intently up at him, his hand still clinging to Calavera's trousers. He was having difficulty keeping his eyes open, but his gaze did not waver. Calavera crouched low and took the young man's arm, gently placing it over de Torre's chest. Then he waited for the young man to gather sufficient energy to speak.

"If our positions... were reversed... and it was I... who felt as you do... who was inconsolable... as you are... what words of solace... would you offer to me?"
Having over-exerted himself, he closed his eyes and coughed, but he opened them again as soon as he could, for he wanted to see whether his words had been of any help to the Lieutenant.

They had. Calavera rose, and nodded his thanks.

When he turned around, he discovered Maria Sierra standing beside him.

She said, loudly, "May I say a few words to you in private, Lieutenant?" and it was clear that refusal was unacceptable.

Calavera led her even further away from the Gendarmes, and said quietly, "Señora, I apologise for frightening your daughter and - "

"This has nothing to do with that," she said, whispering so softly that Calavera had to strain to hear her. "I favoured you with my tone of motherly disapproval because I wanted the others to believe it concerned your outburst, but that was unimportant. Tell me, do you know the French language?"

"I do."

"And does the word 'Yaxax'tun' mean anything to you?"

Calavera was unable to answer for a moment. When he could, he said, "In our current circumstances, it means everything. But the word is not French."

"I expected it was not. The French Captain is not aware I can read his mother tongue, and so he was careless with his documents in my presence. I know why he has come to Esperanza, and what he intends to do afterward. I mention this now to reassure you that any information you wanted from your prisoners, I believe I can provide."

Once again Calavera was briefly speechless. And when he could make sounds again, at first all he could manage was stifled laughter. "You are a marvel, Señora. I am in your debt." And he returned to his prisoners a much happier man.

"We accept your second proposal. Tell me where I can find the antidote, disclosing fully any dangers I might encounter while seeking it, and if the antidote works I will release you and your men."

Again Coléreaux smiled at him. Calavera felt the condescension hammer at his anger, but he knew this was the Frenchman's intent, so he remained calm and neutral, above such trifling. He thanked God for blessing him with Maria Sierra.

Disappointed his method was no longer effective, Coléreaux tried discourse. "Why, Lieutenant, as a man of honour I am hurt. First you accuse me of planning to lead you into a trap rather than toward the antidote, and then you question whether the antidote is genuine. When I concealed the bottle, I did not think to create any hazards around it, and it certainly never occurred to me to offer in exchange for our freedom a liquid that would do nothing to help your ailing companion. You must be a much more devious man than I."

He paused, hoping for a response.

Calavera denied him the satisfaction.

Coléreaux had no choice but to continue. "Fifteen paces directly Southwest from that same corner of the cabin is a dead tree stripped of its bark. At its base, between two prominent roots, is a
large rock. I buried the bottle of antidote beneath that rock."

Calavera turned away from Coléreaux and nodded to Dorado, who again picked up the torch and went outside.

While he was gone, Corvus and Calavera moved de Torre to the cabin's only cot, while Maria Sierra prepared some blankets to sleep on for herself and her daughter.

Dorado returned very shortly, doused his torch before entering, and presented the bottle to Corvus.

"Are there any special instructions we need to follow?" Calavera called over to Coléreaux. "Remember that your freedom relies upon de Torre's recovery."

"Use the whole bottle."

While Corvus helped de Torre drink, Calavera and Dorado searched the Gendarmes' belongings. They found none of the documents Maria Sierra had mentioned, but Coléreaux, anticipating the descent of Guardsmen upon his cabin, would have hidden those somewhere in the forest as well.

Also there were none of the red tunics which all members of the Cardinal's Gendarmes wore, but this was unsurprising. Those might be likewise secreted, or perhaps even left behind in France.

Dorado discovered a half-empty bottle containing a thick liquid, unpleasantly green in colour. One could smell the contents, in spite of the bottle's tight seal, and the odour suggested foul consequences for anyone unlucky enough to ingest the liquid, or have it enter his body by any other means, such as through a wound. Dorado carefully carried the bottle outside and emptied it into the dirt, then brought it back inside and smashed the glass in the fireplace.

Calavera stood over Coléreaux once more. "When will we know whether the antidote has been effective?"

"Let your man sleep through the night. In the morning he will be recovered, although still tired and weak."

"Good. Then I will leave you alone for the rest of the evening. Sleep well."

The Gendarme with the injured arm, owing to the combined effects of his pain and the brandy, had already been asleep for some time. But the third man, Carandini, was very much awake, his alert eyes following every movement Dorado made, while the Guardsman pretended to ignore him.

Calavera walked over to his tall friend. "It occurs to me, that since your new acquaintance is a Lieutenant, he outranks you, Lanza."

Dorado snorted. "Not even the highest-ranked French Gendarme is worth the lowest Emerald Guardsman. Besides, someone once told me that all men are equal before God."

"A wise man?"

Dorado looked his friend straight in the eye. "Always. When he remembers himself."

"Then if he is truly wise, he will surround himself with good friends, who will remind him.
"And since you are my friend, I am sure you will be willing to volunteer for first watch. My exertions from last night and this morning are beginning to take their toll."

Dorado nodded. Calavera walked over to Corvus, who was crouched at de Torre's cot.

"He is going to be fine," Corvus said as soon as Calavera was close enough to hear. "Already he is shivering less than he was."

"Good. Then you should sleep."

"I will, very shortly."

Calavera claimed a blanket and lay himself down at last. The night passed without further incident, or at least none which caused him to wake up, for the next thing he knew the morning sun was peering in beneath his eyelids.

He should have been woken for one of the watches. Corvus and Dorado had conspired to take upon themselves his share of the responsibility.

Ordinarily, he'd be upset with them, but he was forced to concede he'd obviously needed the rest. So he would not mention it; they certainly wouldn't.

Calavera sat up, and just as he was doing so he heard Corvus try to whisper something to him. He turned his head in Corvus' direction.

"Were you saying something, Turo?"

Corvus looked at him glumly. "It no longer matters." He nodded his head toward the centre of the cabin. Calavera turned his head back to see what Corvus meant.

Standing in the middle of the room was a stranger, very short and very thin, with wide eyes, a gleaming bald head, and a thick gray beard which flowed past his chest. But none of these were the man's most striking features.

The man was entirely transparent. Through his clothes, through his flesh, Calavera could see the cabin wall behind him almost perfectly, as though this man were made of the clearest glass.

He stared directly at Calavera, confused and concerned.

"What are you doing in my home?"

Chapter End Notes

In the Summary, I wanted to use a different verb for the sound of de Torre's voice, but I thought I would get angry letters if I wrote "and a young man croaks." - t!
"TURO?" said Calavera, doing his best not to move his lips while the ghost stared straight at him.

"Yes?" Corvus said softly.

"Do you have any previous experience in these matters?"

"As it happens, I do."

"Then I defer to your expertise."

Calavera's assumption that this transparent man was a ghost had come to him immediately, and naturally. Not so very long ago, and for the overwhelming majority of his life, he never would have accepted such a creature might exist in reality. But much had happened to him since - so much that he could hardly believe that the simpler, more ignorant period of his life had come to an end just over a day ago.

"Excuse me?" Corvus said, loudly enough to attract the ghost's attention.

"Yes?" said the ghost. It turned to face Corvus. Calavera was relieved.

But Corvus raising his voice had also roused Dorado, who opened his eyes a slit and immediately saw a stranger. The very next moment he was standing, fully awake, with his eyes wide open and his hand on his sword.

The ghost threw its arms up over its face. "What is he doing?"

Its sudden fear was so intense that the last word came out as a shriek: shrill, piercing, and so unnaturally loud it forced Calavera to squint from the pain it caused his ears. But in spite of his eyes being mostly closed he still noticed the dirt at the ghost's feet rise in a cloud, although its legs had not moved.

Had the ghost been able to stir the dirt without touching it? If so, what other supernatural feats could it accomplish, if sufficiently agitated? Calavera hoped Corvus could save them all from finding out.

"Do not be frightened," said Corvus, holding one hand up to the ghost, while his cautious eyes also noted the cloud settling back to the ground. "I will answer your question - your first question - in just a moment."

Corvus placed his other hand atop Dorado's sword arm. "By now, my friend, you have surely grasped the nature of our new arrival. If you do draw your weapon, what do you propose to cut?"
Dorado scowled. But he took his hand off his sword.

Corvus opened his mouth to address the ghost once more, but now Claudia Sierra had woken up. "Mother, look! It's the strange man I told you about!"

But Maria Sierra could only stare wordlessly.

Corvus kept his body turned toward the ghost as he addressed the young girl. "You have seen this man before?"

"Oh, yes. He was outside two nights ago. He wanted to come in. He was upset because he was unable."

Calavera looked over at Coléreaux, who could not stifle the crafty grin that spread across his face. He'd known about the ghost, and on the night in question had taken steps to keep it at a distance, steps which he had been unable to repeat last night while tied to a chair.

The Captain of the Gendarmes was familiar enough with certain supernatural elements that he knew how to repel spirits. Calavera took note.

Corvus returned his full attention to the ghost. "I apologise, if our staying here has been inconvenient, or disrespectful."

The ghost tilted its head to the side, considering the apology. "Well..."

"You are the man who built this cabin? The ornithologist?"

Its head, in fact its entire frame, straightened with pride. "Yes, I am!"

"It is very solid. And very dry."

"Thank you!" said the ghost, its face lighting up like that of a boy who has been promised a treat. "The secret to the dryness is knowing how to seal the roof."

"Resin?"

"Precisely!" And now the ghost's eyes became mischievous. "But... what kind?"

"Pinus pinaster."

The short, bearded man hopped in place and clapped its hands together. "Marvelous! Have you built a cabin before?"

"I have. But I have never had the pleasure of building such marvelous platforms as yours."

"They're for watching the birds!"

"Yes. And that is why we are here. Because we heard this place was perfect for the study of Carduelis carduelis."

"It is, it is!"

"Then I hope you are not too upset with us for intruding."

"No, not at all! Although it was very frustrating to be unable to come inside last night. And... why are these men tied up?"
Corvus did not have a ready answer for that. "They... they..."

"They were making noise!" said Dorado, so suddenly it made everyone start. "We had to restrain them. Their unruly behaviour was scaring the birds away."

The ghost was confused by this reasoning. "Well, I understand, but... birds are resilient creatures. They would have returned shortly. Was it truly necessary to bind these men like that?"

But Dorado was at the end of his inspiration. "Um..."

"My friend is very harsh," said Corvus, nodding emphatically.

This made sense to the ghost. "He must be!"

"It's the birds," Dorado said. "I am very passionate about them." He did not sound passionate in the slightest.

Calavera warned him with a look: Do not provoke our host with sarcasm.

But the ghost walked - or, more accurately, glided - up to Dorado, its eyes wide. "I understand. They are truly wondrous animals, are they not? So innocent, so beautiful."

Apparently it was willing to accept Dorado's words at face value. The Guardsman simply nodded, not willing to give the ghost any further words to dissect.

But the pause gave it an opportunity to let its mind wander, and become more aware of its surroundings. "Weren't there more of you?" It looked over at the open cellar. It moved closer.

Unseen by their host, Calavera gestured to Corvus: Stop it from looking inside.

Corvus shrugged back: And how might one do that?

Unavoidably, the ghost saw the corpses of the Gendarmes. "Who are these men? What happened to them?"

It was horrified. To Calavera, this seemed a most incongruous emotion for a ghost to feel. But he was not an expert in these matters.

"We..."

Corvus volunteering to answer for them came as a great relief to Calavera and Dorado, at least initially.

"We..."

But his subsequent inability to provide that answer made them more agitated with every passing second.

At last Calavera saw on Corvus' face that he'd made a decision. Clearly Corvus was not entirely satisfied with that decision, but at this point he felt saying something was better than continuing to say nothing. Calavera could only trust his friend's judgment, and pray he was right.

Corvus took a deep breath. "We had no choice. We had to kill these men."

"What?" The ghost jumped so high that when it began to descend its extremely long beard completely covered its face for a moment.
"We did not want to, as I said. But they intended to kill us."

The ghost was not satisfied.

"You see... they did not come here as admirers of our fine feathered friends. They came as... hunters."

"Hunters!" The ghost's eyes, nose, and lips contorted in a hideous mask of rage. Then the flesh of its head disappeared, leaving behind only the transparent image of its skull. Just as suddenly, the features returned, still twisted and furious. "Hunters?" One of the candlesticks on the table flew across the room and smashed into the stone fireplace. "Then these are the men who set all those traps in the forest?"

"Yes!" said Corvus without hesitation. "Yes, they are!"

"I have two boys who come to visit me. I met them one day while looking for Passer hispaniolensis and I invited them here. Those traps could have hurt my friends!" The ghost looked as though it were on the verge of revealing its skull once more.

"These hunters were bad men. They only wanted to hurt others. Birds, animals, people - it made no difference."

The ghost managed to calm itself, breathing heavily with transparent lungs. "Well... I suppose they left you no choice. But they cannot stay here."

Corvus indicated the bound Gendarmes. "These men have volunteered to remove them this morning, as penance for disturbing the tranquility of the forest."

"They have? Well then, I guess that is all right."

"As for the hunters' traps, how many of them remain?"

"None. I dismantled them all."

"Good! Thank you."

"I did it for my friends. Now..." The ghost seemed uncomfortable.

"You are wondering when we will be leaving?"

The ghost twisted its long beard between its fingers. "I do not mean to appear ungracious..."

"Not at all. We have imposed, and you have been more than cordial. We intend to depart this morning."

"All right. Then I suppose I shall go for now, and not get in your way."

"That seems best. Once again, we thank you for your hospitality."

"Think nothing of it."

And then the ghost was no longer there.

Calavera blinked, but there was nothing wrong with his eyes. Their host had simply vanished, instantly.
"Turo?"

"He is gone, Diego."

"Good," said Dorado. He sat down heavily upon a bench. "Do you still have any of last night's brandy left?"

While Corvus attended to Dorado's needs, Calavera moved to the cot where de Torre lay.

The young man's eyes opened as the Lieutenant stopped before him. They were bright, and much more alert than they had been the night before. His face had regained some colour and he was no longer sweating.

"You seem better, Alejandro."

de Torre smiled at him. "I believe I am. My throat is very dry, but I am able to speak. And my head is sore, but it no longer feels like it is going to tear itself apart."

"Good. I will help you sit up, and then I will get you some water."

But he paused, because de Torre's face had changed to an expression of confusion.

"I had my eyes open earlier this morning, but I must not have been fully recovered, so I closed them, and fell back asleep until I felt you arrive at my bedside just now. Was I feverish earlier... or is it possible I saw a man who was... transparent?"

"What you saw was the ghost of the man who built this cabin and the platforms outside."

"Lieutenant, please do not jest with me. I am recovering well but - "

Calavera put his hand on de Torre's arm. "It was no jest. Your eyes were seeing what the rest of us saw."

de Torre did not appear reassured.

"Come," said Calavera, "all will be explained later. Turo is the better man to do it anyway. For now, let me help you sit up, and then water and food."

Once that was done, Calavera, Dorado, Corvus, and the two Sierras sat down to eat the provisions the Guardsmen had brought with them. de Torre surprised them all by rising from his cot and joining them at the table.

Coléreaux remained silent, asking neither for refreshment nor to be untied. He understood that he and his men would have their opportunity to eat once the others had left the cabin.

Their breakfast concluded, the Guardsmen gathered their belongings and prepared to be on their way. Although she had been very brave during her ordeal, when the moment finally came, Claudia Sierra proved most eager to leave - although she concealed it as best she could.

Calavera was the last one to exit. He and Coléreaux had not said a solitary word to each other all morning, and the Guardsman had been much happier with this arrangement than with the infuriating exchanges of the night before. He would have preferred to depart in silence, but honour compelled him to issue a warning.

"I do not know to what extent you observed the ghost that visited this morning, but it has some abilities which might make it very dangerous if provoked. We have told it that you will
remove the bodies from its cellar. I strongly recommend you do as we have promised."

"Those 'bodies,' as you call them, are my men. They will receive the burials they deserve."

Calavera loathed this man, but no decent person could deny the nobility of that statement. He nodded to Coléreaux. Then he moved toward the door.

"Lieutenant!"

Calavera stopped. Although he did not turn around.

"Are you not going to release our bonds before you go?"

Still looking ahead, Calavera said, "I cannot trust you, upon your release, to let us depart in peace. You are the sort who would try and race ahead of us, to effectuate an ambush. So I and my companions require time to place distance between you and ourselves. But I have faith in your resourcefulness; I know you will find a way to free yourself before long."

And then, still without turning around to look at his enemy, Calavera departed the cabin.

He had not left them bound out of pettiness; the reasons he had given were perfectly genuine. Nevertheless, he did take some small satisfaction in this minor victory.

It was soon overcome, however, by his concerns for the future. Before long, Captain Sébastien Coléreaux was going to be loose in Esperanza once more. He was not the sort of man whose pride would permit him to simply return to France in defeat. He would try and exact some kind of revenge upon Calavera, either by attacking him directly or attempting some scheme which would harm what the Lieutenant held dear: his country, and the people who were important to him.

Coléreaux had killed Benton. Were it not for the ghost, his traps might have killed two boys. He had attempted to kill Luis Sierra, and had threatened to kill the clerk's family. It was certain that with Coléreaux at liberty, others would suffer, and likely die.

Calavera could only imagine who they might be.

He noticed Dorado observing him.

"You're torturing yourself with grim prognostications of the future," Dorado said, smiling ruefully.

"You know me very well, my friend."

"There is no point in speculation. The choice of what happens next is entirely his own. The only thing you know for certain is that your paths will cross again. Take comfort in that. You will have another chance to give him the justice he deserves."

"I cannot help but think you are far more eager to meet these men again than I am."

Dorado shrugged. "Carandini and I made each other an unspoken promise. Neither of us are the type to renege."

Calavera did not have an answer for that, so the discussion ended. But Dorado had succeeded: Calavera felt better.

The Esperanzans made their way through the dense forest. As they had on the way in, Corvus and Dorado led the way. When Claudia Sierra's legs became tired, Calavera carried her on
his back. They passed the trap of Coléreaux's which involved the wasp nest. As the ghost had told them, it was dismantled.

When they arrived at the tree where Coléreaux had pinned his fatal message to Calavera, the Lieutenant stopped walking. He lowered Claudia to the ground and told her to stay close to her mother. Corvus continued to lead the others onward, but Dorado remained behind with Calavera.

The two Guardsmen quickly fashioned a litter. Then they placed Sean Benton's lifeless body onto it, and continued after their companions.

Calavera could not help but be reminded of Coléreaux's words about burying his Gendarmes. Every soldier's death is a loss to someone.

The trees of the haunted forest became less dense, and the gray light brighter. From up ahead, where there were no more trees, Calavera and Dorado heard the excited sounds of two boys asking Turo Corvus about his encounter with their friend the ghost.

Dorado chuckled. "First the boys saw the ghost, then the girl. But no adults, until it revealed itself to us deliberately."

"Turo once told me that the reason children see what adults cannot is that their imaginations are encouraged."

Dorado chuckled again, finding that explanation, and its source, most satisfactory.

And with that, Calavera and Dorado exited the forest.

Claudia was making certain every one of the five horses received a big hug and several assurances of its beauty.

The two boys stared at Benton on the litter, but Corvus drew their attention away by complimenting them effusively for the service they'd rendered to the Emerald Guard. Calavera could not say afterward which reward the boys had been happier to receive: Corvus' praise, or the polished coin he gave each of them.

Calavera and Dorado did their best to secure Benton respectfully to his horse, after which the Guardsmen got into their saddles. Dorado held a rope by which he would lead Benton's horse. Claudia Sierra asked to ride with Corvus, and Maria Sierra rode with Calavera.

The boys, of course, chose to stay behind and play in the forest.

For the first few minutes of their ride back to the main road which led to San Rafael, Calavera kept a close watch on de Torre, until the young man turned to him with a bright smile.

"Do not fear, Lieutenant: I am not going to fall out of my saddle. If anything, I am eager to ride more quickly, the sooner to return to the Stronghold."

Calavera nodded to him, both to admit he had been observing de Torre and to agree with his assessment. "Since your recovery is going so well, you may ride to the front and increase our pace moderately."

"Thank you. And once I leave the two of you alone, you can inquire from Señora Sierra what Coléreaux's further plans are."

de Torre smiled mischievously at Calavera's look of surprise, then he spurred his horse
forward, leaving Calavera to wonder how the young man had deduced his plans.

Señora Sierra roused him from his reverie. "He seems to be recovering well."

"He is a remarkable young man." It was the first phrase ever to have come into Calavera's mind when considering Alejandro de Torre, and the young man in question had been demonstrating the truth of it ever since. "And now, if you please, shall we prove his assumption correct?"

"Of course."

"We were told by one of Coléreaux's men that they came to France to seize a certain journal in the Baron's possession. Can you confirm this?"

"I can. It once belonged to a man who had been to the New World. It spoke of a native temple built in dedication to Yaxax'tun... a serpent god?"

"Yes, made of emeralds and gold."

"The Gendarmes mean to locate this temple."

Sitting behind Maria Sierra, Calavera nodded, a gesture entirely for himself. He'd known, with a certainty that resided in his very bones, that ultimately Coléreaux's goal would prove the same as his own.

Dorado had been correct: Their paths would cross again.

But Señora Sierra's story was not yet finished. "They were seeking the journal because they wanted a means of discovering the temple before the others do."

"The others?" Surely not even Cardinal Richelieu could know of the Baron's plans so soon!

"Yes. There is a group of adventurers who have also heard of the temple of Yaxax'tun, and they wish to claim its treasures for themselves. They have been making their plans in secret, but the Cardinal's spies are very resourceful. According to their reports, these men have almost finished preparing their expedition, and should be ready to depart for New Spain within a week."
"DADDY!"

"Claudia! My dearest daughter!"

Her father sat up in his infirmary bed and the girl ran to him, throwing both arms around his neck and squeezing as though for dear life.

Luis Sierra raised his right arm and squeezed her back, streams of water coursing down his cheeks.

Then Maria Sierra entered, and the first thing she noticed was the binding around her husband's left forearm, and that he was not using that arm to hold his daughter.

Their eyes met. He shook his head. A sob caught in her throat, and she raised her hand to stifle it.

"No, my darling." Luis Sierra extended his one good arm to his wife. "Do not be sad. It is an inconsequential price to pay for the safe return of my precious family."

Maria went to her husband, and held him to her, with their beloved daughter between them.

Watching from the doorway, the four Guardsmen decided they had received sufficient compensation for their efforts, and it was time to give the Sierras their privacy. They all stepped away, and Corvus shut the door gently. Then he turned to de Torre.

"And now we must take you to our physician, so he can confirm you are fully recovered."

But de Torre was in a mood to celebrate, and unwilling to allow Corvus to dampen their triumph. "I'm fine."

"You were recently poisoned."

"And then I was given the antidote."

"Which saved your life, yes. But we need to make certain there is no lingering danger or difficulty."

"I know my own body. I don't require a physician to tell me what I already know."

"Good. Then the visit will be pleasantly short."

de Torre looked to Calavera and Dorado for assistance, but they suddenly became very interested in the masonry. The young man turned back to Corvus.
"I'm not going to win, am I?"

"Most assuredly not."

de Torre sighed. "Then I am yours."

"Splendid!" and he was about to take de Torre by the arm, but Calavera interrupted.

"Turo? A word first, if you please."

The two of them stepped out of earshot and spoke quietly, Corvus already having an inkling what this was about.

"I mean to make de Torre the fourth member of our team for New Spain. Do you have any objection?"

"No, of course not." He looked so confused by the suggestion that Calavera almost laughed.

"Good. And now you may attend to our new comrade."

"He shall be well cared for, whether he wants it or not." Corvus strode over to de Torre, grabbed him by the arm without slowing his pace, and began pulling him away.

de Torre waved sardonically to the other two, then turned and stumbled into step alongside Corvus.

Calavera returned to Dorado, who was smiling at him knowingly. "I take it you were asking Turo how he felt about de Torre joining our expedition?"

"I was. And he approved."

"Did he offer any specific reasons?"

"He did not. I was left with the impression he was relying on instinct."

"In all things," Dorado agreed.

"And you, my friend? What are your thoughts?"

"de Torre is talented but inexperienced, headstrong, and moral to a fault."

Calavera nodded; his bruised body was proof enough of the latter point.

"On the other hand, he is perceptive and cautious - he came very near to saving Benton from that trap - and the assignment will certainly require those two traits, perhaps above all others. Further, he performed his duties in exemplary fashion while suffering the debilitating effects of being mortally poisoned."

Dorado paused, and looked over Calavera's shoulder.

"Would you care to join us, Your Lordship, so you might hear us more clearly?"

Calavera turned around. The Baron stepped out from behind a corner. "I could hear you both perfectly well."
"I was about to tell the Lieutenant why I think de Torre will be an excellent addition to our team."

Calavera turned back to him. "You haven't done that already?"

"I was saving the most important point for last." He glanced at the Baron, to make sure de Tarso was paying close attention, then he said to Calavera, "When Benton fell, de Torre held him, and wept for a man he had barely gotten to know. And when Ben - Sean - died, de Torre took but a moment to grieve, and then the very next thing he did was compose himself and look to you for instructions."

Calavera nodded; he'd noted that as well, at the time. He turned to the Baron. "The three of us are in agreement. We choose de Torre."

"I have one question first, Lieutenant. Your initial choice, Saqer al-Farik, had certain traits which you felt were indispensible. Are you satisfied that young de Torre is able to fill the gaps created by al-Farik's absence?"

The Baron's tone might have seemed perfectly innocent, but it was clear to Calavera that the Captain had shared with de Tarso the discussion about replacing al-Farik with two Guardsmen, and the Baron was equally dissatisfied with Calavera's implication. The Lieutenant chose his next words carefully.

"There may remain some minor weaknesses in our team, but for the most part we will have everything we need. The greatest benefit de Torre brings, as Saqer would have done, is his unique viewpoint. He's new to the Guard, and has never gone to war. He will question notions the rest of us might take for granted."

"In that case, I endorse your choice of de Torre. Further, I have already discussed his potential candidacy with the Captain, and I can assure you he agrees as well."

As he said this, a twinkle in the Baron's eye indicated to Calavera that de Tarso had chosen to dismiss the Lieutenant's indiscretion of the day before. Presumably the Captain had also.

With Calavera and the Baron exchanging looks understood only by themselves, Dorado seized the opportunity to interject. "Your Lordship, if I may, I would like to inquire what will become of Luis Sierra."

The Baron blinked, genuinely puzzled. "In what sense?"

Dorado took a breath before continuing. "He knowingly divulged important information to enemies of our country. Now, while I concede that treason is not something to be taken lightly, I believe in this case - " but the Baron waved him to silence.

"Luis Sierra acted to save his family, and at his first opportunity he attempted to undo any damage his coerced cooperation might have caused. In so doing he saved Saqer al-Farik's life, and enabled the Emerald Guard to learn details about Cardinal Richelieu's plans, details which I consider indispensable to the success of your new assignment."

"Then he will not be prosecuted?"

"Of course not."

"And will he... lose his position? With you?"
The Baron cast a grimace at Calavera. "I have earned myself quite the reputation for callousness, have I not, Lieutenant?" He turned back to Dorado.

"Luis Sierra and his family are victims of my lack of foresight. I should have anticipated that his working for me would make him and his family a target for our enemies, and thereby taken the appropriate steps to ensure they were protected. Sierra has paid a substantial price for the flaw in my security. But he does not require his left arm to write, and so there is no reason whatsoever to dismiss him. If anything, this affair has proven that he should be retained at any cost."

Dorado nodded humbly. "Thank you, Your Lordship. And I apologise for any offence I may have given you."

The Baron waved Dorado's concerns away again. "Not at all, Dorado. Your faithfulness to the Sierras does you credit. And I concede that certain... cold-blooded aspects of my reputation may not be entirely without basis."

Dorado nodded again, so the Baron would not see his smile. But Calavera knew it was there.

"And now, if you please, Dorado, I should like to speak with Calavera privately."

"Of course." And with a smile for Calavera which contained any number of meanings, Dorado turned smartly and left.

The Baron motioned Calavera into an unoccupied room.

Feeling playful, Calavera decided he would speak first. "Sierra believes that your secret passageways under the city are merely tunnels."

"There is power in secrets. I am certain it came as quite an unpleasant surprise to Coléreaux, for example, when he discovered he was intruding upon the entombed dead."

"Does Señora Sierra know about the 'tunnels'?"

That was not his real question, and the Baron knew it.

"Of course not. What possible reason would I have for taking a simple clerk's wife into my confidence?"

The Baron was lying, and he knew Calavera knew it. Also he knew the Lieutenant would say no more about it.

"In spite of her inability to read, and to understand the French language," Calavera said, lying even more outrageously than his superior, "Señora Sierra was able to learn much about Coléreaux's - and by extension the Cardinal's - plans."

The Baron's face changed quickly as Calavera spoke, from delight at Maria Sierra's resourcefulness to distemper at the mention of his nemesis.

"I have learned many things as well. You begin; let us give Señora Sierra the credit she deserves."

"The Cardinal is once again attempting to locate the temple of Yaxax'tun."

The Baron's face contorted into a silent snarl. "Yes."
"And he needs to make haste - as do we - because there is a third group involved."

The Baron raised his eyebrows. "She learned that as well?"

"All she knows of the other men is that they are adventurers, presumably not in service to any country. They have been organising in secret, and should be ready to depart within a week."

"I can confirm that. They are currently in Russia, where they've found several wealthy investors." The Baron chuckled, without humour. "By the time you have done everything you need to do, and Coléreaux has gathered more men, and this latest group has completed its preparations, I should not be surprised if you all find yourselves on the same ship."

Calavera also chuckled, also without humour. "I have no doubt our paths will cross. Have you been able to determine anything more about these 'adventurers'?"

"A great deal. Do you recall, when I was questioning the Gendarme who'd been spying, carelessly, outside the Palace, that I told you he mentioned something about 'stars,' but I had not yet figured out his meaning?"

Calavera suddenly understood. He should have guessed it sooner. "The Five Stars."

"You've heard of them?"

"All of Europe has. They make sure of it."

The Five Stars were exactly as Maria Sierra had described them: adventurers, men of considerable skill who explored dangerous regions all over the world. Truly independent, they served no one but themselves, not even as mercenaries. Every expedition they took was entirely for their own benefit, to satisfy their cravings for excitement, for fame, and for wealth.

Calavera had never met the Five Stars, but he did not think much of their motives, nor could he be much impressed by any man's achievements when the person speaking loudest of them was the subject himself.

Nevertheless, Calavera had no reason to doubt they were every bit as formidable as their reputation suggested. He - and Coléreaux - would have to stay focused, or they would find an empty temple waiting for them.

"Is there anything else your prisoner told you?"

"That was everything he knew."

Calavera chose not to examine that assertion too closely.

"Then I would like to ask what you meant a few moments ago when you referred to me and my team doing 'everything we need to do.'"

"There are several items. First, you wanted your men to experience magic first-hand, to prove to them that it is real."

"Yes. That demonstration will no longer be necessary."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"As it turns out, the forest was haunted."
de Tarso didn't speak - although he did raise his eyebrows.

Calavera continued. "I will, of course, give you a full account of everything that's happened since we departed the Stronghold yesterday afternoon. But for the time being, if you please, can we continue listing the tasks which need to be performed before we set sail?"

"The most complicated one involves uniting you with the fifth member of your expedition. Have you managed to reason out who that might be?"

"I believe I have: your agent Santiago, the man who recovered Guillaume Henri's journal and serpent ring."

*****

"I have good news," said Calavera to de Torre the following morning. "The bruises you gave me no longer hurt."

It was an attempt at levity. They were outside the Stronghold's Chapel, having just paid their last respects to Sean Benton. It had been a beautiful service, celebrating not only their friend and comrade's life of service to his adopted country, but also his wit, his earnestness, and his passion for horses and the equestrian arts. The Captain's eulogy had managed to include even a loving joke about the constant dampness of Benton's hair. Corzo's voice had thickened slightly during that segment, but he'd persevered. This was not his first such ceremony, and it would certainly not be his last.

de Torre had wept from the opening hymn through the entire service, freely and without shame, his back straight and his head held high in honour of his friend.

Now, it seemed, de Torre was out of tears, but ever since the funeral's end he'd been lost in his thoughts. Silent, one might say, as the grave.

He caught Calavera observing him and smiled weakly, attempting reassurance. It did not work.

Corvus leaned over and whispered, "He is not only thinking of Sean. He is remembering the last two times he has had to attend this service."

Of course. For his father and his brother. Calavera resolved to leave de Torre to his ruminations; one should not intrude where another's family is concerned.

It took him a moment to realise that de Torre had decided to speak to him after all.

"I should go, and prepare for this afternoon."

His formal entry into the Emerald Guard. Taking place in the shadow of this morning, it promised to be a bittersweet affair.

"I will see you then," Calavera said. de Torre nodded and walked away.

"I must also make my excuses," said Corvus. "I have something important I need to do before the ceremony." He exchanged nods with Calavera and Dorado, then headed for the gates.
Calavera watched him go for a few moments before turning back to Dorado. The Lieutenant also intended to part company; he had somewhere to be.

But Dorado was smirking at him. "Have you heard? Recently there have been several incursions into this province by soldiers loyal to France. Benton was killed by one such group of intruders. The Baron does not wish to declare open war on France, but these outrages cannot stand. Therefore, he and the Captain have decided to launch their own scouting raids, in secret, over the French border, to locate the source of these incursions and impose justice upon the people responsible.

"That, as you have no doubt surmised, is the real reason the Guard's elite have been summoned to San Rafael."

Calavera nodded his approval. "A most convincing story. And a commendable collating of existing fact. No doubt the Captain himself will be at the vanguard of this action?"

"The Captain has remained remarkably calm, but those who know him well are able to perceive the sword of Saint Michael dancing behind his eyes." He glanced meaningfully down at Calavera's chest. "And what about you?"

"What do you mean?" Although he knew perfectly well.

"You could have repaired that hole in your Tunic last night. It is unlike you, when paying your last respects, to be anything less than impeccable in appearance. So tell me, when do you expect to sew that hole shut?"

"I believe you know."

Dorado did. He sighed. "I wish Sean were coming with us. I expect he would have adored the New World."

"Sean is coming with us."

"Diego, please reassure me you have not found some way to take our departed comrade's ghost along on our expedition?"

But Calavera only smiled, innocently.

Dorado snorted at him. "You, my friend, have been spending far too much time with the Baron."
The Recruitment Concludes

Chapter Summary

*IN WHICH one promise is kept, another is annulled, a ritual is conducted, and an Oath is performed.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"YOU'RE looking well, my friend."

"As are you," said Calavera, staring pointedly at the binding around Saqer al-Farik's bare trunk.

"All is proceeding as I expected."

al-Farik smiled after he said this. He expected Calavera to note that his breathing was somewhat laboured. He also knew his friend would refrain from commenting upon it.

"We are leaving tomorrow morning," Calavera said, then paused, uncomfortable. al-Farik understood why.

"I am certain there are many things which you would like to tell me, but are honour-bound to conceal. Do not concern yourself. I know where you shall be - "

"For the most part," Calavera said, softly so as not to interrupt.

"and I know what you shall be doing. For the most part. And you," he patted his injury, "know what I shall be doing. For the most part. When we see each other again, you will share with me everything you are permitted to reveal, and I have no doubt I will regret - somewhat - my necessary decision to remain behind."

"When I return, I will swear you to secrecy, and tell you everything."

There was a twinkle of recognition in al-Farik's eye. "I see you have gotten to know the Baron better, peered behind his façade. And now you know just how far you may risk his displeasure."

Calavera smiled at his friend's obvious delight with the notion. "If I am successful, I expect the Baron's good will to have very few boundaries."

"Hm. Perhaps I will ask him myself, when he visits."

al-Farik's smile reminded Calavera of the cat and the canary, an analogy the Lieutenant had applied not long ago to de Tarso himself as well. Ordinarily Calavera would have playfully denied his friend the satisfaction, but in light of al-Saqer's recent injury he decided it was the least concession he could make, so he asked the question his friend wanted to hear. "Am I to understand that you are expecting the Baron to call on you in your convalescence?"
"The very day I was injured, he sent someone to me. His Lordship was said to regret that recent events were making it impossible for him to visit me immediately, but he requested permission - through his man - to pay his respects at the first convenient opportunity."

"You seem unusually proud of this."

al-Farik shrugged and waved his arms. It was true, and he was unashamed of it. "What can I say? I am by nature an open and forgiving man."

"Surely you do not believe he intends to apologise to you for breaking his word to the Moors of this country?"

"Of course not. He is not of that character."

"He may surprise you. Doing the unexpected is, after all, very much in his character."

"True, and you know him better than I. If he does apologise, I will of course be gracious, but honest. At the very least, he must realise that if he presents himself before me, I will be honour-bound to broach the topic."

"I am certain he does. And you will note this has not dissuaded him."

al-Farik nodded. His silence spoke of his continued distrust of the Baron. Calavera found it regrettable, but not without basis.

"In any event, I hope his visit goes well."

"You are a good judge of character, Diego. I expect it will."

"And now..." Calavera rose.

"Of course." al-Farik rose as well - out of a chair, his cushions being too soft for his body to tolerate in its present condition - and moved to embrace his friend.

Calavera was tempted to caution al-Farik against straining himself, but he knew it was useless: al-Farik would insist, and pretend to take insult from the suggestion he was infirm. It was best just to allow him to do what he pleased.

"Until we meet again, my friend." al-Farik embraced him, and Calavera returned the gesture with equal force, no more, no less. "Have a fruitful journey, and return in good health."

"Thank you," said Calavera as they moved apart. "I wish you a rapid recovery."

They nodded to each other once, and then Calavera departed, as quickly as politeness allowed, so that his friend could sit down again.

*****

When Calavera returned to the Stronghold, de Torre's Welcoming, the ceremony in which he would become an official member of the Emerald Guard, was to begin in fifteen minutes. Most of the attendees, including the Captain, the Baron, and the Archbishop of Esperanza, were already inside the Chapel. There were also many Guardsmen in the pews, more than Calavera had ever
seen at one of these ceremonies. Welcomings were always well-attended, with every available Brother making an effort to be there, and of course in this instance the Stronghold was hosting far more men than usual.

Someone tapped Calavera on the shoulder; it was Dorado.

"Is this not the most impressive gathering of Emerald Guardsmen you have ever seen for a Welcoming, both in numbers and in quality?"

"Without question. de Torre is being given a great honour."

"Two great honours. These men only know of the first." Dorado's expression lost its levity. "Speaking of our team, is Turo with you?"

"No. He said he had something important to do. I have not seen him since."

"I hope he will return in time."

Calavera put a hand on Dorado's shoulder. " Permit me to ask you something, my friend." He paused, and his tone grew more solemn. "Do you trust Turo Corvus?"

Dorado did not answer right away. He wanted there to be no doubt, in his mind or Calavera's. "I do. I may question his actions, and his manner of thinking, and indeed a great many other things about him, but he does have my trust, without reservation."

"I am very pleased to hear it. Then you know he will arrive on time."

Having never considered the question before in quite that fashion, Dorado now nodded, a wiser man. "I do. You are correct."

"Good."

"I have one request, however: May I continue to act toward him as I have always done?"

"My friend, when I selected the two of you to accompany me to New Spain, I was relying upon it."

"Is that so? Well... I accept that. Provided you acknowledge that Turo Corvus - "

"Yes?"

"He's behind you, Lanza."

"Of course he is."

"You were speaking of me?"

"Lanza was expressing his concern for your whereabouts, Turo."

"Oh? Yes. I was out. There was someone I wished to bring to the Welcoming." He stood aside, and revealed a slightly older woman, whose face was familiar to Calavera, although he could not say precisely why.

"Lieutenant Diego Calavera, Guardsman Lanza Dorado, I introduce to you Señora Miranda de Torre."
Of course. The widow of Andrés de Torre, her facial features reflected in their sons Antonio and Alejandro.

"Señora, it is truly an honour." He and Dorado bowed to her. It was not something they did for every lady who was introduced to them.

Miranda de Torre gripped Calavera's hand tightly, and stared him directly in the eyes. Her voice trembled as she spoke. "When Guardsman Corvus came to me, and told me he wished to bring me to this ceremony, I felt I did not deserve the honour. It was I who made Alejandro swear not to join the Order. I had lost a husband, and my first-born son; they were also soldiers. I did not think I could survive in this world with the last of my children also taken from me. But as I watched Alejandro grow from a boy to a man, I witnessed him struggling to find his place in this world, because he could not do what I knew to be in his heart. I wanted to free him from his vow, but I was afraid, and ashamed. Until, three nights ago, he came to me, and pleaded to be released. How can a man truly be alive unless he obeys the needs of his beautiful soul? And what kind of mother puts her own fears above the happiness of her only remaining child?"

Calavera did not know what to say. But it was Corvus, after all, who had thought of locating this woman and convincing her to attend. And now he put his hand gently upon her arm.

"Señora, a mother must be guided by love. And where there is love, there is fear of loss, always. Neither of your available choices were without risk of pain, and it is not selfishness to want your child to be safe."

She smiled at him, her eyes damp.

"Pardon me," said the Baron, who had suddenly appeared among them. He extended his hand to Miranda de Torre. "Señora, it is truly a pleasure to see you in these particular circumstances."

Calavera wondered whether the Baron had encountered this woman on more than two prior occasions, for the funerals of her husband and her son.

Señora de Torre accepted the Baron's hand, and shook it, but then did not let it go. She searched the Baron's eyes, looking for truth. "Guardsman Corvus tells me that my son has been selected for a great honour. It will take him away from Esperanza for a time, and put him in considerable danger."

"All of this is true. I cannot reveal to you the details, but believe me when I tell you what he will be doing is critical for the survival of this country, and that he has been selected because he possesses certain essential qualities no other man has."

Señora de Torre stared at the Baron even more intently. "I have lost two men in the service of this country. My husband died in the forging of it, and my son in the defence of it. I know when I am being lied to, by soldiers, by nobles, by Kings... and you are not lying. Not this time."

She nodded, and released his hand.

"Mother!"

Alejandro de Torre ran through the corridor, Guardsmen scrambling to let him pass. When he reached Miranda de Torre, he threw his arms around her, and she around him. They stopped breathing as they held each other.

The Baron motioned with his head that everyone else should leave them alone and take
their places. The Welcoming was about to begin.

With the exception of the Archbishop, it was unusual for anyone but Guardsmen to be present at a Welcoming. It was a ceremony particular to the Order, and therefore it was not the custom for family to be invited. However, no man made any kind of objection to Miranda de Torre's presence, in part because she sat between the Baron and the Captain, but primarily because word had spread of who she was.

The ceremony began. While de Torre stood before those assembled, the Baron recited the traditional verses which reminded all those assembled of the formation of the Emerald Guard, its goals, and the ideals it exemplified. Then the Captain performed his customary duty, that of presenting the new Brother to those assembled and enumerating his positive qualities. During this speech, he related an abridged version of the events in the haunted forest. This was quite a treat for those assembled; usually a new Brother had never served alongside the Guard before.

The Captain seated himself, and the Archbishop read select verses from the Holy Bible. He led de Torre in a sacred and solemn obligation. Then he said a prayer for the King, the Kingdom, and the Guard, before lastly bestowing his blessing upon this latest brave man who had pledged to serve God, Esperanza, and Saint Rafael.

The next part, the presentation of the Tunic, was customarily performed by the Captain, but this time it was Calavera who rose. He spoke loudly enough for all those assembled to hear.

"Brothers, honoured guests. You have all heard from the Captain how Alejandro de Torre served with distinction in the recent events that returned two innocent people to their home, the same events that led to the death of Guardsman Sean Benton. What has not been related were Sean Benton's last words to me. In the short time he had spent with de Torre, Benton, himself a Guardsman of no small repute, had developed a very favourable opinion of the young man - to such an extent that his dying wish to me was, should the future Guardsman accept, Sean Benton wanted to pass his Tunic on to Alejandro de Torre."

An altar boy stepped forward and handed Calavera the garment, neatly folded.

Calavera stepped to de Torre's ear and whispered, "Do you accept?"

de Torre, who by this time was unable to see for the tears in his eyes, only nodded, afraid his voice should crack if he tried to speak.

Calavera stepped away and once again spoke loudly enough to be heard by everyone.

"Alejandro de Torre, you have been tested by your peers and found worthy of membership in the Order of the Emerald Guard. Further, you have sworn to uphold all that we hold sacred. Therefore, in recognition of your worthiness and commitment, I place upon you the symbol of our Order, the Emerald Tunic."

de Torre straightened his back. Calavera unfolded the Tunic, ensuring that as he did so the Cross of Saint Rafael always faced those assembled. Then he stepped behind de Torre and lifted the front of the garment over the young man's head. As he released it, the Cross on the Tunic unfurled upon de Torre's chest for all to see.

The Captain stood up then, and faced the crowd. He had granted Calavera the privilege of presenting the Tunic, but he was not going to deny himself this part of the ceremony.

"Brethren... I present to you - Brother de Torre!"
And as one, hundreds of the finest soldiers in the entire country, the Baron and Captain among them, rose and chanted, with great and loving enthusiasm:

"Welcome, Brother de Torre!

"Welcome, Brother de Torre!

"Welcome, Brother de Torre!"

They re-seated themselves, and all went silent. Calavera and the Captain also returned to their seats, leaving de Torre standing alone in front of all those assembled, to perform his Oath.

It was known throughout Esperanza that every member of the Emerald Guard had a personal Oath. Before presenting himself for membership, an applicant was required to write his own Oath, memorise it, and present it as part of his examination. It was intended to summarise the ideals of the Emerald Guard, and demonstrate what those ideals meant to the individual aspiring Guardsman. As such, every Guardsman's Oath was deeply meaningful in a unique and personal fashion. The presentation of the Oath was the most highly-anticipated part of every Welcoming ceremony.

de Torre cleared his throat before beginning.

"As many of you know, my father served in the Revolutionary army, and my older brother was a Guardsman. It is to them that I dedicate this Oath. I wrote it, for myself, at the age of sixteen, when my brother was Welcomed into the Order, and I have kept it within my heart ever since.

"The Cross is my armour

The Colours my sword

The Flag is my truth

And my only reward.

The People behind us

My Brothers beside

The Saint stands before us

Our strength and our guide.

In Darkness, in Fire

In Blood, in Despair

No Evil can conquer

This Tunic I wear.
The Cross and the Colours

The Flag and our soul

The Tunic surrounds us

We're one, we are whole."

When he was finished, he humbly lowered his head.

The applause was overwhelming.

He raised his head again and accepted it with all his heart.

*****

Several hours later, when all but Calavera, Dorado, Corvus, and de Torre had left the Dining Hall, where the celebration of de Torre's Welcoming was taking place, the Lieutenant poured the four of them one last drink.

"Armagnac, Brothers, a benediction from the Baron himself."

"Before we drink, Lieutenant," said de Torre, becoming serious for the first time since the ceremony had ended, "I have a promise I must extract from you. Now that there are none but us present."

"Name it."

de Torre took a deep, cautious breath. "During our time in the haunted forest, you concealed from me the fact that I had been poisoned. I must insist, respectfully, that you never again distrust me in that fashion."

Calavera nodded. "Alejandro, you are perfectly within your rights to demand this of me. Back then you were untested; now you are one of us. I apologise for the lack of respect my reticence implied, and you have my word it shall not be repeated."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I am satisfied."

"Then I have something I must in turn request of you."

"Name it," said de Torre, the speed of his response eliciting a bark of surprised laughter from Dorado.

"You are now a Guardsman, and my Brother. You and I are not equals within the hierarchy, but I must insist that you cease referring to me as Lieutenant and begin calling me Diego, as do these two worthy gentlemen. You have earned that privilege."

"I promise to practice... Diego. I cannot promise it will not take some time."
"Effort is all I require for now, thank you, Alejandro." He held his glass of Armagnac before him. "And now, to what shall we drink?"

de Torre gazed down upon his Tunic. "I think there is only one thing that would suit the occasion, and the Baron's gift."

They all nodded in agreement, and raised their glasses.

"To Sean Benton," they said as one, then drank.

Calavera placed his empty glass on the table; when he looked up de Torre was lost in thought.

"You are remembering our lost friend and comrade, are you not, and thinking you would dearly love to join the Captain's scouting raids against the French?"

"That is precisely what I am thinking."

"What if I were to tell you Coléreaux is not returning to France, and that you will therefore have a better opportunity of confronting him if you do not join these raids?"

Dorado and Corvus adjusted their postures. The time for revelry had passed.

"My response would be that I am eager to hear how this might be the case."

And so Calavera told him, everything the other two already knew. And this time he added elements he had hitherto withheld, such as the story of the serpent ring in the alleyway ("I trust that, in light of events in the cabin, there is no one present who doubts that such a thing might be possible?"), which brought him to the most recent revelation - that there was yet a third group interested in the temple of the emerald god: the Five Stars.

None of the others knew of them as well as Calavera, so the Lieutenant expounded upon their collective reputation, then named them individually:

"The group was founded by two Englishmen, John Starling and Reginald Starkey, and their Swedish friend, Lucifer Sandström. The name of their group of course derives from their individual names. They were soon joined by a fourth member, about whom little is known; in fact it is believed that under his real name he is a criminal of some repute. At present he answers to Helios Silvestros, although he may not even be Greek. The fifth member of their team is another enigma with a correspondingly exotic name, a Russian known only as Simargl."

de Torre exhaled heavily. "So no sooner did you learn of this Yaxax'tun then you also discovered there are two other groups interested in his treasures. I believe the Baron's assessment of Guillaume Henri's fate is correct - the temple is cursed."

"I have no fear of that," Dorado said, looking over at Corvus with a smile, "for we're bringing our own Curse with us."

"True," said Corvus, nodding.

"Well, Lieute - Diego, this is a great deal to absorb. When are we departing for New Spain?"

"We leave tomorrow morning," said Calavera. "But we will not be going to New Spain straight away. We must first go to Isla Oestelago, in Spain, where Santiago, the Baron's spy who
recovered Henri's journal, and his ring, is to be found."

"Diego," Dorado said, "the hour grows late, and we have just discovered we will need to be well-rested in the morning. For pity's sake, share with us the detail you are reluctant to reveal. Is it that you do not know the man's identity?"

"It is not that; his name is Armando Maíz."

"Then what?"

"He is being held in Fortaleza Tormentaña, a prisoner of the Holy Inquisition."

Chapter End Notes

And so concludes The Temple of the Emerald God, Book One: Esperanza.

I'll be away on vacation for two weeks, but on August 10th you can all expect to see Chapter Twenty-Six, which will be the first chapter of Book Two: Spain. I look forward to seeing you all then.

t!

NB: Edited July 22 to change one proper name from something I was never 100% comfortable with to something I like much, much better.
- Aaand then I did it again, on August 8.
"SHOOT them! Shoot them!"

The Dove raised his musket to his shoulder and fired, but he was in a hurry, and the Guardsmen were already moving, so the shot missed.

An entire volley followed close behind, filling the room with noise and ravaging the granite of the pillar behind which de Torre had taken cover. He reached for his pistol.

Dorado placed a firm hand over his.

"Remember where you are."

Of course. All the shooting had made him think for a moment he’d been upon a battlefield, which in a certain sense was correct, but this particular battlefield also happened to be the Cathedral of St. James, seat of the Archbishop of Isla Oestelago. de Torre did not much relish the idea that a stray shot of his might damage a place of worship - although from the dust around him it seemed the native Spaniards had no such reservations.

"Reload!" said the voice from the Cathedral’s entrance.

de Torre looked toward Calavera, who was with Corvus behind the neighbouring pillar. The Lieutenant had not noticed de Torre's momentary lapse, for he was in conversation with his fellow Guardsman.

"Was that man's voice familiar to you?"

"Guzmán," said Corvus without hesitation.

"Alberto Guzmán?"

"He always disliked me."

"You were in fine company."

"Hurry!"

"Yes, that's him, all right. I recognise the way his throat cracks when he becomes excited."

Another violent series of cracks reverberated around the walls of the basilica, and again several shots smacked into the two pillars, filling the space with dust as stone chips clattered onto the marble floor. But this time Calavera was more certain of his protection.
He drew his sword, indicating the others should do the same.

The sound of musket shots died out, replaced again by the sounds of ramrods.

"Now!"

Diego Calavera, followed closely by Turo Corvus, Lanza Dorado, and Alejandro de Torre, surged forward from behind their pillars and charged down the central aisle of the Cathedral of St. James, their swords at the ready.

Their destination was still obscured by musket smoke, so they could not see the foe, but their adversaries certainly heard the stamping of their boots, approaching rapidly. From behind the cloud came the sound of muskets hitting the ground, hurried breathing, and swords being drawn quickly and clumsily.

Then the Guardsmen were through the smoke and upon the Doves, most of whom had been undisciplined in their urgency and were not yet ready for the attack.

Calavera sliced one of the Doves across the belly, spilling the man's insides onto the white sash that identified him as a member of the Isla Oestelagan militia and gave that group its name. Calavera aimed his return stroke at another's throat, but that man bent himself back and away - although not far enough to keep Calavera from slashing him across the eyes.

Without slowing his run, Corvus lowered his left shoulder and drove it upward into a Dove's ribcage, pushing that man backward into three of his comrades, knocking all four of them roughly to the ground. To Corvus' right another Dove looked on in stunned astonishment; the Guardsman ran him through the chest before he could recover.

Dorado's first opponent was struggling with his sword and did not even see him. The large man grabbed him by the throat with his left hand and drove him onto the sword point of the man behind him. In the same movement Dorado used this leverage to force the second man's arm out of position, and stabbed him in the side. He pulled his sword out very quickly and raised his elbow, driving it into the nose of the Dove on his right.

Since de Torre had been the last one to arrive, his chosen adversary had had the most time to prepare himself. The Dove attempted a weak thrust, but de Torre smacked his blade aside and pierced the man though his right bicep.

Then everyone heard the approaching horses.

"Lanza?"

"Ten at least," said Dorado, looking over everyone's head and out through the main doors.

There were still too many Doves inside; Calavera's men would not be able to exit the Cathedral before the new arrivals entered, whereupon the Guardsmen would be overmatched.

"Fall back! Turo, you lead."

As soon as they could, the other Guardsmen broke free of their individual engagements and ran to follow Corvus. Two of the Doves immediately ran after them, but Dorado, who took the rear as a matter of course in these situations, already had a plan.

He turned, stepped to the left, and sheathed his sword. Then he grabbed the standing candlestick beside him and swung it viciously, battering the two pursuing Doves into the pews. He
whirled the candlestick over his head and launched it down the aisle toward the rest of the Doves, forcing any other would-be pursuers to dodge out of the way.

Having thus discouraged the enemy from following in too great haste, Dorado hurried to rejoin his comrades.

From outside the Cathedral, a different voice, presumably the leader of the new arrivals, shouted, "No shooting! Swords only!"

Here was something positive, at least: The Guardsmen would not have to worry about being shot in the back as they ran.

Corvus led them deeper into the Cathedral, arriving at what appeared to be a small office. At the far end of the room was a door, which from its heavy construction most likely opened out onto the courtyard.

But instead of heading toward that, Corvus jumped up on a table and peered through the stained-glass window. After a moment he shook his head and jumped back down.

"Two rows of five men, muskets at the ready. If we open this door, we'll be slaughtered."

He exited the way they'd entered, and the other two followed. Dorado rejoined them just in time to see Corvus open the door to a bell tower.

"No - " but no one was listening, so he had no choice but to follow. He closed the door behind him, but it had no latch and there was nothing he could use to bar the door. Frustrated, he hurried to catch up to the others.

When he heard the door re-open below him and other boots begin to scramble up the stairs, it was far too soon for his taste.

He and his comrades were running upward, and when they arrived at the top they would have nowhere else to go.

He was certain Corvus had a plan.

This did not reassure him.

The staircase ran along each of the tower's four walls, and Dorado was almost at the top of the stairs when he saw the long cord for the bell, which was hanging down through the emptiness in the middle of the tower, begin moving upward. Far from surprising him, this sight confirmed his worst fears.

When he reached the top and exited onto the deck beneath the bell, he saw Calavera and de Torre hauling up the rope and passing it to Corvus, who was pushing it over the edge.

"Turo, why do your recent plans all seem to involve swinging from ropes at great heights? Are you morbidly drawn to thoughts of the gallows?"

"I do not believe it is that," Corvus said with sincerity. "Perhaps it is because I have always wanted to fly like a bird. But we will not be birds today - we shall be emulating a very different creature."

And he pointed over the parapet and downward, where the waters of the mighty Rio Miño flowed past Isla Oestelago, passing directly under the rear of the Cathedral of St.James.
"No," said Dorado again, with as much effectiveness as the first time.

"Turo, they're almost here," Calavera said. "We won't have enough time to raise the rope fully."

"I know," said Corvus. "But there is enough weight on this side now that the rope will not fall back down through the staircase. We can summon our friends."

de Torre's eyes widened. "Our what?"

Dorado was pleased to see that someone else was more unsettled than he was. But then, Dorado believed he knew what Corvus was talking about. He'd known the man a lot longer.

Corvus pointed to the four posts which supported the roof of the bell tower. "All of you, spread yourselves out, between two posts. Block the space between them as best you can. We want the bats to flow downward, upon our pursuers."

"Of course," Dorado said, feeling some guilt over his enjoyment of de Torre's concern, but nevertheless unable to resist.

"Turo," said de Torre. "If we are blocking the bats' most desirable path, won't they first fly into us?"

"Yes. Hold on tightly."

They did as instructed, and when they'd nodded their readiness Corvus drew his pistol, pointed it out over the water, and fired.

Startled by the sudden violent percussive sound, hundreds of bats became instantly terrified. They fled their comfortable sleeping nooks deep within the roof of the bell tower, and poured down, shrieking terribly, with only one thought on their minds: escape. Holding desperately onto their posts, the Guardsmen closed their eyes and lips tightly as their faces were battered by leathery wings. Several of the creatures did manage to navigate underneath the humans' arms and fly out the sides, but most of them, blocked by the difficulties their fellows were having, and relying upon centuries of instinct, sought their escape where there was no resistance. They flew downward, into the tower, and over the noise of their beating wings and their cries of fright and outrage the Guardsmen heard with satisfaction the yelling and cursing of men, as well as what sounded like a body or two thumping heavily down a wooden staircase.

As soon as he felt the worst of the wave had passed, Corvus opened his eyes and released his grip upon the posts. "Now - the rest of the rope!"

As they bent quickly to their task, de Torre felt it necessary to raise a question.

"Turo, when you led us up here, did you know there would be bats in this tower?"

"There were."

"But you did not know for a fact there would be, did you?"

"Not for a fact, no."

"And this nevertheless constituted an acceptable plan in your mind?"

"Of course. The bats were here."
de Torre was trying to think of how to respond when Dorado chuckled, and grinned evilly at him. "You wanted a life of adventure in the Emerald Guard, de Torre. Welcome to it."

And there was nothing he could say to that, so the lifting continued in silence.

As they dragged up the bell cord, the Guardsmen kept their ears alert to the sounds of the Doves below. Their pursuers finished regrouping and began climbing the rest of the stairs, albeit more slowly this time.

With four pairs of hands, and more than half the bell cord already out, the rest came very quickly. As soon as they were done, Corvus grabbed the rope, swung himself out over the roof, and nimbly began lowering himself toward the water. The bell bonged once, loudly, but then remained in place, held by Corvus' weight.

de Torre watched him enviously, not expecting he would be able to descend even half as quickly.

"He makes it look so easy, doesn't he?" said Dorado. "Your turn, de Torre."

"I'll move too slowly; you won't be able to - "

"Go."

It was a patient tone, but not one that allowed for argument. Besides, de Torre didn't want to delay things any further. He gripped the rope tightly with his hands, and as tightly as he could with his feet, and started to lower himself.

Once he was on his way, Dorado turned to Calavera, who was watching the staircase opening.

"Are they near?"

"Nearer than I would like. But they are advancing cautiously. They fear what we might have in store for the first few unfortunates to emerge from the stairs and into the light. Perhaps with good reason."

Calavera proudly showed Dorado the contents of his right hand. He'd managed to procure a bat corpse somewhere. He reared back suddenly and hurled it into the tower, aiming in the direction of approaching Doves. From within came several surprised screams, heavy stamps on wooden stairs, and someone shouting, "Grab him! Grab him!"

"Hm. That went even better than I'd hoped."

Meanwhile, on the outside of the tower, Corvus had reached the bottom of the rope. He positioned his body so it was facing the river, then let go and pushed off the wall with his legs, executing a perfect dive into the Rio Miño.

Higher up, de Torre was not having as much success. His feet were proving useless, and his hands were sore from supporting his weight. Twice already they had slipped, and he'd only just managed to catch himself.

They slipped a third time.

He knew he would not be able to grab the rope again. He struck out with his legs, kicking himself away from the wall of the tower and out over the water. He tumbled head-over-heels a few
times, but was high enough that he did manage to right himself and enter the river feet-first.

When his head emerged from the water, he discovered Corvus was right beside him, a huge grin on his face.

"Well done, my friend!"

Seeing his friend's childlike exuberance, de Torre decided it really wasn't worth the effort to stay upset with him.

He suspected Dorado had learned this years ago.

By this time Calavera and Dorado, having failed to find any further useful projectiles, and unwilling to have the Doves arrive at the top of the stairs and discover the Guardsmen would not be using their pistols, had already begun to descend the bell cord.

They were less than a quarter of the way down when a man's head appeared above them. It was, as Corvus had determined, Alberto Guzmán. His hand held a pistol over his shoulder, and his face held a wicked scowl.

"I recognise you, Diego Calavera and Lanza Dorado. You and your companion Turo Corvus, whom I espied earlier, are all professed Esperanzans: traitors to your true country, Emerald Guardsmen, and spies in the service of a heretical usurper. Surrender, or die!" And he began lowering his pistol.

"It was an excellent idea, Diego," said Dorado, "to enter this country surreptitiously. But it appears the Spanish now know we are here."

And, so saying, with Calavera immediately following, he launched himself away from the Cathedral of St.James, into the waiting waters of the Rio Miño.

Chapter End Notes

Beginning with this chapter, these notes will reveal some of the behind-the-scenes stuff going on in the story - usually to do with where the names come from, because I hate coming up with names. If knowing where a name comes from is the sort of thing which will damage the story for you, you are strongly encouraged to avoid these notes.

For everyone else, let's start with two obituaries. There are two people who died recently I wanted to recognise in this story:

The name of the Cathedral in this chapter, St.James, is a dedication to James Horner, a film composer with an extraordinary résumé. It should not come as any surprise to people familiar with his two Zorro scores that I listen to them *a lot* when writing this story. In addition to those, Willow is also to be found in the special stack of CDs I've set aside to turn to when I'm writing this tale and I need a pick-me-up.

And then there is of course the magnificent Christopher Frank Carandini Lee. There is a reason François Carandini is taller than Dorado. Also, this giant of a man (in every sense) was both a Lieutenant in the Air Force and the son of a Countess - I
didn't have to make any of this up!

it!
Chapter Summary

IN WHICH it is demonstrated, among other things, that the perils of a hurried dive into a river may continue after one has extricated oneself from it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"ESPERANZANS, did you say?"

"Yes, Sir. Emerald Guardsmen."

"And how do you know them to be Guardsmen, Guzmán?"

Alberto Guzmán took a moment to consider his answer, aware that the eyes of all his fellow Doves were upon him, if only figuratively. Every man who had been involved in the commotion at the Cathedral of St.James, whether part of the original group of musketeers or one of the men who had arrived later on horseback, was now lined up in front of their commander, who, in spite of his apparent calm, was in a dangerous mood.

The man would have looked threatening even in his sleep. Beneath his short hair, gray like sword steel, and his full eyebrows, dark as gunpowder, was a thin face with prominent cheekbones and a nose pointed like that of a particularly vicious rat. His eyes, tiny and black, probed the face of each of his men with a gaze that promised severe repercussions if the answers to his questions proved unsatisfactory.

He fixed this gaze now upon Guzmán, whose delay in providing a satisfactory answer had been likewise unsatisfactory. The subordinate forced himself to speak.

"I... was involved in the secession of Esperanza. On the wrong side. That is, until I recovered my senses. Today I recognised three of the four men inside the Cathedral from when we fought together. Again, before I saw the light and was restored to the truth. I cannot say with perfect certainty that all four men are Emerald Guardsmen, but I have heard from reliable friends that one of them, Diego Calavera, has become a Lieutenant in the Guard, and during the secession the commitment and loyalty of the other two to the Usurper was unshakeable. Corvus and Dorado have come to Isla Oestelago in Calavera's company, and so at the very least they are assisting an enemy of Spain. But I believe it most probable that all three - and by extension the fourth man - are here on the business of the Baron of Girona and the Emerald Guard."

The commander nodded, considering this. As he pondered, his eyes never wavered from their scrutiny of Guzmán's face. At last he arrived at a conclusion:

"We will take it for granted that you are correct, and they are Guardsmen. When did you first identify them?"

"In the street. I was walking my circuit when I recognised them. I sent my comrades to gather more Doves, while I followed the Guardsmen to the Cathedral."
"And once you had sufficient men present, you took charge of them and ordered them inside?"

"I did. I knew the enemy to be exceptionally dangerous - as they have demonstrated."

"Yes," said the leader. He turned to his left, where the grim results of that demonstration were on display. A physician was tending to several injured men, while one of the Cathedral's younger priests was tending to the deceased. The commander of the Doves considered this scene of devastation for several moments. Then he looked upward and contemplated the Cathedral of St. James itself.

His remaining men continued to stand at attention, looking ever forward. There was a slight breeze, and it stirred their white sashes.

These sashes were known throughout Iberia to be the uniform of the Doves of Isla Oestelago, soldiers acting as both the militia of that city and warriors in the service of the Holy Inquisition. The leader of these Doves was dressed entirely in black, from his hat to his tall riding boots, and this perfect darkness provided such contrast for the whiteness around his waist that the sash almost seemed to shine in the sunlight, as did his gloves, the badge of his rank, which were of pure white lambskin.

He turned back to face his men, and all of them straightened instinctively, although not one had been standing less than rigidly already.

"Are you able to describe these four men, Guzmán?"

"I am, Sir."

"Speak loudly, for all to hear."

Guzmán cleared his throat roughly, but when he spoke his voice was strong. "Calavera, their leader, has curled hair which hangs loosely almost to his shoulder, with a thin moustache and triangular beard that are meticulously groomed. Dorado is very tall, and broad, and has long, straight black hair, which he ties back. He wears neither moustache nor beard, and his eyes are blue. Corvus is also barefaced. His hair does not grow past his ears - although it is very thick, and curled, so it looks like a bramble thicket. One of his ears has a gold hoop through it. The fourth man is younger, too young to have been fully a man during the secession. His untied hair hangs down just past his chin, and he sports a thick moustache with no beard."

The leader nodded. "You are a most observant man; those descriptions will be very useful." He addressed his horsemen: "You heard the descriptions; pass them along to the citizens and to your fellow Doves. Also, most importantly: We have not seen rain for two days, and the Esperanzans will be wet. Now go - I want those men found before nightfall."

"Yes, Sir!" they said as one. Then they hurried to their horses.

The commander waited for them to leave, but rather than watch them go, he scrutinised those men remaining. Holding his hands behind his back, he made a point of looking into the eyes of each of them. When the sound of hoofbeats had faded away, he once again addressed Guzmán.

"You did well in identifying these Esperanzans and gathering a larger force to subdue them. Now, please clarify what happened once the Guardsmen were inside the Cathedral and these men before me had assembled outside."

"I told them there were four dangerous men within, and that we should all have our
muskets at the ready. We entered quickly, and as quietly as we could, but rather than sitting in the pews, or standing off to one side, the Guardsmen were standing in the aisle, directly in front of us at the other end. Dorado heard us enter and was about to alert his comrades, so, rather than let our advantage of surprise be wasted, I gave the order to fire."

The man with the rat-like face gave Guzmán one nod, long and slow. Then he took his hands from behind his back and, breathing deeply, he slowly removed his white gloves, pulling on each finger in succession until the garment came loose. He only looked away from Guzmán in order to tuck his gloves into his sash, and then he looked right back again. When he next spoke, he did it loudly enough to be heard by everyone: the men before him, those who were injured, the priest and physician, and all the onlookers who had assembled in front of the Cathedral.

"Alberto Guzmán, although this day you have honoured your duties to God and to this city excellently well in almost every respect, ultimately you allowed your judgment to lapse, and this resulted in a grave crime. You instigated, and participated in, the damage and defilement of the Cathedral of St.James. As you have already confessed your guilt, you will be spared the indignity of a trial and the pain of torture. You will be imprisoned immediately, and held until the next auto-da-fé, where you will be executed for your transgression against the Lord our God."

Guzmán opened his mouth to protest, but his superior raised and drew back his hand, intending to strike Guzmán should he interrupt. Guzmán's mouth slackened; he said nothing. The commander lowered his hand, and continued.

"You are therefore under arrest. Conscience requires that I advise you thus: Should you make any attempt to escape, you will be shot - immediately."

He took one large step back. A deadly hush fell over the courtyard as he stared directly into Guzmán's frightened eyes, and waited.

After a few moments, during which he blinked away the moisture building in his eyes, Guzmán nodded to his superior.

Then he stepped forward, turned to his left, and began walking away.

Whereupon the man who had pronounced sentence upon him drew a pistol and shot him between the shoulder blades, immediately.

Many of the onlookers jumped or shouted. Not one of the Doves so much as flinched.

The priest ran over, aghast. "In Heaven's name - !"

"Father."

It came out calmly, but the rigidity of the Dove commander's voice stopped the priest dead in his tracks.

His right hand still holding his pistol, the officer used his left to point at the body of Alberto Guzmán. He gave the priest a firm look; the Father had a duty to perform.

The priest hurried over to Guzmán, to deliver him extreme unction.

Over the sound of Latin being murmured in the background, the commander addressed his men.

"For the rest of you, who followed Guzmán in the commission of his crime, the punishment
is ten over each shoulder, before Compline. I will inspect your backs in the morning. For now, you will devote yourselves without reservation to finding me those Esperanzans. You are dismissed."

The Doves hurried away, as eager to leave their commander's presence as to atone for their misdeeds.

As he watched them depart, their superior, with meticulous care, slowly put his white gloves back on.

His duties for Alberto Guzmán performed, the priest again approached the Dove commander, insistent despite his caution.

"What is the meaning of this barbarism? The Holy Inquisition does not execute men for simple acts of defilement!"

"I am fully aware of that, Father. I am the Inquisition's unwavering servant; I need no explanation of its sacred purpose from any man. We are devoted to cleansing people's thoughts, hearts, and souls of heresy. You speak as though the actions of Alberto Guzmán - a praiseworthy soldier of God in most other respects - are analogous to those of a frail old man who could not help making water in the pews. They are not. He was a Dove, and my men know what is expected of them: discipline and respect. The sashes we wear are a public proclamation of our faith and purity. If we do not honour God at all times, how can we expect the people to follow our example?"

Having made his point, the Dove commander turned and walked to his horse.

The priest made no attempt to stop him. Like the man's subordinates, he was relieved to be out of the officer's presence.

Suddenly he became aware of a beggar standing beside him, wrapped in a filthy cloak that covered even his head, with only his bare feet sticking out from underneath.

"Excuse me, Father," said the beggar in a hoarse whisper. "Could you please tell me who that frightening man was?"

"That was Major Martín Pescador. He commands all of the Doves of Isla Oestelago, and answers only to the Archbishop himself."

"Thank you very much."

"Why do you - ?" but the beggar was already on his way.

He was walking to where he'd hidden his boots. They were dripping wet, and he hadn't wanted to leave tracks in the street.

*****

"Pistols first, then scabbards. Also, de Torre lost his powder horn in the river."

"Lanza, could we please delay the cataloguing of our recent material losses until we are safely off the streets, and preferably drying ourselves before a fire?"

"With respect, Lieutenant, I was compiling a list of our needs and priorities. Excluding safe
haven and a fire, of course, which are so important they supersede all else."

"That is reasonable, but nevertheless might I suggest instead that we first count our considerable blessings, chief among them that we are all alive and uninjured?"

"I confess," said de Torre, "that I am not entirely convinced I am alive. Given recent events, I consider it not the least bit unlikely that I have perished, and am now sneaking through the alleyways of Isla Oestelago unaware I am a ghost, like the ornithologist of our recent acquaintance."

Dorado was about to chuckle, but stopped himself short. He held up his hand for quiet.

"I think there are men around this corner," he said softly.

There wasn't much the three Guardsmen could do except remain still and listen intently, which they did, but to no avail. The men who rounded the corner were Doves, and as soon as they saw the strangers standing before them, their eyebrows rose up in instant recognition.

These fully-clothed and armed men were wet from head to toe, and therefore the enemies the Doves were seeking.

"Halt!" two of them shouted.

Every man in the alleyway drew his sword.

Rather than attempt a fighting posture in the close confines of the alleyway, one Dove simply leapt at de Torre with his sword held in front of his body. de Torre blocked it with his own sword, but the man collided into him, knocking the Guardsman to the ground.

de Torre tried to bring his sword up, but the Dove stepped forward and put his boot on de Torre's arm, pinning it. The Dove lifted his sword back to thrust it into the Guardsman's chest.

But de Torre had a knife in his left boot. He instinctively bent his knee, bringing the boot to his left hand, and then he kicked out at the Dove.

The Spaniard avoided the blow easily, but was sufficiently distracted that he failed to notice his opponent now held a new weapon. Once again he raised his sword for a thrust.

And de Torre rolled to his right, aiming for the leg that was pinning his arm. He plunged his dagger into the man's inner thigh, twisted it around, and ripped it out.

The Dove cried out in pain and surprise. His knees buckled, and he dropped his sword.

Blood fountained from his leg and splashed onto de Torre's chest, spraying droplets into the Guardsman's face, stinging his eyes, his nostrils.

The Dove collapsed to his knees. His mouth dropped open, his arms bobbed lifelessly at his sides, and his wide, unseeing eyes stared straight at de Torre as if in accusation.

Unable to move, de Torre watched as the light in those eyes went out.

Then the Dove's lifeless body toppled forward, and the Guardsman brought his hands up instinctively, blocking the man's chest. Taking a deep breath, de Torre rolled sideways and pushed, sliding the corpse aside and off of him.

He tried to raise himself on all four, but his knee sunk into a pool of the dead man's blood.
He knew this, even though his trousers were already wet, because the river water soaking his clothes was cool, whereas this new dampness spreading across his skin was still warm.

Black spots danced before de Torre's eyes, and he collapsed face-first to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Before getting to the names stuff, a HUGE shout-out to The Online Etymology Dictionary. I couldn't write this without them – or, at the very least, I'd feel damned nervous about some of it. Either that, or I'd spend way too much time researching elsewhere. I am particularly motivated to mention TOED (love the acronym!) this week because of this entry:

"To be on all fours is from 1719; earlier on all four (14c.)."

Be honest: You thought it was a typo, didn't you?

And now:

More name origins. Again, if you are at risk of having your intrinsic appreciation of the story damaged, do not read these.

My favourite novel is The Prisoner of Zenda by Anthony Hope, the book which gave us the term Ruritanian Romance. The Spanish word for Hope is Esperanza. That seemed like a mighty good name for a country, particularly one with a backstory like this one. So there we have it: My Ruritania is named for Anthony Hope.

When I was a kid, my father went to Mexico on a business trip. He asked me what I wanted, and I said a Spanish-English dictionary and a sombrero. More about that dictionary next week, but the sombrero I got was a black one; my brother received one in navy blue. That Halloween, I went as Zorro. (Let me tell you, there is no way Zorro wore a sombrero anything like the one I had: way too heavy. The Three Amigos must have had Herculean neck muscles.) The following year I didn't know what I wanted to be, so I went as Zorro again, and was very happy about it.

... Isn't it amazing, the formative things in our childhood that we completely forget as adults until we actively go looking, often as a form of self-examination to rediscover the joy we experienced in younger, more honest, and purely explorational times? As an adult I have always been entranced by swashbucklers, but it was only when I started this story that I realised how far back it goes, all the way to those Halloweens! Unbelievable. So, Calavera's first name is a tribute to Don Diego de la Vega, aka Zorro, created by Johnston McCulley. By a very pleasant happenstance, Diego is also the Christian name of a certain Spanish Captain - but more about him next week as well.

(The Temple of the Emerald God: now featuring cliffhangers in the Author's Notes!)

And the surname Calavera comes from an artist I absolutely adore by the name of José Guadalupe Posada. He's best known for his "calaveras," illustrations of skeleton people. (A style which seems to have exploded in popularity in the last few years!) Calavera is the Spanish word for Skull. I was overjoyed when I looked this up about a week before writing Chapter One: I'd been wearing a skull earring (bright pink) since August as a symbol of my (ongoing) rebirth. This story is an example of that rebirth,
my return to regular writing and the reassertion of my voice, which had been subjugated for over three years. So, Calavera is for Posada, but also for the new and improved Me.
Ambush At The Inn

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH many possessions are claimed by persons to whom they do not belong, and Corvus demonstrates multiple uses for a cloak.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BENTON'S blood covered his chest.

No, it wasn't Benton's blood on his chest; it was his own.

No, it wasn't his own, nor was it Benton's...

It was his.

He'd looked down once, at where his life was pouring out of his body. His face had registered surprise.

No soldier truly believes he is going to die, not until he can't deny it.

Belief in death makes a man afraid. And fear makes a man hesitate.

This man hadn't hesitated; he'd charged straight at de Torre, knocked him to the ground, and drawn back to stab him.

But after de Torre's surprise, he'd known, and then...

Then he'd been afraid.

He hadn't wanted to die.

"Alejandro."

He hadn't wanted to die, but he was helpless to prevent it.

His legs couldn't support his body. His arms hung limp. He could not even blink.

He could only bleed.

His life pouring onto de Torre's chest like water into a washbasin.

de Torre needed to wash his face.

He would never be able to clean the blood off his chest.

Benton's blood, as well as...

de Torre didn't even know the man's name.
"Alejandro!"

His body was shaking.

Someone was shaking him, holding him by the shoulders.

There was a man in front of him.

But there couldn't be; de Torre had shoved the man aside.

Like he was nothing, no longer a man, a mere object.

"Guardsman. I need you to attend to me. Now."

Benton had been a -

No. He was a Guardsman.

Alejandro de Torre.

And he recognised the voice.

He blinked the black spots away from his eyes.

The figure before him resolved itself into Diego Calavera.

Who stopped shaking him by the shoulders.

"Lieutenant, I am at your service."

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"Good morning."

"Ah. Sir... "

"Is something the matter?"

"Yes. Well, I'm afraid... "

"The horses are no longer here."

"No. They were taken. Claimed, you see? By a Dove."

"Excuse me. Do you mean to say there was just one Dove?"

"Yes."

"Can you describe him?"

"His hair was light-coloured, brown like dry sand. His moustache and beard were the same colour as well. The beard was short, in the shape of an anchor, and his moustache flowed into it."
"I see. And did you by any chance happen to learn his name?"

"No, sir! When confronted by a Dove, one simply gives him what he wants and does not delay him on his way through."

"Of course. Was there anything of significance he might have said, anything at all?"

"No... He described you and your companions, and asked if your horses were stabled here. Please understand, one does not lie under these circumstances!"

"Never. Nor would we have asked you to."

"The Dove said he would have to take the horses with him."

"Where? Did he say?"

"He did. He said he would be taking them back to the stables. No! Not the stables... He said he would be taking them back to the coop."

"The coop? You are certain?"

"Yes, although I'm afraid it doesn't make any sense."

"Oh, I'm sure it does. Thank you most kindly for your attentiveness."

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"We also require hats."

Dorado walked over to Calavera, removed the Lieutenant's hat, and placed it upon his own head.

"This fits even worse than mine."

"Let me see," said Calavera, turning around. "It's not as - "

From the other end of the alleyway de Torre hurried toward them.

"Three women," he said, "returning from the market."

Calavera looked down at the five Doves lying on the ground, three of whom were now in a state of undress. He clenched his fists; the Guardsmen had nothing they could use to hide the bodies from the approaching women. Once they called for help, it would be spread around quickly that the fugitives were now wearing stolen clothing.

Still, their new, dry garments were going to be much more difficult to identify than their discarded wet ones.

"We'd best be on our way."

de Torre also considered the deceased for a moment, perhaps pondering the undignified state in which they were fated to be discovered. But instead he said, "Shouldn't we also take their
"No, the Doves know each other, and will not recognise us. Three armed strangers in ordinary clothing will not arouse suspicion, but three strangers posing as Doves will be stopped and confronted."

"Will their suspicions not also be aroused when they see how the tallest of the armed strangers' cuffs do not reach his extremities?"

Dorado cleared his throat with great significance. "Shall we proceed?"

"Lead on."

Dorado started walking, away from the evidence of their recent activities and the innocent people who were soon to stumble upon it. Calavera stepped aside, allowing de Torre to pass him so he could take the rear. As the young man crossed, the Lieutenant clapped him on the shoulder and gave him a warm smile.

He was relieved and deeply pleased to see de Torre so well-recovered.

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Turo Corvus' hands were sore, the left from tightly holding his boots to his chest, and the right from tightly holding his cloak shut over his entire body. The cloak, recently purchased from one of the city's unfortunates for a sum which had caused the previous owner to blink back tears, smelled of rotting food, human secretions, and despair. The odour saddened Corvus' heart, but it greatly lessened his chances of being discovered. The people he passed looked away from him, and hastened to be out of his company.

Stopping outside the door to the inn, he placed his boots on the ground and put them back on. Then he removed the cloak, wrapped it up as tightly as he could, and held it in his left arm.

It was dangerous to expose himself in the street like this, but since he did not want to be thrown out as soon as he entered, he needed the innkeeper to recognise him on sight.

Which he did: "Welcome back!" the man said, walking over with arms outstretched, as though to give Corvus a big hug. "I trust you have had a good morning?"

Then he noticed the dampness of the Guardsman's clothing. The innkeeper pulled his arms back in, pressing his hands together over his sternum. "Um, that is, er, in spite of the state of your... attire?"

Corvus nodded briskly. "My day so far has been eventful, but not unpleasant for the most part, thank you."

"You wish to return to your room, yes? You do not, er, require me to accompany you, do you?"

"No, I remember the way."

"Excellent. Enjoy the rest of your day."
"Thank you. I wish the same for you."

As Corvus mounted the stairs to the third floor, he unwrapped his cloak and held it ready.

When the Guardsmen had arrived yesterday, the innkeeper's demeanour toward them had been perfunctory, merely civil. And it seemed he treated all his lodgers the same way, or at the very least the men.

In Corvus' experience, indifferent people who suddenly behaved obsequiously were not to be trusted, any more than people who were expansive yet also hesitant.

At the top of the stairs he slowed his pace, and peered very carefully into the third floor corridor.

It was empty.

Corvus mounted the rest of the stairs and crossed, quickly but silently, to the door of the Guardsmen's room. He put his eye to the keyhole.

There was nobody within.

But their possessions were missing.

And he could hear two men on the staircase, now, climbing too slowly.

He opened the door and jumped inside, spinning in midair to confirm no one was hiding behind him.

The room was empty.

The bed was in the centre, its head against the wall. Corvus quickly crossed to the other side of it, knelt, and spread the cloak out over the floor.

As he rose, the first Dove appeared in the doorway.

Corvus bent his knees and swayed, pretending to be dizzy.

The second Dove entered the room and stood beside his companion. Both held pistols pointed at him.

Corvus put his hand against the wall and steadied himself.

The first Dove addressed him, investing his tone with the full weight of his office.

"You, sir, are an Emerald Guardsman, in the service of a false king. In the name of God, His Royal Highness the King of Spain, and His Grace Duque Josefo, we place you under arrest as a spy."

"I will... come quietly," Corvus said, nodding. He removed his hand from the wall, and began swaying again. "Only I... have not been feeling well... since I jumped into the... into the..."

He fell to the floor.

One of the Doves hurried around to the other side of the bed.

While he did this, Corvus quickly rolled underneath it. He grabbed the edge of the cloak
with both hands.

The Dove stepped onto the cloak, and Corvus jerked his body around, pulling the cloak with him.

He heard the Dove cry out and fall heavily to the floor.

His companion moved to see what had happened.

Corvus rolled out from under the bed, on the other side.

"Stop, you!"

But Corvus was rolling as fast as the man could adjust his aim, all the way out the door.

As soon as he was hidden from the Dove's sight, Corvus rose and began tapping his foot loudly on the floor.

The Dove, hearing what he assumed were rapidly-fleeing footsteps, ran out of the room as fast as he could.

And Corvus tripped him, sending him face-first into the wall.

Before the man could fall down, Corvus grabbed his collar with one hand and his pistol with the other. He snatched the weapon from the Dove's fist and threw him back into the room, where the stunned man stumbled into and over the bed, landing on his partner.

Corvus re-entered the room swiftly, to cover the two Doves with his newly-acquired pistol, but his urgency turned out to be unnecessary. The first Dove had landed badly when Corvus had tugged on the cloak, probably hitting his head and neck upon the wall. His eyes were open, but there was no light behind them. The second man lay on his side, his nose and forehead bleeding, unable even to keep his eyes open.

Keeping his weapon pointed at the second Dove nevertheless, Corvus leaned forward and with his other hand gripped the edge of the mattress. He lifted it up high, and confirmed his worst fear:

In addition to removing the Guardsmen's other belongings, the Doves had taken their Tunics.

Chapter End Notes

More name origins. At some point I will not include a warning to those who would rather not know, but that point has not yet arrived.

The name of His Royal Highness King Guillermo I of Esperanza comes from two sources. The first is Edwin B. Williams, editor of my Spanish-English dictionary, which I relied upon a lot when first starting this adventure and naming some of my
characters - most memorably one of the villains, whose name I will dissect next week. (And not only because I love the idea of tantalising the reader in the Author's Notes, but also because I find it very useful to know in advance what I am going to discuss here!)

But primarily the name comes from John Williams, the contemporary King of movie soundtracks. I grew up on him. If you know his work, I need not elaborate as to why he is an inspiration for this story. If you don't, look him up and prepare to be amazed.

Turo Corvus' first name derives from Arturo, as in Arturo Pérez-Reverte, simply a phenomenal writer. Also, his books namedrop The Prisoner of Zenda, Dumas, Sabatini, Errol Flynn - you get the idea. My kinda guy. The hero of his most well-known books is Captain Diego Alatriste, a Christian name we've seen referenced in these Notes somewhere before.

By the way, although that's where I got the morphemes, Turo is not short for Arturo in this story.

Corvus is the Latin genus assigned to, among others, the Crow. I wanted to reference a Trickster somewhere in the names for my story, and this character seemed the most appropriate person to receive that honour. The first time I heard the made-up names Turo and Corvus come together in my head, I knew that I was never going to be able to call this guy anything else.
The Home Of The Blind Woman

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH our Guardsmen at last enjoy a peaceful afternoon, until the evening comes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

DOWNSTAIRS, the blind woman was being questioned by several Doves.

"Only three? Are you certain?"

"I only have three rooms to let, young man, and the travelers advised me they each wanted an individual room. This is costly, and therefore uncommon, but certainly not extraordinary, particularly after a long journey. If they had required four rooms, they would have moved on."

"Hm. Nevertheless, I should like to have a look inside those rooms."

"Oh, I am afraid that would not be proper."

"Madam, do you know who I am?"

"You have identified yourself as a Dove, but you have not granted me the courtesy of your proper name."

"My name is of no matter. As a Dove, I insist that you admit me to those rooms."

"Young man, I also have duties and responsibilities. My lodgers have placed their trust in me."

"Step aside, old woman. Immediately."

"Are you intending to threaten me, master Dove? If I do not back away from my own porch, will you enter by force? Do you propose to knock me to the floor, an aging, blind woman, in my own home? How shall your Major respond to that, I wonder? He is reputed to be a man of firm moral principle. Will you be commended for your tenacity? Or will he consider it improper conduct for a Dove to assault a helpless old woman whom he refuses to take at her word?"

"She knows," said Dorado.

Calavera nodded. "Nevertheless, we must continue to act as though she doesn't."

Meanwhile the Dove was inhaling through his nose, so deeply that they could hear him upstairs.

The story of what had happened at the Cathedral - including the fatal consequences for its instigator - had spread throughout most of the city.

"Madam... it was never my intent to threaten you or do you harm. If it appeared otherwise,
the passion in my tone was owing to my commitment to my sacred duties. You must understand, these are dangerous men we are pursuing, who have already killed several of my comrades, who lost their lives in the protection of this city."

"Young man, I pray that you reassure yourself. As I have said, my arrangement is for three lodgers, not four. You have honoured your responsibilities here, and now it is best for you to move on."

"I will. And, if I have offended or upset you in any way, I hope you will accept my apologies."

"There is no need for that. At the moment the true test came, you behaved graciously. When the elderly are shown the respect that is their due, the entire community benefits, and grows in the esteem of God. Peace on your journey."

They heard the door close, and the bar slide into place.

"Is it possible," said de Torre, "that we have somehow stumbled into the home of the Baron's mother?"

Dorado snorted. "Remember: Turo found her."

"Of course. All is explained."

Upon arriving in Isla Oestelago the day before, the Guardsmen had first stabled their horses, then found a room in the heart of the city. After transferring their Tunics from their packs to a hiding spot beneath the bed's mattress, they had parted company, one man heading in each of the cardinal directions, to investigate the city and report back to the others what he'd learned. The secondary purpose of their scouting mission was to locate a suitable alternate lodging-space, some distance away from the centre of town, where they could go into hiding in the event their presence became known and the Doves began hunting for four Guardsmen.

Corvus had discovered an elderly blind woman renting out the three bedrooms on the upper floor of her home. It seemed ideal for their needs, and the plan had been simple enough: pretend to be only three men, and rent all of the rooms. In the event Doves came looking for them, the old woman could report - in perfect honesty, as far as she was aware - that the quantity of lodgers she was housing was different from the number of men they were seeking.

And the plan had succeeded - albeit with one notable exception.

So now Calavera, Dorado, and de Torre were sitting together in one of the rooms, reviewing their situation and waiting for Corvus.

Having smelled the dampness of their hair when they'd arrived, their landlady had provided them with towels. It had been no easy thing to pretend to her that there were only two men present, for only Calavera and Dorado to speak, and for de Torre to mount the stairs as soundlessly as possible. In addition to being logistically difficult, lying to an old blind woman had caused the three men no small amount of shame - and now it seemed that it had all been unnecessary.

Prior to the arrival of the Doves, de Torre had been silent and withdrawn. Now upon their departure he returned to that state, sitting as far away from his two companions as the size of the bed allowed, elbows on his knees, staring at the outside wall.

Dorado motioned for Calavera to join him for a private conversation in a far corner of the room. de Torre would assume they were discussing him, and Calavera also believed this was the
intent - but Dorado had a different idea.

"Before we tend to our friend and comrade's troubles, shall we first resolve whatever it is that's troubling you?"

For one brief instant Calavera was tempted to say there was nothing, but he knew it wouldn't work.

"When I selected the members of our team, I required certain criteria. This list was incomplete. I knew we were going to the New World, to travel along a river. I should have made certain that every man I selected was able to swim. One or more of us could have drowned this morning, owing to my lack of foresight."

Dorado frowned at him, and held his gaze until Calavera became uncomfortable. Then he held it a good deal longer before he finally spoke.

"Diego Calavera, you are an exemplary leader and your planning is without equal, but the only man in this world who expects you to be omniscient is yourself. God alone has been granted that privilege. Your self-deprecation is therefore prideful sacrilege, and I insist that you stop it."

Calavera opened his mouth to protest, but again he knew he was beaten. He smiled and shook his head. "Thank you, my friend."

"I did nothing you wouldn't have done for any of us." He tilted his head toward de Torre. "And now it is your turn."

Calavera gave him a curt nod, and walked over to where the young man was sitting. He stood over de Torre, asserting his authority as Lieutenant, but when he spoke his voice was gentle and concerned.

"Alejandro, what is it that troubles you?" Knowing the young man well enough that he did not expect an answer without further prompting, he tried to guess. "Is it that we deceived the old woman?"

de Torre chuckled, without levity. "No. How could it be? She was never deceived."

"Are you concerned about the morality of stealing clothes from the dead?"

"Not at all. If I lose my weapon on the battlefield I will claim that of a fallen man without hesitation, whether he be friend or foe. Our situation in the streets was no different."

"Then are you still distraught about the man you had to kill?"

"I was, but no longer." He sighed. "Now I am concerned about my reaction to the man's death. During our attack on the haunted cabin, everything was in darkness and I was half feverish. If I killed anyone - in all honesty I cannot remember - it did not make any impression upon me. But in the alleyway, I did my duty - and then collapsed like a tower of cards."

"This is not unusual. It can happen to any man, at any time. It is the hand of God upon our hearts, reminding us that whatever our reasons - and only He will judge them - we are removing from this Earth one of His children, and He loves us all. Only the truly evil will never receive this message. And, if it is any comfort, I have never known a man to be touched by it more than once."

"Thank you," said de Torre, deeply moved by Calavera's words. "But that is not sufficient to put my mind at ease, for the incident was merely one of many. I am young, inexperienced. I
confront you out of ignorance, and must be corrected. I was slowest to charge in the Cathedral, and
the least effective. Our assignment is going to be extremely difficult; we cannot afford for any man
to perform below standard. You would never be so cruel as to tell me so, but I have profound
concerns that in choosing me to be a part of your team, you made a grave mistake."

"Bah!"

Both men turned to Dorado, whose presence in the room they'd quite forgotten.

"When Diego wanted to make you our fourth member, he first consulted with Turo and
myself before making his decision final. We both agreed, without hesitation."

"You still could have been mistaken."

"All three of us at once? Don't be absurd."

de Torre chuckled again, this time with mirth, albeit reluctantly. But then the chuckle grew,
until it became a laugh, a full-throated, full-bellied laugh that de Torre would have been unable to
control even if he'd had a mind to try. With every release of air, he felt his troubles leave him, and
with every inhalation, he felt joy enter.

Tears coursed down his cheeks. He welcomed them.

"Thank you, Lanza. And you, Lieu - Diego. I have been well-counseled. I will know better
in future than to question your most excellent judgment."

"I should think so," Dorado said, nodding sharply.

"You have a most pleasant laugh, young sir."

The three Guardsmen turned to face the door. It had been opened so they could hear the
conversation with the Doves, but they had neglected to close it again. Now the old woman stood in
the doorway, her unseeing eyes staring directly ahead, her hands bearing a tray that held biscuits
and tea.

Three cups of tea.

There could no longer be any doubt: The blind woman knew she had four lodgers in her
home.

Dorado and de Torre turned to their Lieutenant. He cleared his throat, while he tried to
decide how to proceed.

The old woman smiled at him. "My husband brought me to this house on the day we were
married. I could see, then, but I have not had my sight for over forty years. I am familiar with every
sound this house makes; I always know how many people are inside, whether they are men or
women, where they are located, and what they are doing." She smiled again, this time at herself.
"Certain couples would be most distressed if they understood the extent to which I am aware of
their activities under my roof, but I was young once, and I do not judge."

"Madam," said Calavera, with difficulty, "it was always our intent to compensate you well
above the amount we agreed upon, to account for how many - "

She stopped him with a small shake of her head.
"It is easy to lie, if one knows how. The words spoken are only one tool of deception; there are also the posture, the gestures, the tone of voice, the eyes... In addition to the ability, however, one must have the will. You would be quite capable of lying to another person, sir, but with me your tone never spoke anything but the truth."

She put the tray down on the night table, and returned to the door.

"Enjoy the tea, gentlemen. It will help you warm yourselves."

They listened to her descend the stairs, and walk to her bedroom in the back of the house. It seemed to take a long time, but they waited, unmoving and in silence.

Then they waited some more.

Finally de Torre whispered, "Before I take a sip of my tea, which in all honesty I am craving a great deal, I must pose a question. Perhaps the deviousness of certain men - enemies and allies - we have recently encountered in our home country has poisoned my trust in my fellow creatures, but I am obliged to ask: Can this woman be trusted?"

"She addressed you as 'young sir'," Dorado said. "She called the Dove 'young man'."

"Also," said Calavera, "remember it was Turo who recommended her to us."

"Say no more," de Torre claimed a cup and drank from it.

The tea was delicious.

Dorado, for his part, was interested in refreshment with more solidity. He took a biscuit off the plate and bit into it with relish.

It tasted like saltpetre.

He placed it back where he'd found it, indicating that the others should follow his example.

With a certain amount of guilt, Calavera heeded his friend's warning.

But de Torre needed to be certain. He took a small bite.

And then quickly took a big gulp of his tea.

Once he regained the ability to speak, he asked the other two, "If we do not eat them, but dispose of them in some other fashion, she will know, won't she?"

*****

Corvus arrived a quarter of an hour later.

They heard the old woman offer him a cup of tea as she let him in. When he arrived upstairs, he was holding it in his hands.

His companions still had not resolved the quandary of the biscuits.
"Turo, welcome. I expect you have news."

"I do."

"First, I must advise you that our landlady saw through our deception from the first, yet in spite of this she sheltered us from the Doves who recently knocked on her door looking for four Esperanzan fugitives."

"She has a good heart. I am certain the children in the neighbourhood adore her."

"We have no more to report than that, save one regrettable altercation, the tale of which I expect has spread quickly throughout the city already."

"If you are referring to the naked corpses of Doves recently discovered in an alleyway, then you are correct. You will be pleased to know that your actions have resulted in every Dove in Isla Oestelago being ordered to join in the search for us."

"And why does this please me, precisely?"

"As with our Watchmen, many Doves sleep during the day, so they will be freshly rested upon assuming their posts in the evening. Since none are currently sleeping, by sunrise all of our enemies will be tired."

"Yes, we are truly blessed. Were you able to learn anything more about our enemies?"

"Their leader is a Major named Martín Pescador." And Corvus told them what he'd witnessed outside the Cathedral.

The other Guardsmen listened to the story in grim silence.

"After this, I went to the stables - but I will save that for the end. I returned to our lodgings. Regrettably, the Doves had been there first, and the innkeeper recognised us from their descriptions. They left two men behind to apprehend us upon our return."

Dorado snorted. "Only two? Hubris."

"Unfortunately, before I arrived, they had already removed our possessions... including the Tunics."

Dorado's mirth vanished. His back straightened as he inflated his chest. His mute outrage surpassed even de Torre's.

"I am hesitant to ask about the stables," said Calavera.

"Oh, no - there, the news is encouraging. Our horses were taken away by one man wearing a Dove's sash."

"One man?"

"Yes! A man matching exactly the description of Miguel Portero."

The man they had gone to meet at the Cathedral.

"And did this uncommonly solitary 'Dove' leave the stableman with any parting words?"

"He did, in fact. He said he was taking our horses to the coop."
Calavera reined in his excitement. "I don't know what that might mean."

"I do."

Three pairs of eyes turned to de Torre.

"Yesterday while at the harbour I noted a tavern called The Cock and Hen."

The others took a moment to consider this, not because they doubted in the slightest that this was the location Portero had intended, but because each of them had some vivid memories associated with the juxtaposition of the words 'harbour' and 'tavern'.

"This place of business," said Calavera, "was there anything particularly remarkable about it that caused it to catch your eye?"

"There were two items, in fact. The first was an empty wine bottle that flew out the open door and shattered on the street. The second was a patron who exited with a knife in his arm. He yanked the blade out and then re-entered the premises, clearly intending to return the weapon to whoever had given it to him."

The other three nodded wisely. They had expected no less.

"Very well," said Calavera, not enthusiastically, "we'll look for him there tonight. But before then, four hours from now, we'll go out in pairs, Lanza and Alejandro to replenish our firearms, and myself and Turo to get us all new clothing. Until then, there are three bedrooms: Each of us will sleep for three hours, and be on watch for one. I'll take the first watch."

They left de Torre in that room, and as Corvus went to another, Calavera stopped Dorado in the corridor.

"Alejandro's resilience is astonishing. His doubts will be gone by tonight, and the next time he is called upon, he'll surprise himself."

Dorado nodded. "I am glad we're returning to our earlier discussion, for I left something unsaid."

His eyes burned into Calavera's own. The Lieutenant braced himself.

"You are at liberty to tell yourself and others whatever you wish about your criteria for this team, but I consider it a singular coincidence that the three men you originally selected also happen to be your three most trusted friends in the world. With Sean Benton placing a close fourth on that list."

Calavera found himself unable to muster a reply.

"I am sure Alejandro would be deeply honoured to discover precisely what company he's been keeping."

"You don't mean to tell him?"

"Of course not," said Dorado, turning and heading to his room. "It will be much more satisfying to watch him come to the realization himself."

*****
When entering *The Cock and Hen* the Guardsmen didn't want to draw too much attention to themselves, so they peered quickly through the thick crowd of boisterous patrons, trying to find a man with light-coloured hair, moustache and beard.

He was seated at a table in the centre of the room.

Miguel Portero would have been noticed in almost any group of people, not for his physical features, but because he possessed a boldness and confidence which at once radiated outward like sunlight, and at the same time drew one's gaze toward him.

The Baron had told Calavera that Portero was one of the most famous performers in Isla Oestelago. The Lieutenant could well believe it.

There were five other chairs around Portero's table, all of them occupied by men who were raising their cups aloft and singing, very loudly and very poorly.

As the Guardsmen approached, Calavera's eyes met Portero's and he nodded with only his gaze. He said something to his companions, then threw a handful of coins into the centre of the table. There was a brief scramble, after which each man quickly departed, money in hand, to procure himself more drink, or perhaps some other entertainment.

When the Guardsmen were close enough to be heard over the din, Portero clapped his hands together once, then spread them widely open.

"You appear to have come a long way," he said.

Calavera answered as he'd been instructed. "The journey was indeed long, but interesting."

"Have you any adventures to speak of?"

"We have many stories to tell, several of which are factual."

Portero smiled, so compellingly the others could not help but do the same. He clapped his hands together again, and motioned for them to sit.

"Gentlemen, welcome to Isla Oestelago. I regret that I was unable to make our rendezvous at the Cathedral, but perhaps it is for the best that I was not discovered in your company at that juncture. I assure you, I arrived on time, but by then there were already many Doves gathered outside."

From a nearby table, a man shouted in their direction. "Musician! Did I hear you speak just now of the Cathedral?"

"Ignore him," said Portero. "Like a flea, he will soon attach himself to a more promising target."

But for the moment, the man would not be ignored. "Esperanzans in our midst! Fools in thrall to an illegitimate King!"

Corvus sighed and turned to de Torre. "I do not think this is going to go well."

Dorado's breathing became much deeper.

Calavera spoke to him softly. "However much we may disagree with him, Lanza, he is
nevertheless expressing a perfectly understandable opinion."

"And not just any Esperanzans, by God, no," the orator continued, enjoying the sound of his voice more with every passing syllable. "Emerald Guardsmen! Murderers and thieves, the very paragon of Esperanzan morality!"

Dorado looked at Calavera. The Lieutenant shrugged back.

"The insult is a different matter, of course."

Dorado rose promptly from his chair. The suddenness of this action, as well as his considerable size, commanded the attention of half the crowded room.

When he spoke, the power of his voice commanded the rest.

"I am an Esperanzan, sir."

His provoker was delighted. "This comes as no surprise. I recognised you for a tulip the moment you entered."

Calavera and de Torre exchanged a glance, remembering the last time they'd heard that word used.

Dorado put his hand on his sword.

Half the men in the tavern rose from their seats.

Calavera muttered something ungentlemanly.

Corvus shrugged at de Torre.

"Well? What did you think was going to happen?"

Chapter End Notes

We continue our series on name origins. There is no longer a warning here about people not reading if there is a risk it will spoil the story for them.

Martín Pescador is what you find in my Spanish-English dictionary edited by Edwin B. Williams when you look up the word *kingfisher*. *The Kingfishers* is my first completed novel-length manuscript (which I have to revise because it has the wrong villain). Actually the complete title is *The Kingfishers: The Flight of the Ibis*. It's an homage to 80s adventure television: The Kingfishers are my A-Team, my Magnum/Higgins/TC/Rick. So when I was coming up with names for this story, I naturally looked up the word kingfisher, and there it was: a full name, that sounded damn cool. Gotta be a bad guy.

The character looks like a rat because of the mammal called (among other things) a
fisher. It belongs to the *marten* genus - you do not argue with that kind of serendipity. And the fisher is related to the ferret. For reasons which don't need exploring at this juncture, for many awesome Novembers the *psychic ferret* was the official mascot of the Montrealers participating in *NaNoWriMo*. So there we have it: Martín Pescador is a dedication to NaNoWriMo, the wonderful people at my side when we were all doing it together, and, frankly, me.

The other dedication to me (and, to a lesser extent, NaNoWriMo) is Alejandro de Torre. My first NaNo novel was *The Men of the Delatour Family*. It was - are you sitting down? - a swashbuckler. In fact, it was my first swashbuckler. For de Torre's surname I just translated Delatour.

His first name, of course, is also translated from the French, the Christian name given to *Alexandre Dumas*. To write any swashbuckler without acknowledging one's debt to *The Three Musketeers* is quite simply incorrect. Just ask Arturo Pérez-Reverte. Also, without Dumas there is no Adventuring Team Consisting Of Distinct Personalities. (Well, undoubtedly someone else would have created it - but he's the one who actually did). Meaning there is no Avengers, no *Mission: Impossible* (the TV series), no *Silverado* (this week's teaser for next week)... and no A-Team. So you see, it all comes around.
The Power In Isla Oestelago

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH Corvus uses a chair, Portero uses a table, Dorado uses a sword, Calavera uses his voice, and de Torre uses his wits.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DORADO would have much preferred to have drawn his sword. His intent when leaving his seat had been to demand satisfaction from his provoker, and allow the other man to decide whether this would take the form of an apology or a duel - the latter to take place outside the premises.

He had not expected the other patrons of The Cock and Hen to rise so quickly. If he'd had sufficient time to bare his blade, doubtless they would have remained seated.

But now that the brawl had started, it was too late.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dorado saw a man advance upon de Torre. The man reached for his sword.

de Torre punched him in the face.

Quod erat demonstrandum.

Calavera's opponent swung too widely. The Lieutenant easily blocked the punch with his forearm, then hit him twice, very heavily, in the abdomen.

The man fell to the floor gasping.

When the crowd had surged upon them, Miguel Portero had wasted no time. He'd jumped upon the table with a shout of joy and thrown his arms wide, inviting all challengers.

Now he kicked one such challenger across the jaw.

"Ha-haa!"

His exultation was taken as mockery. More men surged forward, intending to knock Portero from his perch.

Which had obviously been the musician's intent.

Calavera cast a quick look at him over his shoulder. "We must leave here as soon as we can. If the Doves arrive, and see you with us..."

"Of the many reasons it would be preferable to leave before the Doves arrive, that one does not concern me." A man tried to sweep his legs out from under him. Portero jumped, and made sure his right heel landed on the man's hand. "Once I'd learned you were identified, I gave the matter much thought." He lifted his foot, allowing the man to withdraw. "Your discovery at such
an early stage made it impossible to assist you without exposing myself. Therefore, when this is over, I intend to leave Spain and travel."

The man attacked again, reaching for Portero's knees. Portero crouched, grabbed the man's hair, and drove his face into the table. When he sprung up, he leapt a foot into the air before landing back on the table. As soon as his feet were set firmly in place, he drove his heel into another man's chest.

Three men advanced upon Corvus, eagerness shining in their eyes. This did not surprise the Guardsman: He was often mistaken for an easy adversary. Through regular practice, he'd become quite adept at proving this impression wrong.

He grabbed his chair and swung it around, knocking all three of his opponents to the ground.

"Yes!" said Portero. "That is why, when I come to the Cock, I always sit at one of four tables. The rest have benches - and you can't heft one of those as easily!"

Corvus readied himself to swing in the other direction - but there was no one there. Which was odd, because he could have sworn there had been at least two men.

He saw de Torre move into a punch, before it had time to gain any power, and then batter his attacker quickly four times in the ribs, twice with each fist. This explained everything. Corvus looked down: Sure enough, the two men he had seen standing before were now lying on the ground.

There were many, many men lying on the ground around de Torre.

Corvus ducked under a punch swung at his head. He came up quickly, both hands together, and smashed his assailant under the chin. The blow lifted the man from the ground and tossed him into the two men immediately behind him.

Three men also came at de Torre. One dropped to his knees to grab the Guardsman's legs, while the other two tried to grab each of his arms. de Torre stepped quickly to his left, knocking aside the hands reaching for his legs. The man on his right tried to catch him, but he was blocked by the one who was kneeling.

de Torre made no attempt to avoid the third man, who succeeded in grabbing his arm, only to discover that with both hands thus occupied he was unable to prevent de Torre punching him twice in the face and once in the throat. That man fell senseless to the ground.

The man on de Torre's right came in close and tried to strike him. But de Torre was now free again, and as he used his right arm to sweep the other's attack away, he drove his left fist across the man's jaw. The man's head snapped sideways, he spun around in place, and then he, like his comrade before him, also lost the ability to remain upright.

The man on his knees aimed a vicious punch at de Torre's groin. The Guardsman swiveled his hips and the strike landed ineffectually on his left hip. Then he swung his hips back around, driving his right knee into the man's teeth. His adversary reeled back; de Torre mashed the man's nose flat with his booteel.

de Torre was a veteran of many tavern brawls, and he did not consider there were any rules of proper conduct in such instances, save one: A man's balls were sacrosanct.

"Diego," said Dorado, hammering an opponent in the side of the head, "having had at last
the opportunity to witness first-hand Alejandro's skill as a pugilist, I am prepared to forgive your implication last week that his ability surpasses my own."

He allowed a weak punch to strike him in the left shoulder. Then he smashed his left elbow into his assailant's breastbone.

"Note, of course, that I do not say I agree with your assessment."

"I would never presume," said Calavera. Someone tried to kick him in the knee. Calavera moved his leg out of the way, then stepped on the man's foot and came in closer. Pinned to the floor, the man was unable to dodge as Calavera placed two solid punches directly into his stomach.

A bottle came soaring through the air and narrowly missed Portero's head. Then a second one fell short of its target, but smashed upon the table, creating a puddle that started spreading. Rather than step into the liquid and lose his footing, Portero elected to leave the table of his own accord. He hopped off and landed beside Calavera. This surprised a man advancing upon the Guardsman. Portero punched that man in the ear.

"We have a tradition here at The Cock and Hen," he told Calavera. "Once words are being exchanged, the first man to stand signifies that the brawl has begun." He struck his latest opponent in the face, and this time the man had the courtesy to fall down. "Although I must confess a certain amount of disappointment - generally before that happens there is a longer exchange of witticisms."

"Lanza does not waste his time bartering with men who have nothing to trade."

They both aimed their fists at the same man. Unable to decide which adversary to address, the poor unfortunate hesitated. He was beaten like bread dough.

From the other side of the table de Torre spoke up.

"Diego! Might we take our leave of these fine gentlemen?"

There were two attackers in front of him; he punched them both.

"An excellent idea," said Corvus, hopping onto a chair and kicking a man under the chin. "Alejandro's hands must be getting very sore."

"We should teach him to use his knees and his elbows," Dorado said, demonstrating both upon his latest opponent. He turned to look over at de Torre, and saw for the first time the semicircle of fallen adversaries piled around him.

"On the other hand, he seems to be doing well enough with what he knows."

"Alejandro, clear us a path to the door."

"With pleasure, Lieutenant."

Then he hissed, and cursed himself for a fool. In addressing Calavera by his rank -

"It does not matter," said Corvus, putting a hand on his shoulder. "The Doves will hear our descriptions from these people anyway; what you said will not be needed for them to confirm our identities."

"Thank you, my friend."

"Not at all. After you."
de Torre began striding toward the door, knocking everyone out of his way. And if in his frustration he struck them harder than was absolutely necessary, rather than conserving his strength, it only made the next men he encountered less likely to block him.

Corvus followed, after him Portero, and then Calavera, who looked behind and noticed Dorado was not moving as quickly as the rest of them. As Calavera had expected, his friend's eyes were searching the crowd.

"Lanza..."

"Go East. I will rejoin you shortly."

When de Torre broke free of The Cock and Hen, he lost his balance and stumbled forward several steps. He had become accustomed to having something in his way.

de Torre regained his footing just as Calavera exited and said, "Turn left," whereupon the four of them began to put distance between themselves and the tavern.

They did not run, they walked, albeit swiftly, so as not to arouse the suspicions of any Doves who might be hurrying to the tavern.

"Tell me about Martín Pescador," Calavera said to Portero as they walked.

"He is the most feared man in all of Isla Oestelago, and the third most powerful. The most powerful man is the Duke, Josefo Lobato, or 'Duque Josefo' as he prefers to be called. His older brother Esteban is the Archbishop. It tells you something about the piety of their family that the first son born to nobility joined the clergy and this was not considered unusual. The two brothers work in harmony, and their dominance over this part of Spain is absolute. When they created the Doves, Pescador was a Captain in the army. They created the rank of Major especially so they could promote him to it."

"With the result being that his power is near absolute as well."

"As intended. And there is a rumour, which one does not repeat in anything but the most trusted confidence, that Pescador, an orphan raised by the Church, is in fact the son of one of the brothers Lobato."

"Do you believe it?"

"I do. Although to give the devil his due, as it were, I cannot think of anyone better suited for his position. Despite my personal disregard for the man, I must concede that in terms of ability, temperament, and morality, he is ideal."

"Notwithstanding that he shot one of his own men, and ordered the others to whip themselves?"

"Guzmán was not executed for failing in his duties. He acted hastily rather than with wisdom, and made an error which, in the eyes of many, was tantamount to sacrilege. Whatever he might have preferred to do instead, Pescador does not believe he can allow any form of heresy committed by his own men to go unpunished. I was not there, but I know the Major well enough to promise you he regretted the necessity of Guzmán's death."

"Yes," Corvus said, "that is what I observed."

Calavera snorted. "I am a leader of men, and also a faithful servant of God, but I never
would have made that decision."

"Of course not," said Portero. "You are the representative of a new country forged in the fires of revolution. Pescador, on the other hand, is the exemplar of a religious ideal."

Calavera had no answer for that. He knew, down in his soul, that Pescador's actions had been wrong, but he could not find the words to say precisely why.

"Quiet!" Corvus said, slowing his pace. "Doves are approaching."

The four men stepped aside and let the Doves run past them. The soldiers in white sashes never even glanced in their direction, so intent were they upon following the whistling coming from *The Cock and Hen*.

"Their sashes remind me," said Calavera, "to ask you if you have our horses."

"I do!" Portero said. "Once I realised the Doves would be hunting you, I hurried to every stable in the city, hoping to get there before the Doves did. I regret I was unable to find your lodgings first in the same fashion."

"You did more than enough for us, and you have my thanks. How did you come to have a white sash?"

"I made one. I thought it might be useful, and it has been on several occasions. Most of the good people of Isla Oestelago do not know what material the sashes are made from; they try to avoid being too long in a Dove's company."

Calavera, his pride still stinging from Portero's defence of Pescador's leadership, could not withhold an observation:

"That is not the way Esperanzans behave toward the Emerald Guard."

Whatever reply the Spaniard might have offered was interrupted by de Torre.

"Diego, reassure me, if you please, that you are neither surprised nor concerned that Lanza is not among us?"

*****

Three Doves stood outside *The Cock and Hen*, all with swords drawn, all blowing their whistles to summon more men to their side.

Across the street from the tavern, Dorado stood in the shadows of an alleyway, watching the front door.

In response to the whistling, many of the tavern's patrons were escaping out the front door, not wanting to be present once the Doves had sufficient numbers to enter. They were allowed to depart without confrontation; fleeing men are not interested for the moment in causing further disturbance.

One of these fleeing men was the one who had provoked Dorado into standing up and instigating the brawl. And, in a stroke of luck unlike any the Guardsmen had experienced since
arriving in Isla Oestelago, the man was running directly toward Dorado's alleyway.

He backed up several feet and waited.

Dorado's prey entered the alleyway, followed closely by two of his friends.

The Guardsman drew his sword. There was sufficient light for him to be recognised.

The other three men all came to a sudden, shuddering halt.

"You have two choices. First, you can apologise, in front of these two witnesses, for the insults you in your profound ignorance heaped upon me and my countrymen. Otherwise, you can draw your sword" - Dorado noted that it was hanging on the man's right hip instead of his left - "and I will stab you through the left arm."

The man took a step back and grabbed his sword.

Dorado smiled; this was the option he'd been hoping the other man would choose.

His two friends turned and ran out of the alleyway.

Dorado's enemy attacked him straight away, thrusting then feinting then lunging. Given that he fenced with his left instead of his right, he was accustomed to winning quickly: Most men did not know how to defend against him.

Dorado was not such a man. He parried the thrust easily, ignored the feint, and simply stepped out of the way of the lunge. His opponent was forced to keep moving forward or leave himself exposed; Dorado gave him a cut on the hip as he passed.

The man turned, and pressed his hand to his leg. It came away bloody. He glowered at Dorado.

The Guardsman waved his left hand dismissively.

"I promised to run my sword through your arm. I never suggested that I would do you no other injury beforehand."

The man spat on the ground. Grinning maliciously, he reached behind his back with his right hand.

Dorado knew he was not reaching for a pistol; this was the kind of man who would have drawn that weapon first.

"I observe you are less free with your tongue now than you were inside the tavern."

His opponent revealed his right hand again. It was holding a main gauche.

Dorado shrugged. "If you insist upon committing yourself to a limited number of manoeuvres, I will not attempt to talk you out of it."

The man attacked again. Between his left-handedness and his main gauche, he was certain he had all the advantages, but Dorado knew how to defend against both of these, plus he possessed an advantage of his own.

He parried and thrust.
The main gauche came up to catch it.

But Dorado twisted his wrist, and the main gauche passed under his sword.

In the same motion Dorado stepped quickly forward with his long legs, pushing the main gauche and the man's body out of the way with his sword as he crossed on the right.

Dorado was behind him before the man even knew what was happening.
He hurriedly tried to turn to his left and bring his sword around.
But Dorado thrust his sword into the man's arm and out the other side.
The man screamed.

"Don't move," said Dorado. "You'll make the hole widen."
The man went rigid.

"Drop your weapons."
He did.

"Now, as best as you can, relax your arm. Stay still, take a deep breath... "
Dorado held his arm steady while he slid the sword out of it.
The man hissed, but he didn't shift or cry out.

"Good. Now, go and find the best doctor you know. Pay him well, and he may save your arm."
The man hesitated. He looked down, at his weapons.

"Leave those. It'll be some time before you're able to use them again."
Still the man did not leave.
Dorado stepped up very close to him, and spoke directly into his ear.

"Run. Now."
At last the man did as instructed.
Dorado wiped his sword clean, sheathed it, and exited the alleyway. On the other side of the road, the Doves were preparing to enter *The Cock and Hen*.

Staying in the shadows as best he could, Dorado ran East.

*****

"Stop!" said Corvus, but it was too late.
All four of them had already rounded the corner.

Where seven Doves were standing in the centre of the street, blocking the way.

The night was too dark for the Doves to see their features clearly, but if the Guardsmen were to move much closer, they would surely be recognised.

"You, there!" one of the Doves called out to them. "Do not be concerned. Step forward, and continue on your way."

He'd made his voice sound pleasant, but there was no mistaking that Corvus, Calavera, Portero, and de Torre - four men with swords on their hips - were under suspicion.

"Molina?" said Portero. "Is that you?"

"Portero! Who are your friends?"

"That witch!"

Everyone turned to de Torre, who had stepped apart from the others and was now patting himself vigorously about the waist. He threw his hands into the air and turned to his companions.

"My purse! That witch stole my purse!"

He turned and ran back in the direction from which they'd come, shouting imprecations at the thief who'd relieved him of his money.

"We'd better go after him," Calavera said, apparently to his fellows but loudly enough to be heard by the Doves. And he also started running, Portero close behind.

"Good evening to you, fair sirs," said Corvus, waving as he likewise turned around. "We hope to see you again before too long!"

As he ran after the others, he heard one of the Doves snort.

"Any man who insists upon visiting this area at night should be more judicious in his choice of female companionship."

Once they were satisfied that the Doves did not intend to follow them, the four men stopped in the mouth of an alleyway to catch their breath.

They heard someone else running down the main road. The footsteps stopped for a moment, then started again, now heading in their direction.

de Torre put his hand on his sword and looked to Calavera.

The Lieutenant shook his head.

"I recognise the length of the stride. It's Dorado."

Corvus nodded his confirmation.

"What are you four doing here?" Dorado said as soon as he was close enough to do it quietly. "How am I expected to find you when you deviate from the main road?"

"But you did find us," said Calavera.
"Don't start talking like Turo!"

"We encountered some Doves blocking our path. de Torre's nimble thinking enabled us to extricate ourselves, but nevertheless we thought it best to seek concealment for a time."

Dorado nodded to de Torre, a proud smile on his face. The young Guardsman returned the smile. He seemed to grow two inches taller.

Calavera turned to Portero. "Can we expect there to be Doves blocking our exit in every other direction as well?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so; this is a common occurrence. They don't know that you're inside their net, but once they've heard your descriptions from the patrons of The Cock and Hen, they'll tighten it until they find you."

"Can we go to the water, and perhaps swim around them?"

Portero shook his head. "By this time, there is a line of musketeers standing at the edge of the docks."

Calavera clenched his fists in frustration.

Portero shrugged. "Martín Pescador is a very thorough man."

The Lieutenant turned to his men, to see if they had any other suggestions.

Corvus was no longer there.

Dorado pointed down the alleyway, where the missing Guardsman was barely visible in the shadows.

Corvus waved them over.

"Wait... " said Portero, but everyone else was already moving.

When he saw they were on their way, Corvus passed behind a corner. The others walked more quickly, so they would not lose him.

They found him standing in front of a narrow passageway. Across this passageway someone had hung a thick black curtain, bearing an ornate symbol done in white paint. The symbol consisted of straight lines which curved at the corners, spirals and closed figures sprouting from the central design, and dots arranged in patterns, inside and outside the main symbol itself.

"What is this?" Calavera asked Portero.

The musician sighed heavily, then answered reluctantly.

"This is the Black Curtain."

"I can see that."

"I will elaborate. This is one of a small number of entrances to the Black Curtain, an area of this city that is quite difficult to find, and so hazardous to unwelcome visitors that even the Doves do not dare enter."

"So it is the only place where we can be safe from their trap."

"Perhaps I have not made myself clear."

"Miguel," said Calavera.

Portero came to attention.

"Having no other means by which we can avoid our hunters, we intend to enter this area. If you do not wish to accompany us, you need not do so. In fact, returning directly to your home is perhaps your wisest course of action: You have nothing to fear from the Doves if you are not in our company. Tell us where we can find our horses, and we will meet you there at noon tomorrow."

Portero shook his head and chuckled. "I have never been one to follow the wisest course of action, Lieutenant. If this is where you are going, then this is where I am going."

Calavera nodded to him. Then he drew the cover aside.

And, one after the other, all five men entered the Black Curtain.

Chapter End Notes

Molina the Dove's name comes from Alfred Molina. He's not strictly speaking an inspiration for this story, but I needed a name in a hurry and I admire his work.

Besides being simply great books, the early novels of Gordon Korman had a defining influence on my writing, specifically the way I handle dialogue, chaos, and chaotic dialogue. My favourite novel of his is Son Of Interflux. In this book, the main character goes to see his guitarist friend play in a club. He is so moved by the performance that when it is over he rises to deliver a standing ovation. That is how he discovers the tradition that the first person who stands up starts the fight. I stole that. With pride.

So, last week I said Silverado was the teaser for this week. I love that movie. I love the way the team members' personalities complement one another. I love Scott Glenn's reticence. And that score is fan-tastic. You know that scene where for the first time all four of them are riding together? That track is called Riding As One, it's by Bruce Broughton, and without that scene and that music there is no scene in this story of all five Guardsmen (including Benton, snif) riding out of the Stronghold together. That is probably my favourite scene in this thing so far, and it will probably still hold that title when at last we arrive at the end of this epic-length confection. Silvestros, one of the Five Stars (whom you have not yet met), is named for the movie in general and the composer in particular.

(The mention that he may not even be Greek is a quickie tip of the hat to The Wire.)

Silvestros is also named for Sylvester Stallone. In spite of his Oscar nominations (plural), the man is criminally underrated, both for his intelligence and, yes, his acting ability. He was great in Oscar; shame nobody saw it (including the critics who reviewed it). Stallone knows that action heroes are the modern Gilgameshes, and he could write a thesis about how these tales interact with their societies. That's why he gave us The Expendables. In a cinematic year that included R.E.D., The Losers, and
*The A-Team*, movies about teams of specialists who seek revenge after being betrayed, *The Expendables* was about a team of specialists who risk their lives because it's the right thing to do. (Also, I am obliged to add that the real A-Team, the good one, the one on television, was also about doing the right thing.) Stallone and I come from the same place. It is a better place than what modern moviemakers and audiences seem to want - and I say 'seem' because I believe with all my heart that if they saw it clearly, they would embrace it. Without *The Expendables*, this story would be missing something. I would have named a more important character after Stallone, but his name was just too difficult for me to adapt in a way that I liked.

Okay, I've gone on long enough. I was going to follow up on *Due South*, which I quoted from last week, but I'll save that for next week.
"SANDALWOOD," Corvus said. "Also myrrh... and something stronger, and sweeter."

"It smells like church," said de Torre.

Corvus nodded. "That's the myrrh. A good idea travels to all peoples."

"Careful," Calavera said, pulling Portero toward him.

He pointed to where Portero had been about to place his foot. Against the wall was a tiny jar half-filled with liquid, surrounded by a semicircle of cowrie shells. Portero had almost stepped on the shells.

"Thank you," he said in a whisper. "I expect our hosts, whoever they might be, do not look kindly upon guests who crush their furnishings."

Dorado brought his head close to Corvus, so no one else could hear his question.

"That is not mere furnishing, is it?"

"No. It is not furnishing at all, in fact."

Dorado sighed. Then he stepped away, to take in his surroundings better.

The Black Curtain was a maze of narrow corridors which twisted and turned unexpectedly, and had all manner of egresses, some almost too narrow for a man to pass through, and others so low one could only move through them by crawling. This was a between space, created when houses were built with no consideration for the constructions around them. Over the course of two centuries the houses had been modified, or damaged, and then repaired, or rebuilt, and in the latter case the ruins of the old had seldom been removed, so the new buildings were either built around or on top of the old structures.

The shadows in these corridors were long and thin, for the only light came from flickering candles placed directly on the ground, at haphazard intervals along the walls.

These walls had no windows, but they did have larger openings, some with steps leading up to them. These were the entrances to people's homes. Most of these entrances did not have doors, and none of the doors were shut. Most of the entrances were hung with curtains, some of which were in rudimentary browns and ochres, others in bright colours with ornate designs, some of them in the same style as the emblem on the curtain through which the Guardsmen and Portero had entered. Most of the curtains were partway open, like the doors.
Every single one of the open entrances was occupied by an inhabitant of the Black Curtain.

And every single one of these inhabitants was an African.

The flickering candlelight danced in the whiteness of their eyes as all of them watched the new arrivals intently.

There was an old woman sitting upon some short steps, her legs wrapped in a blanket and her hands knitting so quickly Dorado could not follow her movements. A man no older than de Torre, with his arms crossed over his bare, muscular chest, leaned against his opening and smoked a pipe. A woman wearing only an orange skirt, nothing on her feet and nothing above her waist, simply stood, unmoving, in the centre of her entrance. Dorado guessed that this was a posture of relaxation: To judge by the looseness of her belly and the fullness and weight of her breasts, she had recently given birth.

Dorado could see no children anywhere, but the hour was late.

He considered the path ahead. For the moment he and his companions were able to stand three abreast, but up ahead one wall came in sharply at a diagonal, creating an opening through which they would have to pass in single file.

To get there they would have to walk in front of a dozen pairs of watchful eyes.

Dorado turned back to Corvus.

"You are perfectly at home in these surroundings, aren't you?"

"I generally prefer more open areas, with room to move around, but I am not at all uncomfortable here."

Dorado nodded grimly. He also preferred more open areas, and the closeness of these surroundings made him very uncomfortable.

"Gentlemen," said Calavera, "we have moved but three steps inside. Given that we have decided to enter this area, we should undertake to do so with more conviction."

A gray-bearded old man, his back partly stooped over with age, stepped out of his entrance and hobbled down his steps. When he reached the street level he turned to fully face the visitors.

"Your leader is perfectly correct." His tone was measured and reasonable, but the tremor in his voice made everything he said sound like a cackle. "You have crossed the threshold. If you are unwelcome, it is already too late. So you may as well behave as though you are welcome."

He waved them closer; Corvus and Calavera stepped forward without hesitation. Seeing this, the others did the same.

"Are you something of a leader here?" Calavera asked the man.

He shrugged. "I am old. The others listen to the wisdom of my experience."

"Hah!"

This voice came from within the old man's home. It was that of an old woman, and her cackling sound was entirely intentional.

The man snapped his head around so quickly that his beard twisted about his neck. He
opened his mouth to shout.

But then he remembered the strangers standing around him, and reconsidered. He turned back to Calavera.

"We have no hierarchy here. Every duty that is required is performed by those best suited to doing it."

Calavera chose his next words carefully. "Who decides whether we are welcome or not?"

The old man shrugged again. The Lieutenant was developing the impression that he performed this gesture to shake off the confusion he experienced whenever asked a question he found absurd.

"There is no decision. It is known."

The questions which could have followed upon this statement were many and varied, and Calavera rejected several of them. He did not wish to be shrugged at again.

He decided upon a practical inquiry. "If it should develop that we are unwelcome, what will be the consequences?"

"I believe I can answer that, Diego."

Calavera looked behind him. de Torre was pointing at two armed men standing in front of the exit. Their skin was the darkest Calavera had ever seen, not the deep brown of an African, but literally black as pitch. Their chests were bare, and there was no hair anywhere upon their bodies: not on their chests, not atop their heads, not even above their eyes. They were at rigid attention, and each man held a spear seven feet in length, black as their skin, and topped with what appeared to be an iron head, sharpened to such polish that the tips glimmered menacingly in the candlelight.

Calavera gave Dorado a look: How did these men get behind us without you noticing?

Dorado glared right back: You are asking that question in this place?

Calavera nodded curtly; it was a fair point.

He turned to the old man. "If we are unwelcome they will kill us?"

The old man turned around and walked back up the steps into his home. He reappeared a moment later with a clay jar, and poured corn meal in a thick line from one end of his threshold to the other, making certain that the yellow granules touched both ends. Then he disappeared back inside, and closed the curtain over the opening.

Calavera would have much preferred a shrug.

He turned and addressed the men with black skin. "Are either of you willing to answer my question?"

"If you are unwelcome, we will kill you," said the one on the right.

Calavera realised he'd been expecting them to speak in unison.

"Only as a matter of curiosity, you understand, does it not concern you that there are more of us than there are of you?"
"No."

"I rather thought it wouldn't. Is that because – "

Corvus held up his finger.

"Diego, if I may?"

"Of course."

Corvus bent down and picked up a candle, then brought it to the sentries. "May I show them?"

It was always the one on the right who spoke. "Will they see?"

"Most of them have before."

"Then you have our permission."

Corvus held the candle very near the stomach of the guard on the right. After a few moments in the close candlelight, the man's skin seemed to become translucent. In a few more moments, they could all see inside of him.

Nestled deep within his belly was a scorpion. It turned toward the light and raised its spiked tail menacingly.

Corvus withdrew the candle, and the man's midsection became solid once more. The scorpion disappeared behind it.

"Lieutenant," said Dorado slowly, "the goals of our assignment in the New World notwithstanding, I am beginning to develop a deep disliking for magic."

"While that is not entirely without basis, let us hope these men do not hold it against you."

Dorado focused his attention upon them. He was fairly certain that if they wanted to kill him, they would succeed.

He had never experienced that sensation before.

A thick stillness settled upon the corridor.

After a time, de Torre addressed the guard on the right:

"Has a judgment been passed yet? Are we welcome?"

He presumed that if they were unwelcome he would not have to ask.

"It is not yet known," the guard said.

"Gentlemen," said Calavera loudly, "let us not spend what may be our last minutes on this Earth in fruitless anticipation and speculation." He turned to Corvus and smiled. "We are in a new and wondrous place. Does it not behoove us to explore it?"

Corvus clapped his hands together. "By all means!"

Calavera bowed and directed him to lead. Corvus bustled down the narrowing corridor,
almost skipping in his excitement.

Calavera followed, without turning around to indicate to the others that they should do the same. He knew they would; they had no other choice.

The narrow point ahead of them opened into a corridor running left-right across their path. Corvus led them left. Sticking to where the course was widest, he next turned right, then left, and finally descended a dozen stairs to an arched opening.

They passed underneath the arch and found themselves in an open space the size of a tavern's main hall, which served as a kind of plaza. A fire burned in the centre, and on the far wall were two merchant stalls, shut for the night.

Calavera looked back the way they'd come. On several occasions during their travels through the maze he'd spotted the sentries following them, but now they were nowhere to be seen.

He supposed that meant they were welcome.

In any case, there was nothing to be gained by assuming otherwise.

"Gentlemen, we have had a trying day, and with the fire providing us warmth this area is likely to be the best place we shall find in which to settle down for the evening."

He noted with some amusement that de Torre and Portero looked over their shoulders for the guards.

He also noted something else, which convinced him to add an appendix to his most recent statement.

"However, should any of you wish to sleep elsewhere, we shall meet back here in the morning. Do not keep the rest of us waiting unduly."

And he walked across the plaza, directly toward a home where a sensual young woman stood in the entrance, one hand on her hip and her shoulders thrown back.

As soon as Calavera was close enough, she stepped forward and grabbed him by the belt, pulling him toward her. He threw one arm over her shoulders and pressed her body to his, then wrapped the other around her waist, his hand slipping down to squeeze her buttock. They remained like that for a long time before disengaging.

Even at that distance, in low light, de Torre could see their tongues examining each others' mouths.

The young woman gave Calavera's belt another brief tug and then she swung around, leading with her ample hips. She stepped deeper into her home. Calavera patted her on the backside and followed her in.

The curtain closed behind them.

de Torre stood and stared at the curtain, although there was nothing more to see.

"Well," said Portero. "Your leader seems to have adjusted quite well to his present circumstances." There was no small amount of wonder in his voice.

de Torre turned to his fellow Guardsmen, feeling he should say something, but uncertain
what that might be.

Dorado saved him the trouble. "He's always been able to do that. I find it alternately admirable and infuriating."

"You mean to say she isn't...?"

"Hah. In all the years I've known him, Diego Calavera has never had to hire anyone for the purposes of what most women are only too eager to give him."

de Torre cleared his throat loudly. "Excuse me, won't you?"

He hurried over to where Portero had begun listening in fascination to a very thin old woman playing some kind of flute.

"I hope I didn't upset him somehow."

"You didn't," said Corvus. "He was blushing, and didn't want us to see."

"Oh, good." Then Dorado realised what that blushing might imply. "Wait. You don't suppose he's..."

"He is a man of high moral character."

Dorado reflected upon that for a few moments.

"Excuse me," said a man's voice on their left.

They turned.

The speaker was wearing a large black robe, with a hood over his head that kept his face in shadow. In his hands he was cradling a round glass bottle the size of a melon, stopped with a cork and containing a bright green liquid. He held the bottle out to Dorado.

"You should drink this."

"No, I do not believe I should."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not know you. I have no reason to trust you."

The man withdrew the bottle.

"You have no reason not to trust me, Lanza Dorado."

"How do you -"

"Lanza, be -"

But it was too late. When the robed figure had withdrawn his hands, one of them had slipped into a hidden pocket. Now holding that hand in front of his mouth, the man opened it and blew a pale yellow powder into their faces.

Corvus staggered back, light-headed and unable to see properly.

Dorado inhaled some of the powder, and immediately felt his strength abandon him. He
would have dropped onto his face, but a powerful arm caught him at the last moment. He was gently lowered to the ground.

Then the same hand moved to his jaw and forced his mouth open. A bottle was tipped into his mouth. Unable to resist, his only choices were to swallow the liquid or drown in it.

He drank.

Meanwhile, unaware that this was going on, de Torre and Portero were much enjoying the thin old woman's performance on her flute. The Guardsman had begun by standing to listen, but this had soon seemed inappropriate, since the musician herself was sitting with her back against the wall. de Torre had therefore crouched down to her level, and when this had become uncomfortable, he'd decided that he was going to stay, relax, and enjoy himself, so he'd seated himself on the ground in front of her.

Portero had been like that since the beginning; de Torre should have followed the musician's example.

The old woman played continuously, never seeming to pause for breath and never seeming to come to an end, as though everything she played were part of one long piece, even though the moods and meters shifted constantly. It was an enchanting tune, not having a distinct melody, but flowing in such a way that it seemed to have never begun and that it would never end, but go on existing both in the moment and eternally. At various times de Torre wanted to cry, he wanted to sing, he wanted to hold a loved one, he wanted to defend an innocent, and he wanted to release himself to God.

He realised suddenly that the woman had stopped playing. He still felt the music moving through his veins - how long had her flute been silent? The old woman was staring at him and Portero, her eyes somehow giving the impression they were focused on both of them at the same time.

Then she pointed her bony chin at the musician.

"Your scars will never heal."

Portero had been smiling joyfully the entire time he'd been in her presence, but now he suddenly turned angry. "I know that, woman!"

"No," she said, looking down and shaking her head sadly, "you do not. You do not even see them."

"They're plain enough." Spittle flew from his lips as he spoke. de Torre was astonished to see the man's typically self-assured countenance change so dramatically.

Portero stood up and walked away.

The Guardsman watched him leave, uncertain if he should do the same. While he was trying to decide, the opportunity passed.

He turned back to the old woman.

She was staring only at him now.

She laughed.
It was a full, honest laugh, a laugh not of mockery but a laugh which embraced the young man as well, although for the life of him he could not guess what it was that had caused her such merriment.

She brought herself under control, and stared at him once more. The mirth had made her eyes damp.

"I want for nothing, but if I did, I should wish to be your age once more."

de Torre decided the wisest thing to say was nothing at all.

"All will turn out for the best. Although it will take time."

She nodded in satisfaction.

de Torre sensed that this was everything she had to say, and it was time for him to leave. He began to stand up.

Her head stopped moving and she stared at him again. "But do beware the artisan."

"I will," he said, not knowing how else to reply.

As he started walking away, he heard her say, very faintly:

"No, you will not."

Corvus was no longer dizzy, and he could see again. He blinked a final time, and righted himself.

Dorado was lying motionless on the ground. Beside him was the round bottle, uncorked and empty. The man in the robes was nowhere to be seen.

Corvus crouched down to attend to his friend. As he did so, Dorado stirred, and his eyes opened.

"Turo... I believe I drank what was in the bottle."

"You did."

Both men looked up, at yet another new voice they did not recognise.

A man stood over them, possibly ten years older than they were, but not yet elderly. He wore no shirt; his bare chest was broad and his arms were thick. Into his skin was painted the design of a snake wrapped all around him, the tail commencing on his left wrist, the body winding up his arm to his body, with coils fully covering his trunk, and finally the snake curling all the way down to his right wrist, where the eyes looked out over his fingers and a forked tongue slid out to tickle his palm.

"Do you know what was in the bottle?" Dorado asked him.

Instead of answering, the man nodded to Corvus. "We must take him to my home. I can tend to him there."

He reached behind Dorado's shoulders and lifted the large man as easily as though he were merely a boy. Taking Dorado's weight on one side while Corvus took it on the other, they began walking in the direction the man had indicated. Dorado tried to assist them, but his legs were too
weak to be much help.

Again Dorado asked, "What was in the bottle?"

"It will make you violently ill."

Dorado cast a glance at Corvus. Both of them were discomfited that the man had avoided the question twice.

Their associate appeared not to notice. "But you must not, under any circumstances, allow yourself to vomit. The consequences will be fatal."

The mere thought of nausea made Dorado's stomach churn. He felt himself about to be sick.

"Close your mouth tightly!"

He did, and vomited into his teeth. His cheeks bulged, and his nostrils burned.

"Swallow! Swallow it down! Now!"

He did. It took him three attempts to get all of it.

"Give him some water."

"Pissing is safe, then?" Corvus asked.

"Pissing is precisely what we want." He caught Dorado's eye. "I regret, however, that it will burn as much as the vomit does."

"Of course it will."

That was all the sound Dorado could manage before he had to close his mouth. There was a tickle at the back of his throat which threatened to make him vomit again, and breathing through his nose irritated it much less than breathing through his mouth.

"We're here," said their mysterious benefactor, indicating an entrance through which he passed first, dragging Dorado after him.

As he followed them in, Corvus looked around the plaza for de Torre and Portero, but he could not see them anywhere.

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Dorado passed a very painful night, consisting of holding his hand over his face whenever he vomited, so that nothing could force its way out through either his mouth or his nose, then drinking water to drive the bile back into his stomach, and finally, as promised, pissing, an act which caused him at first to howl with the pain of it, but after the first time he knew what to expect and was able to contain his vocal reaction to mere hissing.

In spite of their Lieutenant's recommendation that they settle down for the night, neither man slept at all that evening. Nor did the man with the snake design; he watched over Dorado at all times, ever alert should the Guardsman be about to vomit or should his condition worsen.
When the morning sunlight began creeping in through the entrance, their host declared that his patient was out of immediate danger.

"As you have not felt nauseous for two hours, you are not likely to feel so again. However, you should still wait another two hours before eating. Continue to drink water, but only water. No broth, for example, tea, or anything else, also for two hours."

"I understand."

"Are you able to walk?"

"I believe so."

Dorado struggled to his feet, requiring Corvus' help only a little.

Their host handed Dorado a bottle the size of a preserve jar.

"Beginning tomorrow morning, and until this bottle is empty, I want you to dip your finger into this liquid and press it to the bottom of your mouth, underneath your tongue. Then use your lips to clean the rest of the liquid off your finger. Once the liquid begins to run out, run your finger along the inside of the bottle to catch what remains. Be certain to use every drop. Do you understand?"

"I do. Thank you."

"You are entirely welcome."

"What was in the bottle last night?"

"Make sure you take some of this every morning until it is empty."

Dorado nodded. "I knew you weren't going to tell me."

"If you do not follow my instructions, you will die."

"Without ever knowing why."

The bare-chested man threw his head back and laughed, making the snake on his body shake so hard it seemed to be alive. Getting himself under control, he patted Dorado on the shoulder.

"You will know. Whether you die, or you do not die, you will know the reason."

"Then I thank you again, and I wish you a good day."

There were nods all around, and Corvus helped Dorado out of the house. As soon as they were in the plaza, with the sunlight warming their faces, Dorado smiled weakly at Corvus.

"You, my friend, also have my profoundest thanks. But if you please, I would prefer to walk on my own."

"Of course."

And Corvus released Dorado, who walked across the plaza to where de Torre and Portero has already assembled themselves. Dorado limped, still sore from the agony that voiding had recently caused him, but his legs were strong and his back was straight. Corvus could see he was
all right.

Calavera stepped out of the house into which he'd disappeared the night before. As he crossed to where everyone was converging, he did not look back, and the young woman did not appear in the entrance to see him off. Corvus noted the Lieutenant had that distinct look about him, the one which indicates that a person is very relaxed, in spite of having not slept much the night before.

When they were all five together again, Corvus noticed that Calavera was avoiding de Torre's gaze.

"Are we all ready?" the Lieutenant asked.

Corvus caught Dorado looking at him. His friend did not want the others to know about what had happened to him. Corvus gave him a short nod; he was not going to say anything without the other's leave.

"I don't mind admitting that I will be most relieved to leave this place behind," said Portero. "My friends and I have often speculated about the secrets of the Black Curtain. Now that I know what some of them are, I realise nobody will believe I was ever here!"

"Let us hope the Doves don't believe it either," Calavera said. "Turo, are you able to lead us back the way we came?"

"I am."

"Good. Then please, lead on."

As they walked back to the arched opening from which they'd entered, Calavera drew de Torre aside.

"Alejandro, are you well this morning?"

de Torre stared at him for a moment, and then laughed.

"Diego, my friend, are you being circumspect?"

Calavera laughed also, although not quite as freely. "I suppose I am."

"Then let me both put your mind at rest and answer literally the question you have asked. I am well, although my back is somewhat stiff from having slept on the ground. For this reason, I must commend you for your wisdom and forethought. No doubt, having spent the night in more... comfortable surroundings than I, your body is more at ease than mine, as befits a man who must bear the burden of command."

This time Calavera's laugh was louder, and entirely genuine. Here was a better answer than any he might have imagined receiving.

He clapped de Torre on the back and moved to walk alongside Corvus.

It was only then that he realised what had just happened.

For the first time since they had known each other, de Torre had called Calavera his friend.

The walk passed in silence, each man absorbed in his own thoughts. Even when they passed beyond the curtain through which they'd entered the night before, nobody spoke. Perhaps
they were all remaining alert for Doves, or perhaps each man was still thinking about what he'd experienced inside the Black Curtain.

They retraced their steps back through the alleyway, and when they arrived at the end of it they halted, still without speaking.

Their very next step would put them on the main road that traveled along the edge of the docks. If there were still musketeers posted there, the Guardsmen might be recognised.

Corvus was about to peer around the corner and risk a look, but someone on the road spotted them first.

"Miguel? Is that you?"

Portero started. He stared intently at the man who had spoken, and shook his head sharply to make himself more alert.

"Hello!" he said, unable for the moment to manage much else.

His friend strode toward them. He was an older man, his white hair balding on top, with a dark tan and deep laugh lines on his face. He was of average height, but he looked taller because his arms and legs were incredibly thin. His shirt and trousers, already tailored to be narrow, hung loosely upon his extremities. He might have been judged ill or unhealthy were it not for the fact that he advanced upon Portero with all the energy of a boy intent upon hugging a beloved dog.

When he reached the musician he threw his arms around the man with enthusiastic abandon.

"My good friend Miguel Portero! Although it is of course wonderful to be once more in Isla Oestelago, about to embark upon yet another exciting adventure, my joy would be incomplete without the pleasure of seeing you again!"

He broke the embrace, and studied the four Guardsmen.

"Here are men with fascinating stories written upon their countenances! Might I have the pleasure of an introduction?"

But Calavera had the distressing notion he already knew who this man was.

Behind his friend's back, Portero shrugged apologetically to them.

"Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to my friend Helios Silvestros."

As the man stepped forward and extended his hand, he completed Portero's introduction by adding, unnecessarily in Calavera's case:

"One of the Five Stars."

Chapter End Notes

This is the longest chapter I have yet written for this story. For this reason, I have run out of time to do Author's Notes. See you next week!
WITHOUT waiting for Portero, Calavera introduced himself, and then the others.

Silvestros shook hands with all of them, then turned back to Calavera.

"There is something about you that suggests to me you are not from Isla Oestelago. Am I correct?"

"You are. We are Esperanzans."

"Indeed! How interesting. And, if I may ask..."

"We are Emerald Guardsmen traveling incognito, here to free one of the Baron of Girona's spies out of Fortaleza Tormentaña."

de Torre's eyes widened, but he did not cry out. He marveled at his own self-restraint.

Dorado and Corvus reacted not at all to Calavera's revelation, but this was to be expected. They knew their Lieutenant well.

Portero reeled as though shot. Perhaps he thought he might be, before long.

Silvestros, while no less surprised than his friend, was less staggered by Calavera's admission. He merely raised his eyebrows as high as they would go for a moment, then lowered them while his mouth turned upward in a sly grin.

"Well. I see that your trust in my friend Miguel extends also to trust in his friends. I thank you for the honour of your confidence."

And then de Torre understood. In revealing their second most precious secret, Calavera was explaining away in advance any unusual behaviour the Esperanzans might demonstrate, while diverting Silvestros away from any suspicion that Calavera was withholding the one piece of information most important to Silvestros - that the Guardsmen and the Five Stars were competing for the same prize.

"I confess, sir, that my admission was not entirely a matter of generosity. We have, regrettably, made our presence known in this city. No doubt before long a man such as yourself will hear news of our recent activities - as well as our physical descriptions."

Silvestros' eyes lit up. "So, rather than have me recognise you on my own, at some time you know not when, and then either conceal or reveal to the Doves what I know - which reaction also you would not be present to observe - you chose to anticipate the inevitable, and in so doing
discover in the moment whether I was disposed to defend or condemn you. That is ingenious!"

Calavera bowed his head, apparently in humility, but de Torre knew it was to conceal his face, which would not be able to conceal the Lieutenant's pride, neither at the compliment nor at the success of his plan.

"The other four members of your group are approaching" Dorado said. "Can we count on their discretion as well as we can count on yours?"

"Without fail."

"Then it has truly been our good fortune to encounter you today," said Calavera. "Not only will we have the pleasure of learning about your famous selves from the horse's mouth," he gave his men a significant look, "but we shall also have the opportunity to evade the Doves: They are looking for four men, not ten. Wherever you are bound, we shall walk with you, if it is not an imposition."

"None whatsoever. We will be seeking lodgings, for our ship has only just arrived."

"We would assist you in finding accommodations," Corvus said, "but regrettably we only know of one inn in this city, and we cannot recommend it."

"Never be concerned on our behalf," said one of the four men who had just entered their company, "for the Five Stars have built their considerable reputation in part upon their ability to prosper wherever they find themselves - and that reputation is well-earned."

de Torre cast a quick look at his fellows. Calavera, Dorado, and Portero were doing an admirable job of concealing their shared impulse to smack the man across the face, but these desires were so strong that their efforts were not entirely successful. Even Corvus, whose face was generally either excited or placid, grimaced slightly, and shifted his shoulders as though he had an itch in the middle of his back.

None of the Five Stars gave any indication they had noticed. de Torre suspected they were simply indifferent to other people.

Silvestros performed the introductions. James Starling and Reginald Starkey were of average height, and were at once so different and so alike that they could have been brothers. Starling, the man who'd reassured everyone of his group's infallibility, had short blond hair combed with the fine precision of a razor's edge. His thick moustache, slightly darker than his hair and almost as meticulously-groomed as Calavera's, formed a precise triangle from the bottom of his nose to the corners of his mouth. Starkey's brown hair was so dark as to be almost black, and he wore it in a thick mass of curls. His full moustache and beard put de Torre in mind of a black poodle. The Swede, Lucifer Sandström, was as tall as Dorado, and his chest was broad and muscular beneath his distended shirt. His bright blond hair hung all the way to his waist. de Torre could easily picture this man standing at the bow of a ship, an ax hanging at his side and a wooden shield covering his left arm. In contrast, Simargl was possibly the shortest man de Torre had ever seen. His head and face were perfectly smooth and hairless, although thick dark tufts were visible on his chest, peeking up through the lacing at the front of his shirt. His eyes were black, and he did not speak, communicating only with gestures. He bore a long, jagged scar across his neck.

Once the introductions were complete, all ten of them began walking together toward the centre of the city, the Five Stars leading the way, as comfortable with Isla Oestelago's streets as though they had lived there for years.
Calavera raised his voice and addressed his men. "Get to know our new friends," he said, making it sound like an innocent suggestion, "while Miguel and I discuss some personal matters."

Starling, Starkey, and Sandström nodded knowingly: Silvestros had already told them what business the Guardsmen had in Isla Oestelago. Simargl caught Calavera's eye and smiled at him.

It was not a smile to comfort anyone with secrets.

Portero's voice freed Calavera from the spell. "I am pleased we finally have the opportunity to continue yesterday's discussion."

There was something in his tone which implied criticism of Dorado's behaviour from the previous night. Calavera could not ignore it.

"My friend Lanza Dorado is generally of a very even temper. Many indelicate men have had significant reason to be grateful for that - although they of course remained ignorant of their good fortune."

Portero chose not to respond, but Calavera could see he remained unconvinced. More for his own sake than Dorado's he decided to continue.

"Every man of courage and honour has at least one principle which he must defend, no matter what the circumstances. I have no doubt you know precisely what incites your own personal demon."

Portero bowed his head, lost for a moment in his own thoughts. When he spoke, his tone was more humble:

"I presume you have heard something of my more... regrettable history?"

Calavera had not. Nevertheless:

"If you would care to present your side..."

Portero coughed softly. "Thank you. You are aware of my reputation as a musician and a singer. Perhaps you also know that I am often inspired to write my own songs. Encouraged by some success in that field, it seemed only natural to me that I should attempt to write poetry as well. However, I soon discovered that, away from the soothing presence of my guitar, my thoughts turned to matters of politics, specifically the aspects of Isla Oestelago which provoke my intolerance for injustice. My third complete work – published anonymously - was a mocking condemnation of Martín Pescador."

"I thought you approved of the man."

"Not at all. I recently disagreed with you about his motives because I did not wish for you to approach him under any misapprehensions. In spite of the nobility of his motives, I find much of his actual behaviour reprehensible. Hence this line from my poem:

"If piety were measured by ruthlessness, he would be a saint on Earth."

"This quotation became quite popular in Isla Oestelago, so much so that Pescador offered a reward for the identity of the poem's author."

Portero shook his head sadly.
"I do not know which of the people I consider my friends betrayed me, but I was arrested, and sent to Fortaleza Tormentaña for six months."

"Excuse me if I am being improper," said Calavera, "but I was under the impression you were a favourite of the Duke."

Portero snorted. "Oh, I am! In fact, after my release, Duque Josefo personally invited me to dinner, so we could put all that unpleasantness behind us. My mother was a valued - and trusted - servant of the Duchess Tatiana, so I have been friends with their children Salvador and Graciela since birth. Were it not for my favoured status with the family, I expect things would have been much worse for me. But, nevertheless, I was still incarcerated: One cannot criticise Martín Pescador without expecting to be punished somehow."

Portero moved in close to Calavera, and spoke as if revealing a guilty secret. "Truth be told, I emerged the victor in that particular conflict. I was inconvenienced for a mere half-year, but what I wrote about Pescador will stain his reputation in this city long after all of us have gone to our eternal reward."

His wide-eyed grin reminded Calavera so much of an unrepentant little boy that the Lieutenant could not help but chuckle softly along with him.

Over their gaiety, they heard Starkey telling de Torre, "I am of course recognised as the greatest swordsman in Europe - in every sense that phrase might be taken. And, as a result, most people wish for me to prove that reputation. Young men insist upon dueling against me, and young women insist upon... other things. Hah!"

Calavera took a moment to observe how things were progressing with his men. Starkey was finding himself truly delightful, such a compelling subject that he failed to perceive de Torre was deep in contemplation of his sword, wondering...

Corvus spoke next, perhaps more loudly than was absolutely necessary.

"Before you arrived, Helios mentioned you were embarking upon some sort of exciting adventure. Are you permitted to divulge any of the details, or are you sworn to secrecy?"

Starling laughed; it amused him to know something Calavera's friend did not.

"Turo, my friend - "

Apparently everyone was now familiar enough to use Christian names.

" - it will be my pleasure to share with you what we are about to accomplish."

Corvus grabbed Starling's arm and squeezed it. "My profound thanks. You have no idea what this means to me."

Clearly the situation was well in hand.

Calavera turned back to Portero. The talk of the Five Stars' plans had caused him to wonder what this Spaniard knew of his plans.

Naturally, he chose to address the question obliquely.

"How did you come to be in the Baron's service?"
Portero held up a finger and clucked his tongue.

"Now, now. I am not in his service. I serve the better interests of Isla Oestelago, the city of my birth. It merely so happens that the Baron's goals and mine often coincide."

Although Calavera was listening to Portero carefully, one word spoken by Starling distracted him. It was then repeated by Corvus:

"Yaxax'tun, did you say? That is fascinating. And does that name have any special meaning in their language?"

Calavera forced his attention back to Portero.

"Some weeks after my release from Fortaleza Tormentaña, Santiago came to me and revealed he'd been observing me. He told me he'd deduced - correctly- that I was displeased with the current authority in Isla Oestelago, and he said our interests might coincide. Once I agreed to enlist in his cause, he told me who he really was, and we came to an arrangement. He promised he would never use me against the best interests of this city - only against the Inquisition, and Pescador - and I used my influence with my close friend Salvador Lobato, son of Duque Josefo Lobato, to procure information that Santiago might consider potentially useful to the continued prosperity of Esperanza. He was, for example, very interested in the tunnels beneath this city."

"There are tunnels beneath this city?"

"Oh, yes - you didn't know? When the Romans established their port here, they were very concerned about the Rio Miño rising and destroying all their buildings, so they constructed a very thorough system of aqueducts beneath the city."

"Did they?"

"Yes, but as it turned out they were never needed."

"What a shame. And how large are these aqueducts?"

"Well, I called them tunnels initially because they are both tall enough and wide enough for a man to walk through them comfortably."

"Are they?"

"You sound very much like Santiago did when I gave him the same information."

"Do I?"

Portero laughed.

Calavera shrugged in mock guilt; we all must have our fun.

"And did Santiago happen to ask you whether these tunnels extend all the way to Fortaleza Tormentaña?"

"No, he didn't. But the Roman who built this city - Terentius - was rumoured to be half-mad. It wouldn't surprise me if they did."

"Tell me about Santiago's arrest."

"He was discovered with what Pescador called 'seditious material', although I do not know
precisely what that means. All Santiago’s possessions were confiscated when he was sent to prison."

"What was his sentence?"

"There has been no formal announcement of any - which is unusual, for Pescador insists upon the populace being made aware of what has been going on. Santiago will not be charged with treason, for he’s been posing as a Frenchman, an architect by the name of Frédéric Blossier. Depending on the nature of the seditious materials, he might be charged either with espionage or with heresy. In either case the punishment would be the same - but there are the French to consider. Monsieur Blossier's wealth has earned him influential friends in this city, so the Duke has had his brother Esteban the Archbishop send a message to France, apprising the Cardinal - the Archbishop's brother in Christ - of the situation, and asking His Eminence how he feels it would be best to proceed."

"How soon is a response expected?"

"Any day now. I sent word to the Baron as soon as I learned Santiago had been arrested. If we assume, as we should, that the message to the Cardinal was sent at exactly the same time, mine would have arrived at its destination sooner. But frankly, I expected the Baron to send someone more quickly than he did."

"Would it surprise you to learn that he has more in mind than a simple rescue?"

Portero threw his head back and laughed.

"Of course not!"

This outburst drew the attention of two Doves who were passing them on the other side of the street.

Corvus waved to them.

The Doves waved back and continued down the street.

Once they were a safe distance away, Calavera resumed his discussion with Portero.

"Was our arrival preceded by some sort of message from the Baron?"

"He sent along a young lad whom I presume was a fast horseman and a candidate for the Tunic. He taught me the correct phrases, and instructed me to be present at the Cathedral of St.James every morning at half past ten, where one day soon I would meet the men the Baron was sending to free Santiago." He chuckled. "The Fates, of course, wove a different pattern, as they often do."

"You performed a great service for us when you obtained our horses; we are very grateful."

"You are most welcome. Truth be told, I enjoyed posing as a Dove to foil them."

"As for the possessions they discovered in our room at the inn, where do you expect they have been taken?"

"There is a small jail on the harbour road, where prisoners are held while waiting to be taken to Fortaleza Tormentaña. That would be the most likely place for them to store confiscated items."
Portero paused, waiting for Calavera to ask his next question. But Calavera didn't have anything else for the moment; instead he was lost in thought.

Silvestros' voice carried to them:

"Yes, the name comes from the initial - and momentary - misapprehension that the island was in the middle of a lake. At first it was only the island itself that bore the name, but as the area along the banks grew in prominence - it is now Europe's most vital port for ships sailing to the New World - the name 'Isla Oestelago' came to refer to the entire city. In fact most people are no longer aware that the name ever referred to the island at all; they tend to think of that land mass as Fortaleza Tormentaña, which is of course erroneous. The fortress wasn't built until the Fifteenth Century. Initially it was merely a fort intended to defend the river, but in a more peaceful time it was expanded to become a palace for the Duke. By then the duchy was also named Isla Oestelago, a lazy decision in my opinion, which created even more ambiguity. Finally, when Duque Josefo Lobato succeeded his father, he deemed it more appropriate for a noble to live among his people. Therefore he had the ancient Roman baths in the centre of the city restored and turned into a domicile, whereupon he and his family moved into that. Fortaleza Tormentaña became a prison, a decision which was, again in my opinion, very practical, for the building's sole purpose initially was to be solid and functional, and the later expansion did nothing to remedy the inherent coldness of the - "

"Pause for breath, will you please?" said Sandström, his overpowering loudness presumably unintentional, and due to large lungs. "Or, if you must deliver a lecture on this city, perhaps you can remind us which tavern we frequented when we were last here."

"I can recommend The Cock and Hen," said Dorado. "If, for whatever reason, you take exception to the words of any of the other patrons, you have simply to rise from your seat and say so, and the matter will be quickly resolved."

"Thank you, my new friend," Sandström said, clapping Dorado heavily upon the back. "That is most helpful."

"Not at all," said Dorado. "It is my pleasure to provide you with anything I can."

He felt a squeeze on his arm. He looked over, and discovered Simargl scowling at him, and wagging his finger.

Sandström clapped Dorado on the back again. "Do not be alarmed by the severity of my friend's countenance. He is merely toying with you - as you were with me!"

Simargl smiled. Dorado did not.

"We have been to The Cock and Hen. We are familiar with its customs." Sandström wrapped an arm around Dorado's shoulders and pulled him in close. "Perhaps you and I can go and incite a brawl together?"

He laughed, from the very depths of his enormous body. Dorado would have staggered sideways from the force of it, if Sandström hadn't been holding him in place.

The rest of the Five Stars laughed as well. Simargl's open mouth made no sound, but he clapped his hands to compensate.

de Torre spoke softly to Portero. "It never occurred to them that he might have legitimately wanted to cause them trouble, did it?"
"Of course not," said Portero. "They are the Five Stars: Everyone loves them, and they are invincible."

"Have you seen them demonstrate their skills? Is their self-assurance justified?"

"I had the privilege of being with them when the Prince of Orange asked them to locate and overpower a group of men who'd attempted to assassinate his wife. They demonstrated exceptional intelligence and prowess that, incredible as it may seem, exceed the reputation that they themselves have had no small part in spreading."

This honest appraisal, from someone who was unaware of the adversarial relationship between the Five Stars and the Guardsmen, was a far cry from the reassurance de Torre had been seeking.

"So tell us," he said to his unsuspecting rivals, "aside from replenishing your provisions for the voyage to New Spain, is there anything else that brings you here?"

Silvestros answered. "As a matter of fact, my intuitive young friend, there is. Several years ago, a man by the name of Guillaume Henri traveled in search of the temple we are seeking. He returned from his voyage much the worse for wear, poor man, but he brought back a journal with him, which document we feel will be invaluable to us when we arrive at Tipu.

"This journal is generally assumed to have been destroyed when Henri was killed in Valencia by the Inquisition, but we believe it to be right here in Isla Oestelago, in the possession of a Frenchman named Frédéric Blossier."

Unable to contain his concern, de Torre cast his eyes sideways at Calavera.

But the Lieutenant hadn't heard; he'd stopped walking a few paces back.

And he was smiling.

Widely.

"Gentlemen."

Corvus and Dorado also stopped walking.

The three Guardsmen faced their Lieutenant.

"I believe we are ready to proceed."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back to the Author's Notes. Today we are going to discuss Sean Benton.

I needed for Coléreaux to have a victory. He'd failed in his objective in the tunnels, and I knew he was going to be defeated when Calavera went looking for Sierra's family - but he's the main bad guy. I can't have him be too wimpy; he's got to be a threat. He needed a victory, one that would have impact.
So I decided he had to kill a Guardsman. And strut about it.

Maybe, if I'd known at the time that he was going to leverage de Torre's poisoning to force Calavera to let him go, I would have decided that was enough. But maybe not, either.

Also I wanted to kill someone using an ingenious death trap because even though Calavera is able to defeat most of them, they are a big deal.

I knew who the four men on the mission were going to be. (Have you noticed I never use the word mission in the story? I never use the word mission. Even though it's period.) So I thought it would be interesting to see what would happen if five men rode to rescue the Sierras.

Sean Benton was created for the purpose of being killed.

I gave him a physical description because almost nobody had received one yet. (Only Calavera, Dorado, and Coléreaux, if I am not mistaken.) I wanted to make him seem, to meta-readers, like he was going to be important. (He is, but you know what I mean.) Once I'd decided on the hair thing, I kinda ran with the opportunities it opened for me.

I made him likable. I never wanted him to be just the cardboard cutout plot device, like a cop's partner/wife/friend, who dies in the second reel of a bad crime movie. I wanted people to care about him, so they'd care about his death as much as my characters.

The whole thing about Dorado not calling him by his first name? That's because I was having the devil of a time remembering to do it, so rather than fight my instincts I used it. If certain readers wanted to speculate about that, well... all to the good as far as I'm concerned.

Benton's first name comes from two sources combined into one: Sean Bean. First, because he played Bernard Cornwell's Richard Sharpe in the BBC productions, and if there is a better English-language swashbuckling series in the last... er, whenever - I insist that you tell me what it is.

Also I named him after Sean Bean because of that whole joke that Bean dies in everything. So this was jokey foreshadowing.

And I came to deeply regret it. I had one more Guardsman than the assignment called for, and one of these was named after a guy famous for always dying, plus his most prominent area of expertise would be useless in the jungle!

I was sure people would figure it out. It haunted me for chapter after chapter. I am never, ever meta-foreshadowing in a name again. Not here, maybe nowhere else. Ever.

So why did I make him a horseman? Because I wanted to dedicate something to the RCMP, and to Due South. Benton's last name comes from Constable Benton Fraser of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Like I said in an earlier note, I just couldn't bring myself to call the bad guys in this story Horsemen, even though it is more historically accurate. Due South, while broad and parodic, nevertheless presents a vision of the RCMP as a symbol in which all Canadians can be proud, much like Michael Slade does.
Raid On The Post Building

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH the Guardsmen make tar stains useful, shattered clay beneficial, and rejected horseshoes practical.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**DORADO** aimed his crossbow down the tunnel, and pressed the trigger.

His bolt slammed into the barrel, right beside the other two.

"Perfect."

Having now adjusted the weapon to his satisfaction, he placed the crossbow carefully on top of another barrel and moved to the table, where Corvus was hammering thin nails into curved shapes, inspecting them carefully, and then rasping them.

"What are you making?"

"A rudimentary set of keys."

"What happened to your usual set?"

"I don't carry them with me, most of the time."

"Ah. So when our possessions were seized, they were as well."

Corvus shrugged, then smiled. "It has turned out for the best. Creating these has given me an excellent opportunity to refine my skills."

"Yes. I'm in a similar position."

He picked up the first pulley from the floor and placed it on the table, then inspected one of his crossbow bolts.

*****

"Are you certain you need nothing further from me?"

Calavera briefly considered asking Portero to watch the Five Stars and report on their actions, but he decided against it, primarily as a matter of morality. He considered it improper to encourage Portero to work against his friends' interests, particularly since the Spaniard would have been unaware he was doing so. Further, Portero's motives were not identical to those of the Guardsmen.
Therefore he said, "Not for the moment. But should you hear anything that ought to be brought to our attention, you know where to find us."

Calavera held out his hand. Portero took it. The Lieutenant clapped his other hand on top of them both, and looked the musician in the eye.

"You have helped us a great deal. The entire nation of Esperanza is in your debt."

Portero bowed his head in thanks, perhaps even in humility. But when he looked up again at Calavera, his mischievous smile had returned.

"You are most welcome. The best way you can repay me for my assistance is to ensure that nobody else hears of it, at least until I am far away from Spain."

Calavera smiled back. "Should your travels ever take you to our country, you can expect to be received like a hero."

Portero's eyes grew wide. "Oh, I very much like the sound of that!"

"I rather thought you might."

****

The blacksmith lifted the heavy, bulging sack, and dropped it onto the table.

"How many did you say you needed?"

"I didn't specify a number," said de Torre. He removed from his belt four small drawstring bags and placed them on the table. "I need as many as will fit into these bags."

The blacksmith reached inside the sack he'd lifted.

"Very well. Hold them open and I'll fill them."

de Torre waved his hand to dismiss the man. "No, you may return to your forge. I must inspect every ball before I choose it, and there is no sense in you standing idly by while I do this."

"You need to inspect them? But I assure you - "

de Torre lifted his hand again, and frowned at the blacksmith. "These balls are intended for a shooting competition among the very finest of us. I have no doubt that your ammunition is made to the highest standard, but in this instance I'm sure you will understand that I can accept nothing less than perfection."

de Torre lowered his hand, and placed his thumb inside his belt. His fingers started drumming lightly upon the white sash he was wearing.

The blacksmith noted the gesture. He understood.

"You have no objection to this, I trust."

"Of course not," said the blacksmith, retreating to his forge. "I will leave you to it."
de Torre allowed him to depart without another word; he was already ashamed of how much he'd debased the man without adding anything further.

He reached into the sack of ammunition on the table, extracted one ball, and rolled it carefully in his fingers. Satisfied, he opened one of the drawstring bags and placed the ball inside.

It did not take up much space: He was going to be here for quite a while.

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There were two banks in Isla Oestelago. The older and wealthier of the two had a second entrance, on the side of the building, which was kept locked.

Corvus walked up to it and inserted one of his nails into the lock. He felt around for a few moments, found the notch he wanted, and then inserted another nail.

It was a very good mechanism.

Corvus counted all the way to fifty-three before he unlocked it.

He'd put the nails back in their pouch on his belt, and was about to push the door open, when he noticed that a young couple across the street had stopped to watch what he was doing.

From the looks on their faces, they were not going to believe he was an agent of the bank.

He walked over to them anyway, a deep frown on his face. They stiffened as he drew near, but he spoke before they could.

"Disgraceful! Did you see how easily I defeated that lock?"

They both nodded, unsure what to say.

"Do you have any of your precious possessions in this bank?"

They shook their heads.

"Good for you! Clearly, their security precautions cannot be trusted. And that is precisely what I am going to tell them when I walk in and terminate our relationship!"

He strode back across the street and entered through the side door without once looking back at them.

The door opened onto a narrow, empty corridor. Along the right side were several doors. The second of these was locked.

This time Corvus only counted thirty-four before unlocking it.

He and his tools were ready.
After saying his goodbyes to Portero, Calavera returned to the waterfront, always carefully watching the patrolling Doves in case they recognised him.

He walked along the harbour road until he arrived at the corner where earlier that morning he'd been introduced to Helios Silvestros. Then he walked up the alleyway and rounded a corner, following the path which had led them the night before to the Black Curtain.

At the place where they'd entered, there was no longer any covering, nor was there even an opening. There was only flat stone wall.

Calavera pressed on it. It seemed perfectly solid.

"Yes," he said to himself, and anyone who might somehow be listening. "That is precisely what I expected."

*****

The building on the harbour road which served as a prison for those awaiting transfer to Fortaleza Tormentaña was also, owing to its many rooms with locks set into the doors, the post building, where any mail coming into Isla Oestelago from other parts of the Holy Roman Empire was stored before the letters were distributed to their proper destinations. The building was three stories tall, but only the bottom floor was used to hold prisoners and the post; the other two contained offices for administrators and record-keepers.

All of this information Corvus learned from the dock workers, while he helped carry their loads.

After this, he removed a small pot of tar from concealment, then boarded a recent arrival and went over to the mail sacks, which, not being perishable, would be unloaded last. With a coarse brush, he spread a layer of tar around the sacks, making sure that the workers would not be able to avoid stepping on it.

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"You need how much?" said the salesman, astonished.

"Just please fill this as high as you can," Calavera said with an innocent smile.

*****

At long last, de Torre was finished stuffing his four bags. As he tied the final drawstring, the blacksmith set his tongs down and walked over.
"Will that be all, Sir?"

"One more thing. Do you perchance have, somewhere, any horseshoes which for one reason or another you cannot sell as such?"

"Why, yes! In that corner I have several such shoes, along with other rejected items, simply waiting for their chance to be fashioned into something useful! Are you and your comrades intending to follow the shooting competition with a nice game of Quoits?"

"Precisely," said de Torre, who'd never heard of the game.

*****

Dorado aimed, and fired the third of his new bolts into the barrel. He was satisfied with where it landed. Placing the crossbow carefully down, he pulled on the rope beside him. Again he was satisfied. He placed the fourth new bolt beside the crossbow. Just then, Corvus returned from the dock, with his pot of tar. Not five minutes later, de Torre also returned, carrying over his shoulder a sack which the blacksmith had given him to carry his purchases.

Calavera arrived right behind him, with a bulging bag of groceries. Dorado and Corvus cleared the table, Calavera placed the food onto it, and all four Guardsmen ate hungrily. Then they lay down on their blankets to rest themselves. There was nothing more to do until the evening.

*****

Night fell, and as soon as the post building was in full darkness eight men carried a tall ladder quietly up to the side of it. Six men climbed onto the roof, and lay down so as not to be seen by anyone on the street three stories below. The two remaining men removed the ladder to several blocks away, then returned to the post building. They silently greeted the two guards posted outside, and entered, closing the door behind them.

It was by no means comfortable lying as flat as possible on the stone roof of the post building, but those Doves so tasked were determined to do their duty. They shifted themselves into more comfortable positions only when absolutely necessary, and talked not at all, even going so far as to swallow down painfully any coughs which might rise in their throats.
Only one man was permitted to speak. The rest all listened carefully, for when he did speak, that would be their call to action.

One hour passed. It was a clear night, and for this the Doves were grateful. But it was also cold, and the stone upon which they lay brought a chill to their bodies. Still, this was preferable to rain.

A second hour passed. One man's breathing became audible, heavy and regular. One of his fellows kicked him awake.

A third hour passed. The men were shifting their bodies more frequently. Their Sergeant whispered, quietly but sternly, that he did not want to hear any more sound, at all, for at least the next hour.

Just before the end of that hour, all six men heard a soft whip-like noise, followed by a rush of air, abruptly cut short by a hard sound, like that of an ax digging into wood, very near their position.

Their Major had anticipated this might happen, and this was why he'd ordered them onto the roof this night: The Emerald Guardsmen were attacking the post building, intent upon retrieving their possessions! They had just fired a crossbow bolt into one of the wooden beams that supported the roof. From the location of the sound, it had struck directly above one of the windows on the third floor.

Next the guards heard movement. If they concentrated, it sounded like a well-oiled pulley - the Guardsmen were pulling themselves toward the window!

The Doves placed their hands on their swords, eager to hear their Sergeant's command shatter the silence of the night.

Something heavy hit the beam - the first Guardsman had arrived!

"Doves! To the East!"

The six men on the roof rose and drew their swords. Crying out in defiance of their enemies, they ran toward the place where they'd heard the sounds.

Downstairs the door to the post building opened, and another six Doves rushed out into the night, these with drawn pistols. They turned immediately to their left and hurried to the Eastern wall of the building.

All twelve men converged upon the spot at the same time.

To discover, lodged into the beam above the window, a crossbow bolt with a pulley attached to it, from which trailed a thick, taut cord.

And at the top of that cord was a flour sack.

They did not see the long, thin string trailing from the bottom of the sack, leading to where Corvus was crouched behind a stack of coiled rope. Corvus pulled on the string, untying the bottom of the sack and releasing from it a large clay pot.

Somebody saw the pot falling, and shouted. The Doves standing beneath it jumped out of the way, but when the pot hit the street it shattered, diffusing its contents - olive oil - all over the cobblestones.
Next to the post building, facing its East wall, was a store house. Before the men in the street between the two edifices could fully adjust to their new circumstances, Dorado emerged from the shadows of the store house and ran for the post building, in full view of the Doves. Two of them reacted quickly enough to aim their pistols at Dorado, but when they tried to brace their legs and fire they slipped in the oil. One man fell upon his back, but had the presence of mind to remove his finger from the trigger as he fell. The other managed to regain his balance, but was not as mindful of his pistol, which shot the hat off the comrade beside him.

From his position on top of the roof, the Sergeant saw Corvus hurry out of hiding to catch up with Dorado.

"The front door! Hurry!"

He moved to the modified crossbow bolt, crouched down, and grabbed the rope, intending to use it to lower himself to the ground.

But just as he shifted the weight of his body off of the roof, he realised the rope had been coated with some kind of thick grease - he couldn't get a grip on it!

Falling, he twisted his body in mid-air, and managed to grab the edge of the roof, but immediately his greasy hands began slipping. Two of his men saw this in time and caught his arms just before he dropped.

Meanwhile, the four remaining Doves inside the post building were standing in the receiving area, holding their muskets aimed at the open door, ready to fire at anything which might appear in the entrance.

Accordingly, when they saw the shirt come into view, two of the Doves put their musket balls right through it.

The other two caught themselves, for they'd realised in time that the shirt was empty.

Standing to the side of the doorway, behind Calavera, who was holding the empty shirt aloft by means of a broom handle through the arms, de Torre said,

"I've often wondered how you came to have a hole through your Tunic."

Calavera dropped the handle and drew his pistol.

On the other side of the entrance, crouching very low, Dorado peeked his head around the door and then quickly withdrew it.

The other two muskets fired, one ball hitting the wall beside the door and the other striking the ground precisely where Dorado had been a moment before.

"There's only four of them," he said.

Since they'd been counting the number of shots, the Guardsmen knew the Doves' muskets were empty. They entered the post building quickly, and pointed their pistols at the Spaniards.

The three Doves who had been reloading released their muskets and ramrods immediately and put their hands up, but the fourth had been drawing his pistol. When he found himself looking down the opening of de Torre's barrel he stopped dead in mid-gesture.

de Torre winked at the Dove.
He dropped his pistol, and raised his hands in surrender.

Meanwhile Corvus closed the heavy door and dropped the thick wooden bar across it.

A moment later, on the other side of the door, heavy fists pounded upon it, fruitlessly.

The Doves outside knew how thick the bar was. Already someone was calling for a battering ram.

Calavera and Dorado set to binding the Doves' wrists and ankles while de Torre and Corvus ran past the staircase at the back of the room and deeper into the building.

Behind the receiving area was a long corridor, with five doors along each wall.

Four of the ten doors were open, with nothing inside. People on the opposite side of two of the other doors started banging upon them, obviously prisoners demanding to know what was happening. Two of the remaining doors had tar in front of them; these would be the rooms where Corvus' recent acquaintances had placed the mail sacks.

That left two closed doors behind which their possessions might be stored.

Corvus began picking the lock on the one further from the front door. He opened it just as Calavera and Dorado arrived.

The room was empty, except for one corner.

Where their Tunics lay upon their bags.

A large boom sounded from the door: A ram had been located, and was being put to use.

The Guardsmen hurried into the room and picked up their Tunics, each man looking for his own.

"That's mine," de Torre said to Calavera. "I recognise the blood."

The Lieutenant held the Tunic out to him, but paused for a moment before releasing it, so he could look into de Torre's eyes.

Although the young man had been speaking of Benton's blood, and therefore his friend's death, he was not allowing unpleasant memories to overcome him.

This was most reassuring to the Lieutenant: His newest Guardsman was becoming a true soldier.

Dorado gave Calavera the Tunic with the hole in it, and de Torre gave Dorado the Tunic with the faint scorch marks on the back. Corvus had selected his own Tunic from the pile.

The ram hit the door again, and this time the boom was accompanied by a dry cracking. The door was on the verge of breaking.

"Gentlemen, put your Tunics on."

The Guardsmen draped their garments over their heads and onto their shoulders, each man reciting something softly to himself as he did so.

Then they gave their bags to Dorado, and whatever he could not carry was accepted by de
"Ready?"

The other three Guardsmen nodded to their Lieutenant.

He nodded back, his face the very picture of pride.

"Then let's be on our way. For God, Esperanza, and Saint Rafael."

"God, Esperanza, and Saint Rafael!"

de Torre went first, followed by Dorado, while Calavera and Corvus undid the drawstrings on the bags de Torre had filled earlier in the day. Then they hurried after their comrades.

de Torre was mounting the stairs, Dorado close behind him, when the ram hit the door one last time and smashed it to pieces. Doves pushed their way through the remains, immediately moving off to the side so their fellows could follow.

Standing at the foot of the stairs, Calavera and Corvus, an open bag in each of their four hands, swept their arms forward.

Hundreds of munition balls spilled onto the floor and rolled toward the Doves.

The first man to step on one lost his balance and stumbled into the man nearest him, who tried to regain his footing but instead landed on another ball, which rolled beneath his weight and caused him to fall even faster. He dragged his companion to the floor with him.

Around them, other Doves also started to stagger and fall.

Calavera and Corvus did not stay to watch the spectacle, but ran up the stairs as fast as they could. Several shots were fired, most of them unintentionally, but none of them struck anywhere near the Guardsmen. In a moment they were on the second floor, following de Torre and Dorado up the stairs to the third.

This was the section of their plan in which something was most likely to go wrong, owing to three questions they’d been unable to answer in advance.

When he arrived at the top of the stairs, de Torre ran straight for a specific room, only to find that the door was shut.

He dropped his burden and tried the door.

It was unlocked!

And thus was the first question resolved in their favour. The four Guardsmen entered the office, and while Corvus locked the door, the others looked to the window.

The rope was still there, and still taut. None of the Doves had thought to cut it down or untie it at the base, believing the slippery line to be of no further use.

That was the preferred answer to the second question.

Each man claimed his own bags and slung them over his shoulders as best he could. Then they readied their horseshoes.
Corvus went first, of course. He leaned out the window and hung his horseshoe over the rope. Gripping one end tightly in each hand, he leapt out the window, and the horseshoe slid down the greased cord, carrying him safely to the bottom.

None of the Doves on the roof saw him do this; they'd gone to a different side of the building. They were trying to figure out a way down, and they didn't wish to add the oil on the East side to their difficulties.

And thus did the third question also resolve itself in the Guardsmen's favour.

de Torre went next.

While they watched him slide away, Calavera and Dorado heard Doves outside their room, trying to determine where the Guardsmen had gone.

Dorado was third down the rope, which sagged significantly under his weight, but held. Calavera stuck his head out the window and looked up at the crossbow bolt.

It was dug in deeper than he'd expected. In addition to modifying the metal of the head so the bolt would hold better, Dorado must have also tightened the crossbow itself. Calavera doubted if any of them but Dorado would have had the strength to pull the string back all the way to arm it.

Just then, one of the Doves outside in the corridor realised that the Guardsmen must be using the rope to exit the building. He shouted that some of them should hurry back down the stairs and outside to the East wall.

Calavera took this as his cue to exit. He placed his horseshoe over the rope, clutched both ends tightly, climed out of the window, and pushed against the wall with his legs to make him descend faster.

Behind him he heard the Doves on the roof running to his position.

By the time they arrived, he'd already traversed the olive oil and landed nimbly on the opposite side. To the Doves on the roof, he was hidden in shadow.

One of the Doves running out of the post building saw Calavera go into the neighbouring store house.

Eight Doves entered quickly behind him, pistols at the ready.

Calavera was not there.

They searched every corner of the store house, twice.

The Guardsman had disappeared.
Yes, the prison is also the post office. That is my dedication to Mike Post. If readers of a certain age didn't hear the music for The A-Team during the first half of this chapter, I haven't done my job. Post helped define how I view soundtrack music, and he helped define 80s adventure television. His music is simply classic.

Speaking of music: Miguel Portero - a musician, you will recall - is my dedication to composers Michael Giacchino and Brian Tyler. Miguel is Spanish for Michael, and portero means porter, for which tyler is an exact synonym. Giacchino's music for Lost, which I've played occasionally so far, is going to get played a lot once we (finally) get to New Spain, and his score for John Carter (my favourite score) accompanies the writing of the Guardsmen on average every three weeks. Honourable mentions go to Tomorrowland, (huge and noble!), Jurassic World (jungle adventure!), etc. I have mentioned The Expendables elsewhere, and Tyler's music is a huge part of what makes those movies great. So his scores for those three films, as well as The Avengers: Age Of Ultron, also get a tonne of play.

But none of that really tells you much, does it? Just that I dig them. So let's go a bit deeper: Giacchino's music is gorgeous: soaring adventuresome nobility. Tyler's is exciting: rough experienced men getting the job done. Combine those two things, and you get my Guardsmen.

However, neither of these men wrote the score which kickstarted this story. "Then who did?" you may ask. The answer to this question... next week!
The Monster Of Fortaleza Tormentaña

Chapter Summary

*IN WHICH Portero reveals a terrible secret, eliciting de Torre's sympathy, and tells a deliberate lie, leaving de Torre to discover the truth of it.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"DISAPPEARED? A man cannot simply disappear!"

Pescador snapped his fingers. There was a rustling.

And then a tinkling sound, and a second, a third, fourth.

Replaced by rolling, which stopped abruptly.

And a few moments later, an ammunition ball tinkled on the stone floor scant inches from Dorado's feet.

He stepped away from the grate above him.

"You see?" Pescador said, in the room above, a meeting-room in the Doves' barracks. "A drain grate. Was there such a grate in the floor of the store house?"

After the briefest pause, one of the Major's men answered, softly:

"There was."

"They're hiding in the aqueducts beneath the city."

"But - " said one man, before he could stop himself.

"You thought the stories of those aqueducts were mere fables, fanciful tales to entertain the imagination. Of course. But I've always known them to be true. And it never occurred to me the Esperanzans might hide within them, when of course those tunnels would be ideal. The shame of failure for this is entirely my own."

Pescador took a deep breath.

"You four, take half the men in these barracks and return to the post building. Leaving only two men on guard there, every other man present is to go to the store house. You'll certainly discover that the mortar around the grate has been carved away, and all the bars, plus the stones that hold them in place, can be lifted easily as one unit. The aqueducts are big enough for a man to walk through without stooping. Search those tunnels, and when the path branches, leave two men behind to sound the alarm should the Esperanzans attempt to get behind you, and split the rest evenly in order to search *every possible avenue* within that underground system. Flush them up, like pheasants for the shooting. Go."
Four pairs of boots hurriedly stomped away.

"You four. Rouse our allies, and inform them that their Brothers in Christ need their assistance in bringing to justice four spies and thieves, dangerous men who are the enemies not only of our two great nations but His Holiness and the One True Church. Give them yellow sashes, and describe the Guardsmen to them. Tell them to join the search - within the hour I want teams of eight men, four Doves and four of our allies, patrolling every street and alleyway in Isla Oestelago, and stopping every person they see, even those dressed as women, to inspect their faces under lamplight. Go."

Four more pairs of boots hurriedly exited the room above Dorado.

"You two. Sound the bells, engage some criers, and spread the word throughout the city. From this moment until I announce otherwise, by the power invested in me by the Duke of Isla Oestelago himself, I declare it illegal to walk the streets of this city, and any person found breaking this law is subject to immediate arrest. For the first hour, assume that any people you discover out of doors have not yet heard the decree. Take their names and insist that they return to their homes immediately. Once the hour has passed, there is to be no more leniency: Any person occupying the streets is to be arrested under suspicion of assisting these Esperanzan spies, and will not be released until we have determined their innocence - a process which will not even begin until after this current crisis has been resolved. Do you have any questions? Go."

Before these latest Doves even had a chance to begin moving, Pescador was issuing more orders.

"Sergeant, I have a list in my office of every lodging-house in the city. I want the face of every boarder in every room examined - again, with no exception. These men are not above posing as women to fool us. Any lodger claiming exemption on the basis of nobility or clergy is to be ignored - you will be acting under my unambiguous and immutable orders, and should you commit any legitimate transgression under these orders, I alone will bear the entire responsibility for it. Once a lodging-house has been fully inspected, leave a man posted at every entrance, allowing no entry nor exit. Do the same for every empty building and every ruin - I have lists of those as well. Our enemies must have nowhere to hide. Take with you every last man in this barracks who is not currently on guard and does not ride a horse. I will divide the horsemen into small groups, and we will ride through the city, offering swift assistance wherever necessary. Do you have any questions?"

Dorado did not wait to hear the answer; he'd already heard everything he needed to know. He turned and hurried down the tunnel as quickly as he could, lighting his lantern only after rounding a corner, and then running as fast as his long legs could take him.

When he arrived at the location in the aqueducts where the four Guardsmen had planned and prepared for their assault upon the post building, and where the others were now waiting for him, he did not waste any time with greetings.

"Pescador knows we're in the tunnels. He's ordered his men to search every inch of them. He made mention of certain allies, Catholics from another country, who he's conscripting to assist in patrolling the city. Every person found in the streets over the next hour is going to be scrutinised, and once that hour has passed they're going to be arrested. Also, he's ordered the complete inspection and guarding of every lodging-house: We can't return to the old woman."

"That leaves us only Portero," said Calavera, handing Dorado's bags to him. He turned to Corvus and de Torre. "Are you both finished packing?"
"Of course," Corvus said.

"Besides," said de Torre as he adjusted his bag on his shoulder, "Lanza's report contained sufficient grim tidings that we had time to load a dozen mules before he was finished relaying all of them."

"I think four mules is enough for now. Let's be on our way."

And they moved off through the tunnels as quickly as they could, in the direction of Miguel Portero's home, leaving behind, for Pescador's men to find, only four blankets, a table, and two barrels with crossbow bolts protruding from them.

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"I can hear you."

The shuffling, which had woken him up, suddenly stopped.

"I'm a musician: I have excellent hearing."

One of the four men whose arrival had roused Portero lit a lantern, and the room was suddenly bathed in a bright, warm light - which Dorado immediately dampened as low as it could go.

"We apologise for this intrusion," said Calavera, "but we had little choice."

"I've been shaken from my slumber tonight by both the ringing of alarm bells, and the announcements of criers," Portero told him. "In light of the urgent messages they were conveying, your arrival shortly thereafter does not come as much of a surprise. Martín Pescador is a damnably clever adversary."

He turned to Corvus.

"The lock on my door was built by the finest locksmith I could find, yet you defeated it in thirty seconds."

"Twenty, in fact. But you need not feel you were deceived. It is an excellent lock; I am simply very skilled."

Portero turned back to Calavera.

"If he has not found you by sunrise, Pescador will order a complete search of every building in this city."

"I know."

"Do you have a plan, then?"

"Of course."

"Of course."
"We're going to Fortaleza Tormentaña immediately."

Portero's smirk disappeared.

"Well. I imagine Pescador won't be expecting *that*. I certainly wasn't."

Dorado took two large scrolls out of his bag and began unrolling them on Portero's table while Calavera explained.

"There is nowhere in this city we can hide, and Pescador does not yet know why we are here - although he may send extra men to the island as a precaution. Therefore the best way to evade him is simply to not be present for him to find. The only question remaining for us is how to get to the island."

He directed Portero's attention to Dorado's scrolls.

They were maps, one of the city and one of the aqueduct system. Dorado placed the former on top of the latter and held them up in front of the lantern. The light shone through both, revealing where the tunnels coursed beneath the city.

"As you can see," said Calavera, "we've explored the aqueducts thoroughly, with the exception of one area along the waterfront. This black mark," he pointed to it, "indicates where the tunnel has been blocked by a collapse. That's why the map is incomplete: We were unable, obviously, to enter this area using the underground system, and above the ground we were unsuccessful in finding another way in."

Portero could see the problem immediately. From their conversation the previous morning, he'd deduced that Calavera hoped to travel to Fortaleza Tormentaña via aqueduct, on foot and unseen, rather than risk a much more exposed crossing in a boat. However, the uncharted portion of the tunnel system lay beneath the part of Isla Oestelago's waterfront closest to their destination: If there did in fact exist a tunnel which connected the island to the mainland, it would begin there.

"Do you know of any building in that area which might have a grate in the floor?"

Portero took a deep breath, and stared at the maps without seeing them. Whatever he might be thinking, he was clearly trying to conceal it from the Guardsmen - and succeeding. He took another deep breath, and used it to answer the question.

"There is a workshop." He pointed to where it was located. "The original building was a granary, but that burned down several years ago, whereupon the lot was purchased by a woodcarver, who built the shop specifically to suit... his needs."

Portero now turned and looked Calavera directly in the eye.

"That woodcarver is a very dear friend of mine. No harm must come to him or his works."

"You have our word," said Calavera. He was displeased that he'd been asked to give it, even by implication, but he decided to ignore the minor slight in view of Portero's obvious discomfort. Perhaps the musician felt that somehow he was betraying his friend, or perhaps he was afraid of endangering him. For whatever reason, it was clear that Portero had grave misgivings about the information he was sharing, so Calavera was disposed to be charitable.

"We are grateful for your exceptional and persistent efforts on our behalf. Is there any way we might be able to repay your generosity?"
To Calavera's surprise, Portero's face became even more grave.

"Since you've made the offer, there is something I would ask of you. The warden of Fortaleza Tormentañá is named Daniel Cortés. He is an evil creature of exceptional cruelty. No man, however abhorrent his crimes, deserves to be treated the way Cortés treats his prisoners: He tortures them for his own pleasure."

Portero gave the Guardsmen a moment to consider this, then he made his request:

"The sun will shine more brightly upon the Earth the day this vile creature is removed from the face of it."

Calavera took his time before answering.

"If what you say is true - and certainly you have never given me cause to doubt you - then I am in sympathy with your desire to rid the world of this wretch. But, and I say this with profound regret, we must deny your request. The Emerald Guard are not assassins, and we cannot comport ourselves as such."

Portero nodded. "I understand, and your decision comes as no surprise. That is why I have not made the request before now, and why I only did so in response to your offer. I did not intend to give offense, and I hope none was taken.

"I only have one last thing to say on the subject."

He took a step away from the table, turned his back to the Guardsmen, and removed his shirt.

On the left side of his body, from his elbow to his shoulder, and on the upper portion of his back, shone brightly, despite the dim light, several long, wide, and very deep scars.

Portero put his shirt back on before turning around again.

"On the third day of my incarceration in Fortaleza Tormentañá, Daniel Cortés came into my cell with two men. Those men held me motionless on the floor while the warden grabbed my left wrist and pulled, stretching my arm as though it were on the rack. He taunted me, delighting in my screams of pain, and did not stop pulling until he heard my arm snap out of joint. Then he and his dogs left me lying on the cold stone floor, alone in darkness, and unable to do anything but writhe in agony and weep.

"When I again had the strength to move, I tore strips from my shirt and bound my arm as best I could. I spent the remainder of my sentence - six months, less three days - with my arm in such pain that I was half delirious and barely had the strength to feed myself. Upon my release, the first thing I did was find the best physician I knew. As I expected, he had to break and re-set the arm, and the news, of course, was grave: Six months of neglect had severely harmed my nerves and tendons. He performed what surgery he could to repair the damage, and succeeded to some extent in preserving the use of my arm. But Miguel Portero, known throughout Isla Oestelago as a singer and as a musician, emerged from his imprisonment in Fortaleza Tormentañá unable to play the guitar ever again, for the rest of his life. Daniel Cortés took that from me, and for no better reason than his own amusement."

A smothering silence fell upon those assembled. From time to time one of the Guardsmen would feel he'd been averting his gaze for too long, and would look at Portero, but then the performer would catch his eye and the Guardsman would look away again. All four of them knew
that this was the first time Portero had ever told of his injury, had ever revealed his scars to anyone. And he might never do so again.

de Torre was the first to find something to say.

"Is Cortés a proud man?" His voice came out slightly hoarse.

Portero was puzzled by the question, but the answer was easy enough.

"I only had the honour of his company on that one memorable occasion, but I would describe him as having that type of vanity which all petty and cruel men possess."

"Good," said de Torre softly, his voice now fully under his control. "For as the Lieutenant said, we are not assassins, but a man such as you've described is generally quick to take offence, and likely to attack his provoker. Further, such a vain man will probably become so enraged he leaves his adversary no other choice, in his own defence, but to take the other man's life."

Portero's eyes began to cloud.

de Torre looked to his Lieutenant.

Calavera did not make any movement that the young man could perceive, but somehow he conveyed the impression he was nodding his agreement.

de Torre turned to the other two Guardsmen.

Corvus shrugged, indicating that to him this seemed perfectly reasonable.

Dorado made no movement at all, except for his thin lips, which curved upward ever so slightly. And his eyes glittered.

Portero at last replied, and his voice was rougher than de Torre's had been.

"If such a vain man were to die as a result of his failing, there would be no one to blame but himself."

The room became still once again. Calavera let the silence linger long enough to put an end to the topic, then he took back control of the discussion.

"None of this matters if we never arrive at Fortaleza Tormentaña. The longer we tarry, the more time we give our enemies to tighten their net around us. I am particularly discomfited by this talk of 'allies'. We no longer know precisely who our enemies are, nor do we know their numbers and the extent of their skills. For this reason, each of us will proceed to the workshop alone: An individual is less likely to be noticed than a group, and if one or more of us is caught, the others might still get to the island and rescue Santiago. Gather around the map."

They did, and Calavera quickly showed each of his Guardsmen the route he was to take to the workshop.

de Torre had the shortest course. "Since you will get there first," Corvus said to him, "you will need these."

He held out his keys.

"Turo, I cannot possibly accept - these are yours."
”Then you must be sure to give them back once you are done with them.”

de Torre accepted the inevitable, as well as Corvus’ keys.

Calavera clapped the young man on the back and directed him toward the door.

”Go now - “

And de Torre had by this time become familiar enough with his Lieutenant’s cadences that he was able to say along with him, as were Corvus and Dorado:

”For God, Esperanza, and Saint Rafael.”

And then the door was open, and de Torre was outside, running through the streets of Isla Oestelago.

He stayed in the shadows as best he could, and ran using only his toes and the pads of his feet. It was uncomfortable, but it enabled him to move swiftly and mostly silently.

The patrolling Doves were making no attempt at all to remain quiet. de Torre heard a group of them approaching, and had enough time to hide himself behind a rain barrel before they rounded the corner.

He saw the light change; one of the Doves was raising his torch.

Would they look behind the barrel, just to be certain?

de Torre bent his neck and looked upward. He was beside a house, and the eave was close enough for him to reach, if he stood on the barrel.

Would he have time to pull himself onto the roof before they saw him?

Their voices grew louder - they were too close.

de Torre sat down on the road, with his legs crossed in front of him, and bent his body forward, making himself as low and as small as he could.

Should they discover him, he would be unable to defend himself, or to escape.

But there were enough of them that neither resisting nor running away would make any difference.

The men were upon him, just on the other side of the rain barrel.

He crouched lower.

There were six men at least. Their voices and footsteps seemed very loud to him.

And then, after a few moments, the sounds started getting quieter.

de Torre waited, and waited, until the sounds had almost completely faded away. Only then did he peer around the barrel.

There were eight of them, four with white sashes and four with yellow.

And they were walking away, looking only ahead and to the side, never behind.
Nevertheless, de Torre waited until they'd rounded another corner, and he'd counted to ten, before he stood up.

He quickly shook the stiffness out of his legs, then began running again, slightly slower and more quietly than before, but listening more attentively.

And before he knew it, he found himself in front of the workshop door.

He'd arrived. He could hardly believe it.

The keyhole in the door seemed remarkably small. He removed Corvus' keys from his pocket and tried the littlest one.

It went in, but he couldn't turn it.

The second one he tried wouldn't fit inside the lock at all.

de Torre didn't know what to do, then - Corvus' keys were not going to work! Helpless, he simply stared at them, silently entreating the otherwise useless objects to give him some inspiration.

And then he noticed a key which might have been smaller than the second one he'd tried. He inserted it in the keyhole - and it turned!

de Torre unlocked the door, pushed it open, and closed it behind himself as quickly as he could, before any approaching Doves - or their allies - could notice it was open.

In the darkness he listened.

There was no shouting from outside.

The only sound within was the thudding of his heart.

Only then did it occur to him that Portero had not mentioned where in the workshop the aqueduct grate was located. de Torre would have to find it, in the darkness, on his own. He dropped to his knees and began crawling forward, running his hands over the floor to try and perceive a slope. Would the grate be in the centre, or against a wall? While he and his comrades had been making their maps, they'd encountered both.

de Torre moved very slowly. In the brief instant the door had been open, the light from outside had revealed many shadowy objects, and he did not want to bump into any of them now, for numerous reasons. His eyes were adjusting to the darkness; he was beginning to make out some shapes in the room.

A flint was struck behind him, and a moment later lamplight filled the workshop.

He tried to look over his shoulder, to see who was there, but he couldn't twist his neck far enough.

"Turn around, slowly."

When speaking of his friend the woodcarver, Portero had used the words 'him' and 'his'. But those pronouns and this voice did not have the same gender.

de Torre did as instructed, and discovered that upon entering he'd failed to notice in the
darkness a cot beside the door, placed right up against the wall, with a woman on it, who presumably had been asleep before he'd intruded.

She was not dressed for bed, however, but in the shirt, trousers, and even the boots one would expect a craftsman to wear while engaged in his profession. In fact, upon closer inspection de Torre could see wood dust on her sleeves, legs, and feet, as well as one long, curled shaving stuck in her hair.

The hair itself was black, long and straight, and although suffused with dust it was still lustrous. Through her narrowed lids her eyes also reflected the lamplight, and they were of a deep, dark brown. In those eyes de Torre could read suspicion but no fear, as well as a fierce intelligence, and the playful yet intense curiosity of a child. Although she was frowning at the moment, her cheeks were high and full. On the apex of her left cheek was a thin but bright scar, such as one might receive if one were carving intently with a very sharp knife and it suddenly slipped. Some might call the mark an imperfection, but to the young Guardsman it suited the rest of her face and her demeanour perfectly.

She was the most beautiful woman de Torre had ever seen.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter edited Nov. 16 to capitalise one word, in accordance with my personal style guidelines.

Last week there was no chapter, due to illness. Part of the problem there is that although the minimum chapter length is 1800 words, in the execution the chapters have come out much much longer, averaging 2800+ words in length - which obviously means a lot more time in the writing and the editing. I am hoping to start making the chapters shorter, so this is your warning to stop expecting what you've been getting. On the other hand, this chapter turned out to be 2.2 times longer than my estimate, so what the hell do I know? Obviously this is a work in progress - which is one of the reasons I love serials. Let us embrace the uncertainty, for I have left myself no choice!

Huge thanks go out to Jo (http://archiveofourown.org/users/jmathieson/pseuds/Jo) this chapter. Her advice and insight led to an opening that is much better - in many ways - than what I'd initially planned.

Now, on to the namedropping.

This story, a "swashbuckling jungle adventure" (yes, there will be jungle at some point, I promise; in the meantime you (and I!) will have to settle for tunnels and forests
and crypts as substitutes) has its origins in the fact that I was on a huge jungle adventure kick, and of course I love swashbucklers, so I thought I would see what happens if you have swashbuckling characters going on a jungle adventure. Basically, the three people most responsible for inspiring this story are the ones who got me on the jungle adventure kick: Joseph LoDuca and Frédéric Henry & Guillaume Blossier.

Henry and Blossier are responsible for designing the two board games in The Adventurers series. Those games exemplify everything we love about that genre: exotic locales, death traps, a fast lighthearted pace - you know, that whole fun and excitement thing. In particular I love The Pyramid Of Horus, which has mummies and scorpions and even falling blocks which threaten to close off your exit/escape from the pyramid! If watching movies is a vicarious thrill, playing this game makes the thrills much more immediate - even more than a video game or tabletop rpg, because you get to physically touch and move characters, blocks, and mummies. So I absolutely had to honour the designers of this game, and I did so in the names of my cursed journal-writing hermetic, Guillaume Henri, and in Frédéric Blossier, the alias of the spy known as Santiago.

Then, as luck (or Destiny) would have it, right about the time I was obsessing over this incredibly fun game, I discovered the existence of a TV franchise called The Librarian, which is classic artifact-hunting adventure. For all three TV movies, and the spinoff series, the music - which is a blast - has been composed by Joseph LoDuca, honoured in the name Duque Josefo. José is the correct Spanish for Joseph, but I like the sound of the Portuguese Josefo better, and Isla Oestelago is right there on the border of Portugal anyway, so I went with that. LoDuca’s rousing scores for this series are... well, basically everything you could want. And then he added even more fun.

So there you have it: I owe this whole jungle adventure thing to these three people. Next week: One of the swashbuckling stories that inspired this story, and the character whose name straddles both genres!
The Hour Of The Wolf

Chapter Summary

_IN WHICH de Torre is moved, profoundly, by two very different women._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**ALEJANDRO** de Torre was not yet in love, but he recognised the danger existed.

He'd seen many attractive women in his life, some he might even call beautiful, but this one possessed some undefined quality he'd never before experienced.

He searched her face, trying to identify precisely what that quality was, but the correct word remained elusive. He looked from her eyes, to her hair, to her cheeks, to her lips, to the place where her neck disappeared into the collar of her shirt, back to her eyes, which narrowed even further, and then his attention was drawn to her lips again.

They were smiling.

He smiled back.

Her expression quickly changed, into something he could not decipher.

Then he remembered he was an intruder. One does not compound the transgression by smiling at the person upon whom one has trespassed.

_Captivating_, that was the word! At last he'd identified the attribute for which he'd been struggling: This woman was captivating. While inspecting her face, he'd become utterly fascinated by it.

And when she'd smiled, he'd forgotten himself entirely, and thought only to return the warmth he was feeling.

But now the woman was displeased, and with good reason. de Torre knew, as the offending party, he should say something, but he could not decide what, nor what tone would be appropriate.

If he attempted to reassure her, would she believe him insincere? He wanted her to think well of him.

That is, he preferred _in general_ to be regarded well. As all men do.

Under different circumstances he would attempt to put her concerns to rest by identifying himself as an acquaintance of Miguel Portero's, but in this instance that would only serve to implicate her friend in de Torre's invasion of her workshop.

_Very dear_ friend, he reminded himself. When describing their friendship, Portero had used the phrase 'very dear friend'.
And when talking of the woodcarver, de Torre recalled, Portero had paused for a moment, and then deliberately lied about her gender. What was she to him, precisely?

For that matter, how did this woman think of Portero? Was his deep affection for her reciprocated?

de Torre decided it best to turn his thoughts away from that topic.

He still had not spoken. How long had he been silent?

"I apologise for - " but he couldn't continue; his throat was too rough, too dry. He coughed, swallowed, and began again. "I apologise for the intrusion. I had not realised anyone would be here."

"And if you had realised, would that have made a difference?"

Her voice was intelligent yet playful, the same qualities de Torre had observed in her eyes.

He realised he was not answering her question. What had it been, again? Ah!

"Yes, it would have made a difference."

"And now that you know I am here, what do you intend?"

This was a very pertinent question! He didn't know the answer. The others would be here shortly, and he had to wait for them. Upon their arrival, with the streets heavily guarded and this shop having the only grate they knew of (although, de Torre cursed himself, he had not yet seen it!), the only logical course for them was to enter the tunnels and proceed to Fortaleza Tormentaña.

But how would they keep the woodcarver from advising the Doves of their actions? They certainly weren't about to kill her, or strike her unconscious. Binding her would certainly delay her raising the alarm, but if no one came to release her the consequences could be dire.

He realised that he was once again the cause of a protracted silence.

"Um... " he said, to indicate that he intended to answer, while his mind worked urgently to decide what that answer should be.

She smiled at him again.

His mind stopped working.

He examined his feelings once more, to determine whether he was in love.

He was not. This came as quite a relief.

However, where before he'd been captivated, now, he had to confess to himself, he was unquestionably infatuated.

And he still had not answered her question.

He opened his mouth to remedy this, but all he could think to say was 'Um' again, and he did not want to appear a gibbering idiot.

But remaining silent with his mouth open would not create a significantly better impression.
Thus confronted with the absolute need to voice a coherent sentence, de Torre opted for honesty. This would be easiest, given it was his natural inclination.

"I have not yet decided how I intend to proceed."

He looked at her waist, and then at the cot upon which she was sitting.

"I am unarmed, sir," she told him, guessing the reason for his inspection. "When I decide to have a nap, I leave my knives on my work table. I find that to be the most sensible place for them."

de Torre's gaze shifted to consider the scar on her cheek.

But this was unforgivably rude! He turned his head away, cast his eyes downward.

"Also," and if he'd insulted her, her voice did not betray it, "I had not been expecting to meet an intruder this evening."

de Torre quickly looked back up at her.

"Once again, you have my most humble, and sincere, apologies."

"Of course. You would have much preferred to encroach upon my privacy without me becoming aware of it."

"Um..."

"And despite the professed sincerity of your apology, you have yet to express your intent to leave."

"I cannot."

"But of course you can. You have but to rise from your knees and walk to the door. I would be unable to stop you."

It occurred to de Torre - and he should have thought of this sooner - that in all the time they'd been speaking, the woman could have shouted for the Doves, but had chosen not to. He did not think it was because she feared for her life.

"Or, if you prefer, you can leave without standing. You can simply crawl to the door. I promise I will remain where I am, and not obstruct you."

Her expression did not indicate she expected him to leave. Not in the slightest.

She smiled again, a smile which suggested she and de Torre were sharing in some secret mischief.

It was a beautiful, captivating, uplifting smile. It made his scalp prickle and his skin grow warm. Encouraged by the way she was making him feel, the young Guardsman risked smiling at her a second time, and returning her good humour.

"While I cannot properly respond to the doubts you have cast upon my sincerity, I would be most grateful if you were to consider my remaining upon my knees thus far a true sign of my genuine humility."

She laughed.
And when she laughed, she did so without hesitation or reservation; her laughter consumed her entirely, and radiated outward to fill the entire room.

It was the most wonderful sensation de Torre had ever felt in his life.

His heart dropped into his stomach, paused for a moment, then soared up into his throat, before slowly, gently, settling back into place.

By the time it had returned, de Torre knew the inevitable had come to pass.

He was in love.

And he didn't even know the woman's name.

She stopped laughing, and the abrupt silence was almost painful. He wanted nothing more in the world than to hear her laugh again.

She gave him another playful smile. He wondered to what extent he was a partner in her private game, and to what extent the subject of it.

Should the other Guardsmen not have arrived by now?

With mild shame, he discovered he did not mind if they took their time.

The room had been silent for too long again. Was it his turn to speak? No, it was hers; the laughter did not count.

"You have proven your humility to my satisfaction, and your knees must be very uncomfortable by now. Rise, Guardsman."

He was halfway up before he was aware he'd been moving.

Also, she'd identified him correctly, even though he was not wearing his Tunic.

Was there any point in denying his affiliation?

He looked into her eyes. There was not.

Also, he did not want to lie to the woman he loved.

Perhaps it would be better, after all, if his companions were to arrive quickly.

She'd spoken last. It was his turn.

"Might I have the privilege, lady, of knowing your name?"

"This is my workshop. Did you not know whose door you were unlocking?"

"No, I did not."

"Then why did you enter?"

"I... would rather not say."

"So as not to lie."

"Just so."
"And, if I were to tell you my name, would you do me the same courtesy?"

"Alejandro!"

She reared back, surprised.

"de Torre. Alejandro de Torre. That is my name."

She nodded, and again her face wore an expression de Torre could not penetrate.

"I am, as you have deduced, an Emerald Guardsman."

"And you have some specific business in my shop, which you would rather not reveal. I presume you don't mean me any harm?"

"None!" said de Torre, horrified that she might think otherwise. "You were not expected to be here."

She rose from her cot. de Torre almost bowed to her, but caught himself. She stepped forward, as though to pass him, and he took a step back, although his legs were disinclined to move away from her.

"I often spend the entire night in my workshop, when I am deeply immersed in the creation of a new piece. I work until I am too tired to wield a knife safely," she noticed his gaze dart to the scar on her cheek again, and she tapped it to reassure him she was unashamed of it, "a lesson which came at a price much lower than it could have been. Then I retire to my cot for some rest. More often than not, I am woken by the bells tolling two. This night, of course, the bells have been ringing more often, interrupting my habitual pattern."

This reminded de Torre of an important question he kept forgetting: Why hadn't she called for the Doves?

"But on most nights, I rise at two, fully refreshed, and continue my work. That is when I am at my best: The Hour Of The Wolf - a term of no small significance to my family. During that hour, the wolves are at their most dangerous, the witches at their most powerful - and the artisans at their most creative."

'Beware the artisan.' Had it only been the night before that he'd heard the old woman say that? She'd tried to warn him. She hadn't succeeded. Unless there was some other danger de Torre had yet to discover...

The artisan walked away from him, deeper into her workshop. There was a carpet in the centre of the floor, and when she stepped on it de Torre heard the sound of wood creaking. The grate he had come here to find would be under that carpet, covered by a board.

But then his attention was drawn to the woodcarver's latest piece.

And it took his breath away.

It was a depiction of the Holy Virgin Mother, cradling the body of her son in her arms. The figures were of actual size, and in the flickering lamplight de Torre kept expecting Mary, who was standing, to walk toward him, tears flowing from her anguished eyes.

There was something more to this Virgin Mother than simple mourning, however, something de Torre had never seen in a Pietà before. Although she was crying, her eyes were fully
open. Her chin was held high, and her back was straight. The arms carrying her tortured and murdered son were strong and would never falter; she held him both up and outward, as if presenting him to all the people of the world, and to God Himself, in a posture that proclaimed, "Here he is, and here am I. He was once mine, and now he is yours, but he is still my own, and will remain so until the end of time."

"She's... proud," de Torre said, struggling to put words to what he was feeling. "He has made His sacrifice, but it was her sacrifice as well. And now that He is dead, she bears the burden alone, but she accepts it. No... She embraces it. Her sacrifice has saved us all, but she asks for nothing in return. She needs nothing... but to support her child... one last time."

"That's it. Precisely." Her voice was so soft it seemed he was imagining it.

de Torre turned to the woman who had carved this magnificent sculpture. Her eyes were wet, but her face was radiant, the feelings on it so pure and unguarded in their honesty that he wanted to cry for the beauty of her. She blinked, and a tear rose out of her eye, then coursed down over her scar and the rest of her cheek, growing darker but leaving brightness behind as the water collected the fine dust from her face. The tear stopped falling at a point just above her lip.

de Torre reached out his hand, to draw the tear away from her.

Ever so gently, she leaned toward him.

And then a gunshot shattered the stillness of the night.

She jerked away from him, and turned toward the sound.

The gunshot was followed by the sounds of men shouting. Outside in the night, perhaps a block away, the Doves had found their quarry, and were now hunting him.

de Torre had taken three quick strides to the door before he stopped himself.

Whoever the fleeing man was, whichever of his comrades, the young Guardsman could not help him. The fugitive would simply run until he was safe, either as a result of distance or concealment. If he were caught before then, there would be too many enemies for him to overcome: He would be killed or captured. And if somehow de Torre were to arrive in time to fight at his side, they would still be hopelessly outnumbered, and two would be defeated instead of one.

His duty was clear: He had to remain where he was.

"May I ask that you please extinguish your lamp?"

"Of course." She did so. "After all, it would not suit your purposes to attract any Doves to this building, would it?"

He could not see her face in the darkness, but he could guess what expression she wore.

Nevertheless, de Torre felt he should offer some response.

"You could have called out for them at any time after I entered, but you did not."

"Perhaps I was too frightened."

Her tone made it clear she did not expect him to believe her.

"Am I your prisoner, Guardsman? Am I ordered to obey your instructions and conceal your
presence? If the Doves should surround this workshop, will you threaten to harm me unless you are granted safe passage?"

"Never! It would be unimaginable for me to harm you!"

"My dear Alejandro, I did not mean for you to take me seriously. I would have expected - "

A fist pounded upon the door.

de Torre reached for his sword.

"Who disturbs me?"

It took de Torre a moment to realise that the voice which had asked that question, with a tone of command startlingly loud, clear, and authoritative, had come from the woman standing beside him in the darkness.

"Arturo Pérez, my Lady, a Dove in the humble service of your father. Forgive me, but I saw your lamp go out suddenly, and I wanted to make certain that all is well with you."

He said something further, having to do with the dangerous men prowling the streets of the city this evening, but de Torre ignored it, for his mind was focused on a more immediate concern.

He now knew the name of the woman he'd fallen in love with.

She was Miguel Portero's childhood friend, Graciela Lobato.

The daughter of Josefo, Duke of Isla Oestelago.

Chapter End Notes

First off: Arturo Pérez is not named for Arturo Pérez-Reverte. I didn't even realise how close the names were until 36 or so hours after I'd named him! Because the name is a compound consisting of Marv Wolfman's middle name and George Pérez, creators of The New Teen Titans, which I used to buy, every month, at the convenience store 5km away. Even though the book came out monthly, I went there every week so I wouldn't miss it. (Those were the days.) The first ish of TNTT I ever bought was #39, which featured a spectacular opening fight with lots of great quipping; some very difficult, mature decisions at the end; and a group of people who not only worked together to save the world, they loved each other deeply. I was just thinking the last few weeks about that whole Team thing regular readers of these notes know I am totally devoted to, and suddenly I realised that at a formative age, TNTT had everything I treasure in this concept. So as soon as I had a chance, I named a character after Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, two guys to whom I owe one hell of a lot. In fact, I've been rereading those issues, and it looks like 'one hell of a lot' is a gross understatement.

So, if this story encompasses (1) swashbucklers, and (2) jungle adventure, then there's probably a character in here whose name incorporates both genres (and even more than that). That character is Lanza Dorado.
A current TV show with a huge impact on my decision to start writing this is BBC's *The Musketeers*. It's a blast - you know it's going to be as soon as the opening theme starts playing the Bo Diddley Beat. And who wrote that rollicking theme? Murray Gold. The Spanish word for golden is of course *dorado*. And who plays the coolest cat on that show? Hugo Speer. Spear, lance, Lanza. Lanza Dorado is my dedication to *The Musketeers*.

But he does not stop there, oh no. No one who claims to be a lover of soundtrack music can deny the importance of the great Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who among his many other credits scored the best Errol Flynn swashbucklers, nor the influence of the magnificent Jerry Goldsmith, who scored... a tonne. Great stuff, any kind of style you can think of, including the jungle adventures *Congo* and *King Solomon's Mines*. Whatever the quality of those films might be, the scores are everything you could possibly want. Goldsmith is never, ever far from the CD player. So Dorado covers a lot of key gold references, across both genres. And another jungle adventure: Noah Wyle, star of *The Librarian* series, who has Speer as one of his middle names. And yet another swashbuckler: William Goldman, author of *The Princess Bride*! That may sound like a lot for anyone to handle, but Lanza Dorado is a big man.

And why is Graciela Lobato a woodcarver? Because I wanted to give the daughter of nobility a hands-on skill, like those great photos of Elizabeth Windsor fixing cars in WW2, and also because it suddenly occurred to me that while I was dedicating all kinds of characters to people who'd helped inspire this story, I was looking beyond someone without whom this story never would have existed: my creative and supportive wife. So I wanted to do a special kind of dedication to her, and the Tarot card I associate her with is the Three Of Pentacles, so voila - woodcarver. Thanks, love.
The Gunshot In The Night

Chapter Summary

*IN WHICH an event the reader has already experienced is re-presented as a matter of perspective.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LANZA Dorado was the second of the Guardsmen to leave Miguel Portero's home. Unlike Alejandro de Torre, he preferred to walk to his destination rather than run. This was both a matter of experience, for he knew there was no point in hurrying, and a matter of having a longer stride than most men, so he could still move quickly without exerting himself.

He arrived at the woodcarver's workshop without encountering any Doves - only to discover there was a light burning within the building.

Surely it had not been lit by de Torre, even if he was having difficulty locating the grate. That left him with several hypotheses:

The first was that the woodcarver was present, working on his art. If de Torre had arrived to see that the building was occupied, he would have remained nearby, in hiding, to wait for his comrades.

Unless, of course, he had not yet arrived.

The second possibility was that the light belonged to one or more Doves, who had seen de Torre enter the building and surprised him by doing likewise. If that were the case, then de Torre was either captured or killed, for if he'd defeated the Doves he would have then extinguished the light.

Dorado considered it more likely that the light belonged to the woodcarver, for surely if Doves had spotted de Torre they would have sounded some kind of alarm.

Only then did it occur to Dorado that it was possible, however unlikely, that de Torre had entered the workshop first, and that the woodcarver had entered later.

In the silence of the night, Dorado allowed himself the indulgence of a heavy sigh.

He was going to have to go to the window and peer inside.

He crossed the street quickly, and when he was against the neighbouring building, he tried to disappear into the shadow of the eave as best he could.

This was one of the rare situations in which he found himself wishing he were a smaller man.

Having satisfied himself, after a few moments, that he had not been seen by anyone, he began shuffling sideways, toward the window, listening for any sound that might be coming from
And then the stillness of the night was shattered by a gunshot.

He heard shouting, and running, coming from perhaps a block away. One of the shouts contained the word 'Guardsman'.

And then the light inside the workshop went out.

_Could_ it have been de Torre? He was inexperienced, but very intelligent. Dorado did not believe the young man could have committed such a grievous error as to announce with illumination his presence within to any Dove passing without.

Footsteps were rapidly approaching.

He moved away from the window and deeper into the shadows.

The runner stopped at the workshop door. Then pounded on it.

"Who disturbs me?"

The person inside the workshop was a woman!

Was the woodcarver entertaining a lady? But then why would _she_ answer, and not him?

"Arturo Pérez, my Lady, a Dove in the humble service of your father. Forgive me, but I saw your lamp go out suddenly, and I wanted to make certain that all is well with you."

_Portero!_

He'd lied to them, not only deliberately misleading them as to the woodcarver's gender, but in so doing concealing that she was the daughter of the Duke!

Dorado did not register what the Dove was saying next, for the blood was ringing in his ears and he was imagining how he could best express his displeasure with Portero the next time he found himself in that man's presence.

But then Graciela Lobato answered the Dove, and Dorado focused only on her voice.

"I thank you for your diligence and concern, but all is well with me. Your time would be spent more profitably in the investigation of the gunshot we have just heard."

Despite her polite tone, there was no mistaking that Arturo Pérez was being dismissed.

The Dove bowed to the door. "Yes, my Lady. Thank you, my Lady. Good evening, my Lady."

And then he turned and ran in the direction of the uproar.

Dorado closed his eyes and listened.

He seemed to be once more alone in the night.

But he could not complete his assigned duty - unless he wanted to enter a darkened room and attempt to overcome its occupant - a woman, and the daughter of Nobility - before she could cry out for the assistance of armed men sworn to defend her.
He was, in essence, trapped out-of-doors.

And where was de Torre?

*****

Diego Calavera had been the last of the Guardsmen to leave Miguel Portero's home, and this only because he was an officer. Turo Corvus had argued that he should be the last to depart, for his unique form of deviousness made him the least likely of the four men to be noticed and apprehended, a perfectly valid and reasonable argument.

If it had been at all possible to sway Calavera from his decision to be the last to depart, Corvus' reasoning would have succeeded. But after a short debate the Lieutenant had made it clear, in a tone that brooked no further discussion, that he was steadfast.

Corvus had left third.

And only once he was alone with Portero did Calavera think to ask where in the woodcarver's shop the grate was situated.

"In the centre of the room," Portero had told him. "There is a board covering it, and a carpet covering the board."

Calavera imagined de Torre crawling over the floor in the darkness, running his hands along the ground in search of an inclination or a grate. He was confident the young man would recognise the board was a covering.

Nevertheless, when he left Portero's a few minutes later, Calavera made greater haste than was likely prudent, feeling that he'd committed a shameful oversight in failing to think of the question before de Torre had left, and wanting to rectify the lapse as soon as possible.

He was almost at his destination when he heard the gunshot.

It was followed immediately by shouting and running.

Whichever of his men was being chased - assuming it was one of his men, which seemed most likely in light of the words being shouted by the Doves - the Guardsman was leading his pursuers away from the workshop. Calavera would probably find the remainder of his journey unobstructed by the enemy.

That is, should he choose to continue in that direction.

When delineating the routes they were each to take to the workshop, Calavera had made it clear that if any of them were to be spotted by the Doves, the others were to proceed to their destination without coming to his assistance, reducing their own chances of being discovered while trusting that their comrade would extricate himself.

He did not believe that an officer had the moral right to disobey his own directives.

But on the other hand Calavera was not a leader who could leave any distressed man of his to fend for himself.
He changed his course and ran toward the commotion.

As Turo Corvus walked carefully through the dark and deserted streets of Isla Oestelago, he listened attentively for any sounds of movement which might alert him to the presence of patrolling enemies.

The Doves and their yellow-sashed allies were walking in groups of eight. This had the advantage of ensuring that should they encounter any or all of the Guardsmen they would outnumber them by at least two to one, but it also had the disadvantage of making it very difficult for the groups to move silently, for the combined sounds of eight men, no matter how quiet each individual, were still loud enough to carry through the overpowering hush of the empty city.

Corvus avoided the first patrol by hiding underneath a tarpaulin covering a pile of firewood.

The second he evaded, going around them by means of a narrow passage between two buildings.

He was deciding how best to handle the third patrol when he heard a voice off to his side:

"Turo Corvus."

He turned, drawing his pistol.

The man who'd spoken was emerging from behind a barrel. A second man stepped out of the shadows in which he'd been hiding. Both men were bringing their own pistols to bear.

Corvus realised at once what had happened: This group of eight men had split into several groups, one group of at least two men making enough noise for eight, distracting the attention of any man sneaking about, while one or more pairs of men lay in wait for potential Guardsmen to cross their path!

All of this passed through his mind in the space of a second, during which he adjusted his aim, shut his eyes tightly, and pulled the trigger.

Although he swallowed as he fired, so the report wouldn't hurt his ears, it still sounded very loud in the peaceful evening.

Even as he fired, he began running away from his two adversaries, toward the cover of the nearest building.

Corvus had aimed between the two men, hoping to startle them with the sudden noise and to momentarily blind them with the flash of it. The stars in the night sky were too bright for the flash to have the full effect he'd desired, and the men were too well-trained for the sound to halt them for more than a second. After that second they only needed to blink twice to regain full eyesight and the ability to aim their pistols.

It was enough; Corvus was already behind the building, running away as quickly as he could.
"Guardsman!" one of the men shouted, and they both gave chase.

He was running too fast to safely turn around, but Corvus' hearing was good enough that from the sounds of the footfalls he could tell that all eight men were now behind him, and that they'd set themselves up in three groups, two pairs in hiding while four men pretended to be eight.

The men pursuing him continued their shouting, not because they expected Corvus to suddenly stop and surrender, but because it would enable any other nearby Doves to join in the chase, or worse, to cut off the Guardsman's path.

He could not outrun the men behind him if they were joined by others, and it was a near certainty that they would be.

Corvus remembered passing a bakehouse three blocks away. He had an idea how he might save himself from his pursuers by making a stand in there.

It was a desperate plan, but that befitted the circumstances.

From a road off to his right, he heard the sound of eight more men running toward him.

"There he is!"

"Turo Corvus!"

It was the second time these men had identified him by name. He'd been present when Guzmán had described himself and the others to Martín Pescador; Corvus had not imagined the description could be *that* effective.

But then he realised he recognised the voice which had shouted his name just now. He risked a look over his shoulder.

There was no mistaking the height and profile of the man:

François Carandini.

The Doves' allies in yellow sashes were the Cardinal's Gendarmes.

Chapter End Notes

Last week, Graciela said The Hour Of The Wolf was "a term of no small significance to my family." This was something of a hint to people who know Spanish well enough to deduce (or guess) that she was of the Lobato family, for *lobato* means *wolf cub*.

And mainly I went with Lobato over Lobo because the latter is a bit too common and the former sounds cooler to me.

Ah, but why a reference to a wolf? Because of Randall Wallace, whose first name is in part derived from a Germanic word for *wolf*. He wrote & directed *The Man In The Iron Mask*, a much-maligned movie I absolutely adore. The portrayals of the four classic principals are the strongest I've seen in any movie about Dumas' Musketeers, plus I'm a huuuge sucker for the Team stories in which the team consists of
Experienced Veterans – even more so if they are Returning To Action. Obviously there is a considerable amount of experience contained within the lives of three of my Guardsmen – a revolution will do that. So how could I not love this movie?

Last but absolutely not least, Randall's *The Man In The Iron Mask* has that scene where the old guys charge the younger Musketeers. That scene gets me every time.
Siege Of The Bakehouse

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH the Guardsmen arrive at two different methods to reach Fortaleza Tormentaña, both of them having particular drawbacks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WITHIN Alejandro de Torre, confusion warred with relief, hope with duty.

He whispered, in case there were still Doves close by in the darkness:

"Your name, I take it, is Graciela Lobato?"

"It is."

"And you are, therefore, the daughter of the Duke?"

"I am, yes."

"May I enquire, my Lady, why it is that you have just now given assistance to a man you know to be hunted by men in the service of your father?"

The woodcarver took her time answering, while de Torre strained in the darkness to make out her expression.

"There is no harm in enquiring, of course. But before I answer, do you intend to reveal to me your purpose here in Isla Oestelago?"

"I tell you honestly that nothing could give me more pleasure than to be entirely forthcoming with you, but alas my duty prohibits me."

"In that case, Alejandro, for the time being at least, it seems that each of us shall be withholding something from the other."

*****

Turo Corvus was two blocks away from the bakehouse. He was a fast runner, faster than those pursuing him, but his advantage was not enough for him to put sufficient distance between himself and the others before he arrived at his destination.

Unless something changed, he was sure to be interrupted in the middle of picking the lock on the bakehouse door.

To give himself more time, Corvus turned left.
And ahead of him he saw exactly what he needed: a right turn into a dark alleyway, and on the other side of that opening a building with a sloped roof.

Corvus coaxed every last vestige of strength from his legs, running much faster than was comfortable, with considerable risk of pitching forward.

But it worked! He reached the alleyway before his pursuers rounded the corner, turning into it without them seeing him.

Holding his lips tightly together, so his enemies would not hear him catching his breath, Corvus removed two balls from his ammunition pouch. He threw them upward, in a wide arc over the roof of the building across from him. Then, in perfect silence, and remaining in the shadows, he crept as quickly as he could further down the alleyway.

Although some of the Doves and Gendarmes in pursuit of Corvus carried torches, they were not able to see very far in front of themselves, but they did perceive the alleyway as they approached it.

"Which way did he go?" one of them asked. "Straight, or to the right?"

"I didn't see," said another.

Their hurried footsteps were making too much noise for them to hear the quiet sound of Corvus' two ammunition balls rolling down the sloped roof.

But then the balls rolled off, and clattered loudly onto the street.

"There!" shouted the man in the lead. "I just heard him!"

He ran past the alleyway and down the street, with the others close behind him.

Corvus proceeded to the bakehouse, as quickly as he could without making a sound.

Just as he arrived at the door he heard, three or four blocks away and to his left, the shouts of men who've realised they were fooled into following the wrong path.

The moonlight in the street was very bright, for which Corvus was grateful. He withdrew the tools he'd built in the tunnels and started picking the lock.

"Over here!" shouted a voice from his right, apparently close by. "At the bakehouse!"

Corvus did not look up from what he was doing; everything depending on his success.

Off in the distance, to his left, he heard his former pursuers rallying themselves.

And to his right, and much closer, he heard hoofbeats.

The horseman galloped close to the bakehouse, intending to strike Corvus as he passed, but the Guardsman managed to defeat the lock and open the door just in time. He entered the building and shut the door behind him, then searched around in the dim light for anything he could use to block the door.

The horseman entered the bakehouse, his pistol drawn.

Corvus placed the bottom of his foot against a table and pushed with his leg, sliding the table toward his adversary.
The Dove moved out of the way easily enough, but in so doing he tightened his finger on the trigger, firing into the ceiling and wasting his shot.

Corvus drew his sword.

The Dove dropped his pistol and did likewise.

Corvus charged.

The Dove adopted a defensive posture.

Corvus leapt onto the table without breaking his stride.

The Dove tried to adjust his stance.

Corvus leapt over him in a somersault.

The Dove hesitated for a moment, then he swung around.

Corvus landed on the other side of him in a crouch.

The Dove's sword passed over his head.

Corvus straightened himself, and stabbed the Dove in the side.

The man cried out, and stiffened.

"Drop your sword, please."

The Dove did as instructed.

"Now remain still; I am about to extract my weapon."

The Dove clenched his fists, and nodded.

Corvus removed his sword; his opponent hissed, but stayed motionless.

"Now you should leave. You require a physician."

The Dove was understandably confused.

"Place both your hands tightly over the wound, to hinder the bleeding. I will move the table, and you will exit."

The Dove put his hands where he'd been told, which he understood to be in his best interests, but he did not move toward the door, for he couldn't comprehend that his enemy was allowing him to depart.

"If you do not leave before your companions arrive, I will have to bar the door with you on this side."

Once again, the wounded Dove undertook the action which would most benefit his health, and walked toward the door.

Corvus moved the table aside, the Dove exited the bakehouse, and Corvus pushed the table back into place. Then he reached over it and pulled the door shut.
From outside came the sounds of galloping horses from one direction, booted footfalls from another.

"You! That man is injured. Place him on your horse and take him to the physician. Hurry!"

Corvus recognised the voice: Martín Pescador.

"Surround the building!"

The sounds from outside indicated this was being done.

The next sound Corvus heard was the retreating footsteps of a solitary horse.

After this, a long period of silence.

And then Pescador called to him.

"Corvus?"

He must have learned the Guardsman's identity from Carandini.

"Yes?"

"There are twenty of us. You cannot escape."

"That remains to be seen."

"It would be preferable for all concerned, yourself included, if you were to surrender."

"I am prepared to discuss that, under the flag of truce."

"Shall I approach?"

"I have your word?"

"You do."

"Before God?"

"As all things are."

"Then you may approach."

Corvus risked a quick peek through the window, and saw Pescador unclasping his belt.

"That will not be necessary; I know your honour."

Pescador readjusted his belt, and walked to the door.

Corvus slid the table aside.

Pescador entered, and closed the door behind him.

Corvus did not bother sliding the table back into place. He knew none of Pescador's men would dishonour their Major's word by attacking.

Pescador looked over the bakehouse thoroughly, imagining what might be to come. He
noded to himself.

"With the assistance of my allies, Cardinal Richelieu's Gendarmes, I have been familiarising myself with the reputations of you Guardsmen. Except, of course, for Alejandro de Torre, who has only recently joined your ranks, and was not at his best in the haunted forest."

Pescador's gaze came to rest on a pile of flour sacks.

"Your decision to enter this building was not haphazard. You knew there would be flour within... and flour catches fire."

Corvus said nothing. It seemed that Pescador did know his reputation.

Pescador turned to face him. "I would rather not see this man's bakehouse destroyed."

"You know him?"

"I know he provides food for the people of my city; that is sufficient."

Corvus nodded.

Pescador continued. "If we were to attack, it is likely you would die. But before that were to happen, I expect I would lose several men as well."

Corvus nodded again.

"I would like to know your thoughts on this."

Corvus shrugged, but then he spoke. "It seems senseless. The regrettable events at the Cathedral notwithstanding, we do not wish you ill. We are not here as your enemies."

Now it was Pescador who nodded.

"You took pains, at the post building, to get what you wanted without killing any of my men."

"We did. I am pleased to have it acknowledged."

"In that case, what impediment, if any, remains to your surrender now?"

"Your prison warden, Daniel Cortés. He has a reputation for cruelty."

Pescador's face, which until now had been almost friendly, changed into a grimace of disgust.

"It is a reputation the man deserves. He is a vile, loathsome creature. Were it my decision, he should be subject to the same horrors he has inflicted upon others. I am undertaking to remove him from his position, but until that is done, I can see to it only that his infamy is minimised."

"Might I have your word, then, that he will not harm me?"

"If that is all it takes to secure your surrender? I will not allow any of my men to die for Cortés' ignominy. You have my word."

And, so saying, Martín Pescador plucked each finger of the white glove on his right hand in sequence, then removed the garment and offered his bare hand to Turo Corvus.
The Guardsman accepted it.

"I surrender myself to you. But please be advised that this capitulation only applies to the present circumstances. I do not promise I shall make no attempt to free myself once I am incarcerated in Fortaleza Tormentaña."

Pescador chuckled. Then he shook his head, and shrugged in mock apology.

"My worthy adversary - no man has ever escaped from Fortaleza Tormentaña."

*****

There was another long silence between himself and Graciela, but this time de Torre did not find it uncomfortable.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he was better able to make out her features. Her cheeks, her nose, her chin, her eyes...

She noticed him scrutinising her.

Now he was required to say something.

"I... want to thank you... whatever your reasons... for not revealing my presence here to the Dove."

"You are quite welcome."

"Um... "

He'd been about to ask her again why she'd done that, but he knew she wouldn't tell him.

He was quite relieved when she selected the next topic of discussion.

"You may perhaps be unable to tell me why you have come to this city, but surely there can be no harm in explaining what has brought you to my workshop, given that I will be present to observe whatever it is you do here."

"Yes, that seems perfectly reasonable. You might not be aware of this, but there is a large system of aqueducts underneath the city. I've come here seeking an access to those tunnels. There is likely a - "

Suddenly the door to the workshop opened, and a large figure entered, closing the door behind himself.

"Alejandro, my friend and comrade," said Dorado, who had been listening at the window for the last few minutes, "would you kindly care to explain to me why you are conversing in friendly terms with a person whose workshop you have invaded in the middle of the night, and who is, not incidentally, the daughter of the local ruling noble, who has given orders for us to be hunted and arrested?"

"Lanza, my comrade and friend, I hardly understand it myself."
"Perhaps you might be better off addressing your questions to me," said Graciela, with a certain bite in her tone.

"I was certainly intending to give you the opportunity to - Silence!"

All three of them held their breath, listening intently.

In a moment, de Torre heard the sound of very, very delicate footsteps right outside the door.

Then the door opened, and in the light from outside de Torre recognised Calavera.

And just as suddenly the door was closed again.

"Alejandro? Lanza?"

"We are both here, Captain," said Dorado. "But before you say anything further, you should be aware that there is a stranger among us."

de Torre experienced an instant of displeasure at Dorado describing Graciela in that fashion, but then he had to concede that she was, in fact, unknown to his two comrades.

When had he stopped thinking of her as a stranger to himself?

Her voice came out of the darkness. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Graciela Lobato, and this is my workshop."

Following this introduction, there was a long silence. Dorado cleared his throat, once, but said nothing.

At last Calavera settled upon one of the several questions he'd been considering.

"Is she our prisoner?"

"She is not," said de Torre, perhaps a little too quickly.

"I see. I presume that we are not her prisoners?"

"Earlier on," Dorado said, "when a Dove knocked on her door, she dismissed him - even though Alejandro was inside with her."

There was an unusual quality to his voice; de Torre could not quite decide what it was intended to indicate.

"I see," said Calavera, again. His voice also had a peculiarity with which de Torre was unfamiliar.

The Captain took a deep breath before speaking further.

"I bring news with me. The first item is that the Gendarme Coléreaux is here with his men; they are the allies to whom Pescador had been referring."

He gave the other Guardsmen a moment to assimilate this.

"And the second item is that Turo has been captured. Before sunrise, he is going to be a prisoner in Fortaleza Tormentaña."
Dorado chuckled. This was a sound de Torre understood perfectly.

It promised ugly tidings for the ill-prepared.

"I believe you mean," Dorado said, "that we have placed a Curse upon the island prison."

"Just so," said Calavera, his tone likewise portentous.

"Then we should hasten to join him," de Torre said, "although for whose sake I shall not say."

"Have you located the grate to the aqueduct?" said Calavera.

"Not precisely, but I believe it to be in the centre of the room, underneath a carpet."

"It is," Graciela said.

She lit her lamp.

Calavera and Dorado started at being thus exposed, but de Torre simply shrugged at them, unconcerned.

Meanwhile Graciela had placed her lamp on the floor beside the carpet, and was lifting it away.

"I take it you wish to walk to Fortaleza Tormentaña through the underground tunnels?"

"We do," said Calavera. In spite of his natural inclination toward suspicion, he was becoming used to the notion that the daughter of the Duke of Isla Oestelago posed no danger for the Emerald Guardsmen.

"I am familiar with them. When I was younger, my brother and I explored some of them with a friend of ours."

"A 'very dear' friend?" de Torre asked before he realised what he was doing.

Behind him, Calavera and Dorado exchanged glances full of meaning.

But Graciela appeared not to have heard the question over the scraping noise of the wooden board she dragged across the floor, exposing the grate beneath. Instead she continued with her story.

"We never managed to search the tunnels underneath this area, but after I built this shop I did so on my own. There is a passageway that leads away from the city, underneath the river. I presume it goes all the way to the island."

"You haven't confirmed this for yourself?" said Calavera, his tone playful.

de Torre was pleased to see him warming toward her.

Having now also lifted the grate away from the tunnel opening, Graciela stood up and faced Calavera before answering him.

"I would have liked nothing better, but I was discouraged by the builder. Unlike the rest of those he created, the alleged madman Terentius seeded the tunnels underneath the river with all manner of devices intended to kill unwary intruders."
Her warning thus issued, Graciela turned to de Torre.

de Torre turned to Dorado.

The two Guardsmen turned to their Captain.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "were we expecting anything less?"

Chapter End Notes

This one's for ereshai, who commented ages ago:

"This means that they should surrender unexpectedly at some point, just to throw everyone off balance. As part of a cunning plan, of course."

Did Corvus plan to give up? Honestly, even I don't know.

Also: I stole one or two phrases in this chapter from Steven Brust's glorious The Phoenix Guards, which I am currently re-reading. It's hard for me to imagine a swashbuckler fan who doesn't love this book. Shameless love letter to Dumas - and for "shameless," read "uninhibited and celebratory."
The Tunnels Beneath Rio Miño

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH our Lieutenant is delighted that someone clever has intended to kill him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"LADY Graciela," said Calavera, "do you know precisely in which direction from here lies Fortaleza Tormentaña?"

"I do," she answered, "but I'm afraid that information can be of no use to you, for the tunnels do not proceed in a straight line."

Calavera chuckled. "Of course not. In fact, I should have been quite disappointed if they did. Nevertheless, would you please indicate that direction, as accurately as possible, to Lanza?"

The lady pointed, and Dorado walked up to stand behind her, looking over the top of her head and along the length of her arm.

"And how certain are you that this is the correct direction?"

"I have lived in this city, and, in some ways, in the shadow of that island, for all of my life. My indication is precise."

Dorado took his time making certain he had his bearing, then stepped away from her.

"Thank you."

"Not at all," she said, and smiled to herself.

For a moment, Dorado was afraid she might ask to come along.

He looked over at de Torre, hoping his comrade did not harbour any desire to invite her.

de Torre was indeed contemplating the lady, but his thoughts were consumed with regret at having to depart her company.

Dorado considered this unfortunate for his friend, but preferable to most other alternatives.

Meanwhile Calavera had lifted the grate out of the way and was peering down the hole. He removed a short coil of rope from his belt, grabbed tightly onto one end, and let the rest fall through the opening.

He listened carefully for when it hit the ground.

"Twenty feet," said Graciela Lobato. "But there are rungs set into the side, so you will not need the rope at all."

Calavera crouched to take a closer look, and immediately noticed the iron set into the stone walls. He stood and began coiling his rope back up. As he did this, he shared a smile and nod with
the lady, kindred adventuring spirits.

"And is there sufficient room at the bottom to light our torches?"

She contemplated the rag-tipped clubs tucked into each man's belt. "I brought my lamp with me, but those torches look to be quite easily lit. It is narrower down there than what you might prefer, but you shouldn't have any difficulty."

"Good." His eyes caught sight of the building's fireplace. "One last thing: Might I impose upon you for the use of that fire poker?"

"By all means." The lady retrieved it and presented it to the Lieutenant with a regal flourish.

He bowed to her as he accepted it. "My most sincere thanks. And now, I believe we are ready to proceed."

He caught Dorado's eye and tilted his head slightly, indicating he wanted his friend to approach.

Graciela perceived the gesture, but de Torre did not. She moved away to give them their privacy.

Once Dorado was close enough to hear him whisper, Calavera said, "We'll give Alejandro a few moments alone with the lady."

"Is that wise?"

"Probably not."

He stepped onto the first rung and began climbing down into the tunnel.

Dorado wordlessly followed.

When his friends had completely disappeared into the opening, de Torre approached the hole, reluctantly. Upon arriving at the edge, he decided he could not stand to leave without saying something to the woman who had suddenly and irrevocably come to mean so much to him. He turned around.

"Lady Graciela - "

And then, of course, he could think of nothing to say.

The lady, as was her custom, offered him no assistance whatsoever.

"Yes?" she asked him, the innocence in her voice not entirely convincing, and utterly undone by that playful gleam in her eyes.

Eyes de Torre desperately hoped to see again someday.

So he said that. "I... I do hope I shall see you again, someday."

"I wish for the same."

She did! This was excellent!

de Torre forced himself to remain neutral of countenance, and restrained himself from
"Good. Then... fare you well, until I see you again."

She walked slowly toward him. "Do I have your word, Alejandro, that I shall see you again, before you depart Isla Oestelago?"

"Of course! Yes!"

And now he reined in his voice as well.

The lady was very close to him now, close enough that if she took another step, their feet would touch.

"Good," she said, and there was no more playfulness in her eyes, only earnestness, eagerness, and hope.

de Torre desperately wanted to kiss her.

He could not, of course.

Perhaps she would lean forward, and kiss him?

Graciela did not lean forward.

The moment passed.

de Torre took a deep breath, smiled and nodded to her one last time, then proceeded down the rungs and into the tunnels.

He was halfway down when the lady called out,

"Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen!"

It was only with the greatest discipline that de Torre managed to refrain from looking back up at her.

He arrived at the bottom as the other two were lighting their torches. Trying to avoid his companions' eyes, de Torre removed his own from his belt and held it out to them.

Dorado touched his torch to de Torre's and lit it. In the flickering shadows, the tiny smile on his face seemed much wider than it actually was.

"I will go first, Lanza second, Alejandro third. If our legendary builder is worthy of his reputation, I expect there will come a point that these passageways appear to continue in a straight line, but in fact veer ever so gently off to one side. Lanza, I will rely upon you to perceive that we are no longer on course."

Dorado indicated the single opening leading away from their location. "This tunnel will take us slightly to the left of the bearing Lady Graciela indicated."

He turned his head, looking in all directions, to confirm an observation.

"If this is supposed to be a system of aqueducts, why are we not in the middle of a tunnel? Should there not be a means for water to travel here from the rest of the city?"
"Yes," said Calavera, "I noticed that as well."

His smile was one of deep satisfaction. The firelight danced in his excited eyes.

"Well, let us go and encounter the first of the deadly perils which, centuries ago, Terentius created to thwart us."

So saying, he turned sharply on his heel and stepped into the tunnel.

Dorado smiled at de Torre.

"The Lieutenant is never happier than when he is testing his skills against a worthy opponent."

de Torre nodded; he'd observed this already. "He must be quite fearsome at Chess."

Calavera stopped and turned, his boots scraping on the stone floor.

"I despise Chess."

He motioned for his companions to begin following him. When they started walking, he turned once more and resumed leading them.

"Chess is a duel of wits, but those wits are limited by the rigidity of permitted movements. A player knows at any moment what his opponent's pawns may do, how his bishop may strike, that his rook cannot move this turn, and so forth. The rules limit imagination, and what purpose does that serve in a contest of tactical thinking?"

"I once had the privilege to witness a duel between a young man - younger than yourself, Alejandro - and a minor nobleman who'd already been at Court for ten years. Within the first minute it was clear to everyone, including the young man, that the nobleman was by far the superior swordsman. I'll never forget the look in the young man's eyes as that realization came upon him - and then his subsequent change of expression when he decided his only course of action was to gamble desperately."

"A conclusion Corvus would have applauded," Dorado muttered.

"It was a damp spring morning, the grass still slippery with dew. The young man took three rapid steps backward, then charged his opponent. Just before he came in range of the man's sword, the young man threw himself forward upon his knees, sliding across the grass and underneath the nobleman's sword. When he was close enough, he thrust upward, into the man's belly and out between his shoulder blades. The nobleman was dead before he'd had a chance to fully understand what his opponent was doing."

de Torre considered the tactic. It was irregular, inelegant, and perhaps a touch ignoble - although de Torre was of the opinion that a dueling ground was a battlefield like any other, and thus the primary rule was survival - but it had enabled the young man to survive a conflict he would surely have lost otherwise.

"We did something similar," Calavera said, "in the post building, when we shouted our Salute before charging - fooling our adversaries outside into anticipating a direct attack."

"I thought we'd done that to honour the return of our Tunics."

"We also did it for that reason, yes."
Calavera chuckled. The sound echoed loudly off the stone walls.

"You have in part illustrated my point: The Salute was more than one thing. In Chess, the best movements serve more than one potential purpose. But the experienced player knows what those possibilities are, because they will always be the same: threaten a piece or square, clear an opening for another piece, and so forth. The player does not have to imagine what his opponent might have in mind."

Calavera stopped walking. He spread his arms out to his sides.

"But when Terentius built these tunnels, he was limited only by his imagination. These passages can go in any direction - maybe they don't lead to the island at all, but out to sea! - and any feature of the architecture might serve not only to conduct water - if in fact this was ever the purpose of these 'aqueducts', which I begin increasingly to doubt - but also to conceal... "

He knelt down, and held the poker directly out in front of him. He touched it to the floor, and pushed.

A part of the floor sunk into the ground.

In the wall off to the side, a stone dropped open on a concealed hinge, and a burst of flame shot across the tunnel, at waist height, directly over the poker. The flame reached all the way to the far wall.

The only reason neither Dorado nor de Torre cried out was that while they'd traveled to Spain Calavera had described to them his time in the catacombs beneath San Rafael.

Calavera lifted the poker. The flame stopped, and the stone flipped back up into place.

He stood, and turned to face de Torre. "You see? This is a true battle of wits!"

de Torre was pleased for Calavera's sake that the Lieutenant was deriving some enjoyment from their jeopardy, but it was not a pleasure the young man could share. He was reminded that, in a similar battle of wits, Coléreaux had won, and Sean Benton had died.

Meanwhile Dorado had walked up to Calavera, and was staring at the stone from which the flames had come.

"Diego, would you please activate the flame again?"

Calavera did so.

Dorado crossed his arms, and considered the device.

"I understand the Vulcan room. The falling oil was ignited by a flint, and caught fire as it dropped onto the intruders. That is not easy to achieve, although it is simple enough in principle. But how did Terentius arrange for the flames to shoot sideways?"

"I have a theory about this," said Calavera, "but for the time being I prefer to keep it to myself. Shall we continue?"

With Calavera indicating which floor tiles they were to avoid, the Guardsmen continued down the tunnel. As he stepped gingerly over one of the lethal triggers, de Torre reflected that Graciela must have discovered this trap. This latest demonstration of her cleverness made him appreciate her all the more.
He knew he must stop thinking about her.

He was finding that difficult.

Perhaps if he focused on his surroundings, and tried to perceive what other perils the builder of these tunnels might have devised for him.

Finally, the thought of being burned to death, or worse, was sufficient to direct his mind away from thoughts of the woman he loved.

And then he noticed something.

"We must be out of danger from any fire. There are spider webs in the corners now."

Dorado ran his finger through one of them. "I have been on ships, in snow-capped mountains, and even in a desert, once. I am convinced there is no place on God's Earth where spiders do not crawl."

de Torre found that thought comforting; it made the tunnels seem less mysterious, less threatening.

Further down the tunnel, Calavera was not as reassured. He stopped walking and looked up.

The spider webs there were very thick, almost covering the entire ceiling.

"Does it seem unusual to either of you that - "

Something large and white fell upon him, enveloping his entire body and knocking him to the ground.

de Torre started running toward Calavera, but Dorado blocked him.

"Draw your sword," he said, transferring his torch to his left hand and unsheathing his blade.

de Torre followed his example.

Lying on the floor a few steps in front of them, Calavera was struggling to extricate himself from his covering. de Torre could see that he was using a great deal of force, but in spite of this he wasn't managing to move very much at all.

de Torre looked to Dorado, wanting to insist that he go and help the Lieutenant, but Dorado was looking up, so de Torre did the same.

There was a gap in the webs above Calavera, through which de Torre could see that they weren't covering the ceiling at all, but rather concealing a high alcove.

And lowering itself from that alcove was a giant spider, with a body eight feet across.
This Chapter was postponed a week, for illness, but initially placeholdered thus:

Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Regrettable Postponement

IN WHICH our Author, having a sinus cold over the weekend and into Monday, resigns himself to being unable to produce a chapter this week.

"ALAS!" said The Exclamation, and then coughed.
IN WHICH Calavera is first inventive, and then clever, but finally impetuous.

"SPREAD out," said Dorado, "so it has to treat us as two separate targets."

But de Torre was already moving, using only the front of his feet, dancing away from Dorado to a position closer to the spider, and then shifting from side to side, never letting his heels touch the ground.

The spider turned its head to face him.

"Why aren't we readying our pistols?" His eyes never strayed from their attacker.

"In this dimness, the flash will blind us, unless we close our eyes as we shoot, which is equally undesirable. And the echoes off these stone walls will make the sound deafening, stunning us somewhat and disrupting our equilibrium."

"Agreed - but will it not do the same to our foe?"

"It might, it might not. I am not an expert in the weaknesses of spiders, gargantuan or otherwise."

The disproportionate creature in question was now merely five feet above their heads, close enough for any of its legs to strike them, but not close enough for the Guardsmen to thrust their swords into it.

Its body contracted, then expanded.

de Torre smiled at it.

It was a grin of the sort Dorado knew well.

The spider reared back, and straightened again.

Shooting a line of white webbing directly at de Torre.

But the accomplished pugilist was already moving out of the way, and the adhesive mass smacked harmlessly into the wall behind where he had been.

Dorado realised this was what de Torre had intended all along: He was more nimble, so he would keep the spider occupied while Dorado found an opening.

The spider swung a leg at de Torre.

Who moved out of the way, and struck it with his sword.
It was like hitting a tree: He made a cut, but it was shallow.

Nevertheless, the spider waved its extremities and shrieked.

The high-pitched sound was painful to the Guardsmen's ears, but still satisfying for all that.

Thick yellow fluid sprayed out of the gash in the spider's leg. Like the creature's webbing, the substance stuck to the side of the wall, and flowed downward very, very slowly.

Meanwhile, Calavera was bending his body, sitting up halfway and falling back down, over and over, trying to loosen the adhesive covering which enveloped him from head to toe.

"Dorado, I fear our Lieutenant may be smothering."

"I have faith in his tenacity."

The spider had stopped descending; it was still out of reach.

The two Guardsmen waited to see what it would do next.

Dorado's eyes darted quickly to Calavera and back again. His friend was still struggling, still moving: That meant he was still breathing. The moment Calavera's movement ceased, Dorado would risk everything to go and free him, but that time had not yet come.

He turned his thoughts back to the spider.

He was still impressed by the immensity of it.

"What does it eat down here?"

"Is that really germane?"

Calavera was able to hear them, despite his ears being covered. He had an answer for Dorado's question, but of course he was unable to speak.

Also, every time he inhaled, he took in less air. He was beginning to feel light-headed.

The time had come for desperate action.

He rolled his body to the right, toward where he must have dropped his torch. It would still be lit; the rag tipping it had been soaked in oil.

When Calavera rolled on top of something elongated, and felt heat penetrating through the webbing enfolding him, he knew he'd found the torch. He manipulated his body so that the hottest part of the torch was over his hands.

The trick was to singe the web sufficiently to free himself without getting burned.

And before he suffocated.

Suddenly the spider dropped to the ground, landing on four of its legs.

The other four simultaneously lashed out at de Torre and Dorado.

de Torre had not been prepared for two attacks at once. He dodged one leg, and almost twisted out of the way of the second, but it managed to slap him into the wall.
Dorado did not bother avoiding the legs - he stepped toward the nearest one, swung heavily, and chopped it in half.

Then the other leg smashed him to the ground.

The spider turned on him. It was a predator, and it understood that one of its prey was vulnerable. The pincers at the front of its mouth clacked together with anticipation.

Meanwhile, Calavera rolled off his torch. He forced his fingers - sore but unburned - through the web surrounding his hands, and pulled.

Dorado's sword lay five feet away. If he went for it, the spider would lunge, catching him defenceless.

His arms now free, Calavera tore at the webbing covering his face. His body buckled as it struggled to find the last of the air in his lungs.

Slowly, cautiously, the spider advanced upon Dorado.

Slowly, cautiously, Dorado drew his pistol. It seemed the time for desperate measures.

His mouth and nose at last free to breathe, Calavera gulped in air greedily, and then started to cough, his violent convulsions held in check by the adhesive covering that still restrained most of his body.

Dorado knew the spider was about to lunge at him. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he was certain of it.

But instead the spider reared back, and screamed.

Dorado smelled burning.

The spider turned around - impossibly quickly! - and Dorado saw flames dancing upon its back.

He replaced his pistol and moved to retrieve his sword.

de Torre's right hand was slippery with the oil he had flung from his phial onto the creature's back, but he kept a sure grip on his rapier.

The creature lunged at him, opening its pincers to bite.

de Torre stepped aside and plunged his sword into its eyes.

The spider howled, and jerked its head away, ripping the sword loose and causing itself further injury.

Something wet that de Torre did not want to identify smacked onto the floor.

Meanwhile Dorado had recovered his own weapon. He dropped his torch to the ground, stepped right up behind the spider, and swung at it with both hands, hacking off one of its legs.

The spider rose up and twisted its body around to face him.

So de Torre slashed its belly open.
From the wound came a green light - so bright it forced de Torre to close his eyes.

Rough arms grabbed him from behind and pulled him to the ground.

"Lanza - get down!" Calavera shouted.

de Torre fell to the floor face-first, the Lieutenant's body covering his own.

There was a sound like the shattering of the world's largest crystal vase, and although de Torre's eyes were shut the intense green light managed to penetrate into his vision.

Then the light vanished, and Calavera rolled off of him.

de Torre opened his eyes, carefully.

Calavera was standing, scraping away the last strands of webbing which still clung to his body. Dorado was also getting to his feet, looking somewhat battered but otherwise uninjured.

Neither the spider - nor its carcass - were anywhere to be seen.

"My suspicions have been confirmed," said Calavera, helping de Torre to stand. "Terentius - who may or may not have been a madman - was unquestionably a magician. This spider was grown to its unnatural size, and afterward sustained, through magic."

"This means that the dangers in these tunnels need not rely upon the laws of the natural world," said Dorado. "They can consist of anything. And yet, for some reason, you seem inordinately pleased."

"I am not so much pleased as excited. If these tunnels underneath the river are the only part of the 'aqueduct system' which Terentius bothered to protect, then it stands to reason that somewhere in these tunnels is something worth protecting - something he considered valuable!"

Dorado placed his hand upon his Lieutenant's shoulder.

"Reassure me, my friend, that you are not allowing your excitement and insatiable curiosity to distract you from the goal of rescuing our comrade."

"We have two fellow Guardsmen to rescue from Fortaleza Tormentaña. And after that, we must match wits with a people who almost certainly possess magical skills of their own. If there is something concealed down here which may put us on a more even footing with them, I want to find it."

Dorado nodded, a big smile on his face.

"I am pleased to see your time deprived of air has had no adverse effect upon your devious mind. Shall we continue, then?"

"No."

Dorado's face fell.

de Torre laughed.

Dorado glared at him.

de Torre stopped laughing.
Calavera raised his torch and looked up into the alcove above them. de Torre's ignition of the spider had singed away most of the webs, including the one on which the spider had lowered itself, but - No, there!

"Lanza, might I impose upon you to lift me to that strand of web hanging from the ceiling?"

Dorado crouched down and set his hands into a cup for Calavera to step into. "You believe there might be something hidden up there?"

"Most people would assume, if they were somehow able to survive the giant spider, that the alcove had only one purpose: to be a nest for the guardian of these tunnels."

de Torre knew what he was going to say next.

"But I am not most people."

And he was right.

Calavera stepped onto Dorado's cupped hands and touched his friend's shoulder for balance.

Dorado stood, and lifted.

As soon as he was close enough, Calavera grabbed the strand of web. Then he reached up with his other hand and began pulling himself up.

He was in no danger of falling; the strand was too adhesive for him to lose his grip.

He climbed to the very top of the alcove, but he didn't see anything that might be an opening. Nor did he see any stone which looked like it might be a trigger.

Nevertheless, he gripped the strand a little more tightly with his right hand, held onto it with his feet as best he could, and reached out with his left to start touching the walls.

But his hand went straight through the stone.

"I've found something!" he called down, and started shifting his body back and forth. In a few moments, he was swinging on the strand, and with a deep breath he raised his legs, lifting them toward the spot where his hands had gone through the wall.

His feet passed through as well!

He bent his knees, and when his feet encountered a hard surface on the way back, he pressed his heels into it.

The wall was illusory, a magic trick concealing an opening. Calavera pulled himself toward the opening with his legs, then reached out with one hand and grabbed the edge.

He let go of the strand, and dragged himself through the opening.

There were shouts from below. All the other two had seen was him disappearing into the wall.

Next they saw a rope emerge from that same wall and drop toward them.

Calavera stuck his head out.
"Tie my torch to the rope and I'll haul it up. Then you can come join me."

A few minutes later, the Guardsmen found themselves in a library. Niches in the round stone walls were used as shelves to hold books. A wooden table, with inkwell and paper, sat in the centre of the room. There was only one chair.

The room had unquestionably been built in the time of the Romans, but the ink still smelled wet, and the paper did not look excessively dry. Everything was as though the occupant had been there only yesterday.

Carved into the walls were unusual patterns, similar to the design they'd seen at the entrance to the Black Curtain, but executed in a style entirely different. de Torre reached out to one, meaning to run his finger along the groove in the stone.

"I wouldn't," said Dorado.

de Torre stopped. He dropped his hand.

It would not be wise to tempt whatever ghosts might haunt this ancient place.

In the centre of the table was a large book, bound in black leather, with a blood-red border embossed into the front cover for decoration. Calavera picked it up.

And the floor shook.

Dorado turned to face the entrance. He could not see through the illusion and into the alcove, but he could see the cut in the stone wall through which they had passed.

And behind it, the wall was moving.

No, they were moving. To be precise, the entire round room was turning, like a potter's wheel.

Dorado had a dreadful suspicion he knew what was going to happen.

But before he could act upon it, the room stopped moving.

Which meant it was probably too late.

Nevertheless, he walked over to the opening cut into the wall of the library, and reached out to touch the illusion.

It was no longer an illusion, but a solid wall. When the room had turned, it had left the illusion behind - as well as the exit to the spider's alcove. Now their only way out of the room opened on nothing but immovable stone.

They were trapped.

"I have mentioned, have I not, that I am developing a deep disliking for magic?"
Yes, we are still underground, which is still my European proxy for corridors in Ancient Mayan temples!

The first such underground tunnels to be found in this story were of course under the Cemetery of Saint Mary of Purity, named for Enid Blyton, the person who really got me into secret passages at a tender age, with her Famous Five series. It seemed the back of every one of those books contained the word "underground"!

The derivation was simple enough: Mary was Blyton's middle name, and the name Enid is derived from a Welsh word indicating purity.

EDITED Dec. 10 - Thanks, ereshai!
Prisoner Of The Spanish Major

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH Turo Corvus, despite being under arrest, triumphs over a Gendarme, and learns something the Doves do not.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MARTÍN Pescador opened the door to the bakehouse and addressed his men.

"The Guardsman has surrendered himself to me. Lorre and Rojo will help me escort him to the island. The rest of you are charged to continue looking for the others. Aragonés, wait by my horse."

Corvus heard a flurry of activity outside.

Over it came the sound of François Carandini’s voice.

"I wouldn't trust his surrender; Corvus is a crafty one."

"That is not your concern. I have taken him at his word."

"His word isn't worth - "

"Need I remind you, Gendarme Carandini," said Pescador, his voice heavy with the weight of his absolute authority in Isla Oestelago, "that your Captain has conferred upon me the authority to lead his men as though they were my own, and therefore that to question my decisions is to commit an act of mutiny?"

"No," Carandini said, then added, very reluctantly, "Major."

"Good. Then be on your way, and we will speak no more of this misunderstanding."

After a quiet pause, during which he was presumably watching to confirm that Carandini was doing as ordered, Pescador turned back to Corvus. Already the Guardsman had removed his belt, which held his scabbard and his knife sheath, as well as several pouches, and was placing it upon the table. Then he reached under his Tunic and unclasped another sheath, removing it and his second dagger from where it had been concealed within his clothing.

"Does that comprise everything which may be used as a weapon or which may be used to assist your escape from custody?"

"You have my word, I have placed upon the table everything which does not constitute clothing."

Pescador nodded, noting and accepting the nuance of Corvus' amendment. He understood that in the Guardsman's hands, there was nothing at all which could not somehow be used to assist him in his endeavours.
Two Doves, presumably Lorre and Rojo, entered the bakehouse and took guard positions on either side of the door. Corvus nodded to them; they stayed at attention and did not return his greeting.

Meanwhile Pescador was opening and examining the contents of the pouches on Corvus' belt: balls, powder, lighting flints, a phial of oil, bent nails...

He held up the last of these.

"I find it difficult to believe that these crude tools are what you used to gain access to the rooms in the post building."

"I do own a more precisely-tooled set, but I have loaned it to a comrade less experienced in picking locks than I am."

Pescador nodded again. His face did not betray his grasp of what Corvus had just knowingly revealed: That whatever the Guardsmen's plans still were, picking locks was included among them.

"I don't expect you would be willing to vouchsafe to me what brought you Esperanzans to Spain and to Isla Oestelago in the first place, would you?"

Corvus shrugged, his regret mostly genuine. "I can only assure you that we intend no harm to anyone, nor do we intend to do anything which will weaken your city and your country's ability to defend itself."

"I take you at your word, of course, but nevertheless, you do understand, I trust, that with no further information I am obliged to try you as a spy, for which the penalty is death?"

"I understand."

Pescador hesitated. He wanted to ask Corvus if he would reconsider his reticence, but he knew what the answer would be.

The Guardsman also suspected the Dove did not want to see him executed if there were not sufficient reason, but that he would not express this to an adversary.

"Please remove your Tunic and place it upon the table beside your belt."

"Is that truly necessary? As I am to be held as an Esperanzan spy, and you intend to execute me as a Guardsman and therefore the enemy of your country, would it not be more appropriate for me to wear the symbol of my crimes during my incarceration?"

Pescador scowled at him. This was not the way things were done.

"If I may be so bold," Corvus said with another apologetic shrug, "one might consider the alternative dishonest."

Pescador stepped right up to him, and Corvus feared he might have pushed the Dove too far.

"Extend your arms away from your body, and place your legs somewhat apart."

Corvus did as instructed, and Pescador moved his hands firmly but not roughly all over the Guardsman's body and clothing, paying particular attention to the Tunic. When he was finished
inspecting Corvus for anything he might have concealed upon his person, Pescador stepped back and nodded to him.

Corvus lowered his arms.

"You may wear the Tunic to the prison, during your trial, and for your probable execution. But you have reached the limit of the concessions I am willing to make. Do not provoke me by seeking anything further."

"I will not. You have my thanks."

Pescador shook his head. He did not want gratitude; he was only doing what he felt was right.

Corvus felt sorry for him. He imagined it must be very difficult to live one's life as Pescador did, with the constant fear of behaving incorrectly.

The Dove motioned for Corvus to exit. It was time to take him to Fortaleza Tormentaña.

Corvus walked to the door, and as he approached the Doves guarding the door, one of them left in front of him, while the other followed close behind. Corvus was aware of Pescador returning everything inside the bakehouse that had been disturbed to its proper state, then picking up his possessions from the table, and extinguishing the torch.

Out in the street, Pescador gave Corvus' things to Aragonés, the man guarding the Major's horse.

"Place these in the saddle bags, then bring my horse to the stables before returning to your patrol. You may leave these items where they are; I will deal with them and the horse's proper stabling upon my return."

"Yes, Major."

His man went about his business, and Pescador went to where Corvus and the other two Doves had stopped to wait for him. The major walked past them, and they followed, matching his pace.

Corvus wondered whether their route would take them past the woodcarver's workshop. He expected it would, for that was on the most direct path to where the Doves kept their boats.

He resolved that when they passed the building, he would speak loudly, indicating to his comrades that he was captured and they should continue without him.

But instead, when they were halfway to the docks, Pescador turned down a road which led away from the woodcarver's.

"Pardon me," said Corvus, pointing in the direction he wanted to go, "but isn't this the most direct route to your boats?"

Pescador stopped and turned around. Aside from undisguised displeasure at being contradicted, he was keeping his expression inscrutable, even to a man as skilled at reading faces as Corvus was.

But one thing was clear: Pescador did not want to take Corvus to the docks by the most direct route, for a reason he wished to keep to himself.
Nevertheless, he was obliged to respond to Corvus' question.

He decided what tack to take, and his expression became an open smirk.

"You are correct. It seems you've studied our city rather carefully. Is there some reason behind your desire to go to prison via the most efficient path?"

It was the stratagem Corvus had been expecting; he was prepared for it.

"There is no ambush I am aware of, if that is your concern. We should be quite safe."

Pescador was trapped. He could not now refuse to go in the direction Corvus wanted without offering some kind of information or implying cowardice on his part.

"Well. As long as I have your word we shall not be troubled by your comrades, I suppose there is no need to take an alternate route."

And he resumed walking, leading them along the path that would take them past the woodcarver's shop.

Corvus watched him very carefully after that, for any sign of why Pescador had not wanted to travel in that direction.

He was rewarded for his diligence when they entered the city block which housed the woodcarver's building.

Subtly, so those around him would not notice, Pescador looked directly at it!

Corvus now knew what he would say as they passed the shop.

Pescador surreptitiously looked at it again.

But this time, Corvus allowed the Dove to perceive that he'd noticed the hidden glance.

Before Pescador could comment, Corvus said, loudly enough to be heard within, "I notice, Major, that this building has attracted your specific interest. Is there any particular reason for that?"

Pescador turned to face Corvus while he continued walking, and although his expression remained neutral, Corvus could see behind his eyes the flame of anger - although it was primarily directed at himself, for being discovered.

On either side of him, Corvus felt his guards stiffen. They knew the reason for their superior's interest, and were uncertain how their leader might respond to Corvus' interrogation.

"That building is often occupied at night, by the daughter of Duque Josefo, the Lady Graciela Lobato. She is an artist, a carver of wood, and... artists keep unusual hours."

Well! Here was something Miguel Portero might have mentioned to the Guardsmen when he was telling them about the aqueduct grate in that building!

It did not escape Corvus' attention that Portero had more than once referred to the woodcarver by a masculine pronoun - a deliberate lie. He could only conceive of a few reasons the musician might have done this; all of them were cause for concern.

But there was still more... in the tone of Martín Pescador's voice when he spoke of Graciela Lobato.
Corvus was trying to decide how to confirm - delicately - what he suspected, when the door to the darkened workshop surprised all four of them by opening!

The guards on either side of Corvus immediately turned and drew weapons, one a sword and the other a pistol. Pescador also turned, but all he did was place his hand on the handle of his pistol: Before bringing his weapon to bear, an experienced and disciplined soldier first makes certain that a genuine threat is present.

And so it was that when the Lady Graciela Lobato emerged from her workshop, two weapons were pointed at her, but neither belonged to Martín Pescador.

"Major," said the lady, "there seems to be much commotion this evening."

The Doves put their weapons away, quickly.

"My Lady," Pescador said, bowing slightly more deferentially than propriety required, "the Esperanzan Emerald Guardsmen who have invaded our city are out in the streets tonight, and we are making every effort to locate them and bring them to justice. I regret that the execution of our duty has disturbed you, but certainly you must see that the tumult is in everyone's best interests."

"Of course, Major. You have never failed in your duty."

The Major, who after his bow had been standing at perfect attention, somehow managed to straighten his back even further. "Thank you, my Lady."

Graciela Lobato stared Turo Corvus in the eyes.

"Three times this evening I have been disturbed by a visitor."

"My apologies - "

"There is no need for apologies, Major. These men were simply doing their duty. Once they had what they were seeking, they continued on their way."

The whole time she spoke her eyes never left Corvus' own.

She wanted to make certain he understood what her words really meant.

It was astonishing to Corvus that the Duke's daughter should be assisting the Emerald Guard - and secretly telling him about it directly in front of Pescador! - but he nevertheless managed to appear unmoved.

In any case, Pescador would not have noticed if Corvus had reacted; the Major was focused entirely upon the lady.

Who now faced the Dove. "On behalf of my father and our city, I thank you for your unfailing commitment to our protection. I will let you get on with your business."

"I thank you, my Lady," and once again Pescador bowed to her, as did his men.

She nodded to them, then stepped back into her workshop and closed the door.

Presumably not wanting to disturb his Lady any further, Pescador indicated with a nod of his head that they were to continue on to the docks.

They walked in silence for several minutes, and Corvus noticed that the more distance there
was between himself and the woodcarver's shop, the more Martín Pescador's confident tranquility returned to him.

When he judged that the Major would be not at all prepared for it, Corvus asked his question.

"You are in love with Graciela Lobato, are you not?"

Pescador stopped walking, and this was all the answer Corvus needed.

That the other two Doves also stopped walking, independently of their Major's actions, prepared Corvus for the intensity of Pescador's reply.

The Dove turned to him, and his face was anguished.

"The smile of Lady Graciela Lobato is the closest thing to Paradise I ever hope to experience in this lifetime. I lack only the courage to ask the lady whether or not she deems me worthy of her."

Chapter End Notes

Quick n' dirty Author's Notes this week, since we didn't get to the character I was intending to write about:
- "Rojo" means "red"; "Flynn" means "ruddy," and Lorre is backward.
- Aragonés is named after the person you think he is.
Chapter Summary

*IN WHICH, among many other events, Turo Corvus is delivered, protected, threatened, and questioned.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**CALAVERA'S** first desire was to throw the book into the wall, but he managed to hold himself in check.

He looked down at the table. There was no device concealed upon the tabletop, nothing which might have been spring-loaded to rise upon the lifting of the book, triggering the room mechanism.

This was some consolation. He could tell himself that if such a device had existed, he would have noticed it prior to lifting the book. Despite how eager he'd been to take possession of it.

"I apologise, my friends, for my careless haste."

Dorado's glance at him indicated, as gently as was possible, that Dorado thought his friend was being silly.

de Torre merely shrugged. "I have no doubt we shall soon find a way to free ourselves again."

This was perhaps the best thing he could have said; Calavera felt his mood lighten considerably.

"Besides, this may not be intended as a trap," de Torre said. "Perhaps this closing of our exit is primarily intended to close off the entrance, granting the occupant some privacy for his studies."

Dorado snorted. "I would have thought the spider sufficient assurance of that."

Calavera held up his finger. "Alejandro makes a good point: Although the blocking of the opening may appear to us to be an inconvenience - "

"An inconvenience?"

" - we should not assume that this was Terentius' intent."

Calavera put the book back on the table, trying to place it exactly where he remembered it having been.

Nothing happened.

He lifted the book.

Again, nothing happened. Although this second time that came as more of a relief as
compared to the disappointment of the first time.

Also, it caused Calavera to notice something unusual on the table. He leaned in more closely with his torch.

There was a faint symbol on the spot where the book had been resting, painted in an oil so light in colour it was very nearly transparent. The symbol consisted of several triangles, some overlapping each other, set within a circle. Smaller designs, possibly letters in an alphabet Calavera did not recognise, surrounded the circle, appearing at every point where a triangle touched its circumference.

Calavera turned the book over and opened it. On the inside of the back cover, painted upon the leather in what was presumably the same oil, was the same symbol, identical in size. Before Calavera had lifted it, the book had been placed such that the symbol in the book was directly above the one on the table.

There was no doubt in Calavera's mind that he'd activated a trap triggered by magic.

This probably meant it could be undone by magic as well.

Calavera began turning the pages, slowly, hoping to find within a representation of the symbol, along with some explanation of how to undo its effects.

The book was written in Latin.

The only person he knew with an understanding of Latin (aside from, in all likelihood, His Lordship Vincente de Tarso) was probably, at this very moment, somewhere above him on the Rio Miño, being taken to Fortaleza Tormentaña.

He sighed, and returned to his perusal.

And a moment later he realised he was underestimating his long-dead foe.

"Lanza, Alejandro, search through these books, one page at a time to make sure you don't miss what you're looking for." He held his torch over the table. "That symbol. It's what triggered our imprisonment; perhaps it holds the key to freeing us."

And if the answer were in any of these books, it would most likely not be in the one that had triggered the trap in the first place, would it?

de Torre walked over to one of the shelves, and reached out his hand to select a volume.

"Wait!"

There was a broom in the corner. Calavera picked it up and motioned for de Torre and Dorado to move themselves a reasonable distance away. Then, holding the broom as far down on its handle as he could while still being able to manipulate it, and approaching the shelf from a distance away and to the side, Calavera began moving the books one at a time by placing the tip of the handle upon their spines and pushing downward, shifting the top of each book away from the others at an angle.

When he moved the fifth book, a dart shot out of the shelf and embedded itself in the broom handle.

"Begin with that one," he said to de Torre, and tossed the broom to Dorado. While Calavera
and de Torre examined their respective volumes, Dorado began using the broom to discover which of the other books Terentius had considered important enough to protect with a trap.

He'd gone through fifteen books on a different shelf when de Torre discovered in his own the symbol on the table.

The accompanying text was again in Latin, but this didn't matter, for the gruesome illustrations surrounding it were more than sufficiently clear.

They depicted a man cutting off the extremity of his finger at the topmost knuckle, then tipping the severed piece over the symbol like a chalice, using his own blood to rinse the mark away.

de Torre placed the book in his Lieutenant's hands without speaking, regret and apology in his eyes.

Calavera studied the images for several seconds, making himself certain of what he was about to do.

Then he handed his torch to de Torre and placed the book open on the table, beside the one with the symbol.

He unsheathed his dagger and drew it across the tip of the little finger on his left hand. Blood welled up from the cut, and before any of it could be wasted Calavera started rubbing his finger over the symbol on the table.

It stung like the devil, and there was another feeling as well, hot and cold at the same time. He ignored both sensations as best as he could, covering the symbol entirely.

Then with his right hand he rubbed at the blood with his handkerchief, pressing down as if he were polishing a boot. The symbol on the table began to fade.

He squeezed his finger and applied more blood, then wiped twice as hard.

The symbol disappeared.

The room began to turn again, in the opposite direction.

Calavera's instinct was to continue rubbing, until the room was where he wanted it, but this was not the same as pushing a table into position: This was magic.

The room continued to turn, with no further prompting from Calavera, until the opening in its wall was once more aligned with the opening in the wall of the alcove.

Before replacing his handkerchief, Calavera cut a strip from it and bound his finger tightly.

Dorado and de Torre approached the exit, and stared at it in mute indecision. Both men were eager to leave, but reluctant to move through the opening in case the room should shift again and crush them.

"I suppose I should volunteer to go first," Calavera said.

"It is the privilege of leadership," said Dorado.

Calavera smiled and nodded. His recent success had restored his confidence.
Magic might work in unanticipated ways, but it evidently possessed its own logic, and once that logic was understood it could be defeated.

Perhaps it could even be made useful.

Calavera placed the first book, the one he'd lifted off the table, into his bag.

"You intend to take that infernal thing with you?"

Dorado did not seem at all comfortable with the idea.

But Calavera was resolved.

"I've paid for it. I intend to keep it."

*****

The men who guarded Fortaleza Tormentaña lived on the island, and were in the service of the prison warden, Daniel Cortés, forming a small, limited army, with him as their commander. Not quite soldiers, and certainly not Doves, they occupied a hierarchical position outside of the one over which Major Martín Pescador had authority, and so were not required to obey any order he might issue.

That being said, there was no man in the Duchy of Isla Oestelago foolish enough to provoke Pescador's displeasure without exceptional reason.

And it was just such an exceptional reason that at this moment was confronting the guards unfortunate enough to be posted at the main entrance to the prison this evening.

"Begging your forgiveness, Señor Pescador - "

"Major Pescador."

"Yes, of course, my apologies. Begging your forgiveness - "

"Yes."

" - but the Warden does not like to be disturbed when he is asleep."

Pescador glared at him.

"For my part, I do not like to be denied, nor kept waiting."

His expression and tone had the desired effect of making the guard understand the firmness of Pescador's position.

It also made the man shift slightly away and change his posture, trying to make himself smaller, like a dog afraid of being hit.

This was certainly over and above the desired effect. Pescador was not pleased.

Animals only behave in this fashion when they have learned to expect severe punishment.
Once again, Pescador promised himself that very soon, Daniel Cortés would no longer have dominion over the people in Isla Oestelago, any of them.

He adopted a less threatening countenance, and tried to speak more gently.

"Take me to him."

The guard looked as though he were about to faint.

"I will leave one of my men here, so there will continue to be two guards posted at this entrance. You will escort me, my other Dove, and our prisoner, to Cortés' door. I will wake him myself, so that if he chooses to become angry, he will have to direct his temper at me."

They both knew that this would not entirely protect the guard from Cortés' wrath, since the warden could do whatever he wanted once Pescador was gone, but it was nevertheless the best choice for the man, from a very limited number of options.

And so it was that, before long, Martín Pescador was pounding on the door of Daniel Cortés' private chambers.

After a moment, a man's voice, loud in spite of its obvious tiredness, bellowed from within.

"What idiotic mosquito is that, buzzing in my ear while I sleep, and forcing me to slap it between my hands?"

"It is Major Martín Pescador of the Doves, Señor Cortés. My regrets for the lateness of the hour, but I have with me an Emerald Guardsman of Esperanza, who I wish to deliver into your care."

There was a long silence behind the door. The answer to his question had given the warden much to think about.

Corvus heard the bed creak, rather loudly, then what must have been the sound of Cortés donning some clothing. Based on the movement of the bed when he'd risen from it, and the subsequent heaviness of his breathing, Corvus expected that the warden would reveal himself to be rather plump.

But then the door opened, and Corvus almost gasped in amazement. To say that Daniel Cortés was merely plump would be to understate the case to such an extent as to fail to describe him at all. He was exceptionally fat, larger than any man Corvus had ever seen. In order to support his enormous belly, he had to arch his back, and this only made him look more exaggerated and grotesque.

Corvus quickly recovered from his astonishment, before the warden could perceive it.

But out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Pescador had noticed.

His own expression indicated that on this particular subject, the Dove and the Guardsman were in perfect agreement.

For his part, Cortés was staring at Pescador with an ugly combination of contempt and superciliousness. He was making no attempt to conceal either; Corvus doubted the man possessed sufficient finesse to do so even should he have wanted to, which he most certainly did not.

Pescador returned the warden's loathsome regard with a calm expression that succeeded in
being simultaneously more sophisticated and more insulting.

"This is Turo Corvus. He is my prisoner. You will be responsible for holding him until his trial."

Cortés turned at last to face his charge, and when he did his beefy cheeks lifted in a sickening smile.

There was nothing the least bit pleasant about his expression. He was relishing the thought of having a Guardsman at his mercy.

In spite of Pescador's assurances and his own temerity, Corvus was deeply unsettled by the prospect.

He now fully understood Portero's astounding request that this man be killed. Not only was the warden of Fortaleza Tormentaña clearly, as the now-erstwhile musician had called him, "an evil creature of exceptional cruelty," but worse, he knew what he was and reveled in it.

"Cortés. Look at me."

Pescador's cold voice shook both Corvus and the warden out of their reveries. Both men turned to him.

But the Major focused on only one of them, and so intently that even a man as proud as Cortés could not help but be affected.

"I have given this man my word that he will not be mishandled in any way while he is my prisoner. Although I am entrusting him to you, he remains in my care."

He took a breath.

"You will show him how the Doves behave toward soldiers, or I will show you how I behave toward men of dishonour."

Cortés' eyes demonstrated his displeasure, both at the insult and at being told how to comport himself in his own domain, but his expression hardly changed, and he said nothing.

The two Spaniards silently held each other's gazes for some time, their mutual enmity so strong that it held both men paralysed.

Then Cortés smiled. It was perhaps less ugly than the smile he had given Corvus, but certainly no more pleasant.

"I will, of course, do everything a man can do to honour your word to this prisoner. Of course, should he break his word and attempt to escape, it will be my duty to prevent him, and I could not with a clear conscience do anything less than my utmost in such an event, even if it meant risking his injury."

Pescador had just been out-manoeuvred by the man who ruled Fortaleza Tormentaña.

Cortés was going to be denied his opportunity to torture an Emerald Guardsman, but nevertheless he'd devised a means to indulge in his precious cruelty while simultaneously casting a stain upon Pescador's honour.

He was planning to kill Corvus outright, and claim that it happened while the Guardsman
had been attempting to escape.

Walking once more through the tunnels beneath Rio Miño, Calavera, Dorado, and de Torre arrived at a juncture where the single route split into two.

"Lanza?"

"The path on the left points directly toward the island."

"So naturally," said de Torre, "we will be taking the one on the right."

Dorado chuckled; he was proud to see the young man maturing before his very eyes.

"You're certain?" said Calavera.

"I've been keeping careful track of our bearings, in spite of the minor turns we've taken. I am certain: The line is direct."

"Then Terentius wants us to be afraid to take it."

de Torre threw up his hands in resignation. "Of course."

Dorado studied Calavera carefully. "Are you certain?"

The Lieutenant looked down for a moment at his bandaged finger, then back at his friend.

"Much less certain than you are of our direction."

"Good. Then the left it is."

They continued walking for what seemed like half an hour. Eventually their eyes became sore from the flickering light and the smoke of the torches, but they knew this was a minor inconvenience compared to what they might suffer if they had less light by which to perceive any dangers.

"Stop."

Calavera and de Torre ceased their walking immediately, the latter somewhat surprised at how quickly he'd responded.

He suspected he'd never been more alert in his entire life.

Calavera pointed at the ceiling.

One of the stones above was narrower, and very long, forming a thin rectangle that spanned the width of the tunnel.

"What do you think it is?" said Dorado.

"A door," Calavera said. "One piece of solid stone designed to drop from the ceiling and block the passage completely."
de Torre, who'd been staring at the rectangle in wonder and puzzlement, suddenly knew, although he could not say how, that Calavera was absolutely right.

"What sort of diabolical mind can even imagine these things?"

"You mean besides our Lieutenant?"

de Torre turned to Calavera, intending to apologise if he'd given offence, but his friend was smiling at him.

Calavera was thinking once again of the Baron of Girona.

"If it is a door," he said, "there must be a means of triggering it. Look around, pay careful attention to the mortar, or to any stone which seems somehow different from the others. Inspect everything: the walls, the floor, even the ceiling. And be sure to step only on areas you've thoroughly inspected.

de Torre, who remembered vividly the sight of flames suddenly shooting from the walls of the tunnel, needed no urging to be cautious. Nevertheless, he appreciated the advice.

They searched for fifteen minutes, and found nothing. Each man looked over the area his comrades had already inspected, but still they found nothing. They widened their search, and again nothing.

Finally, after a very wearisome forty-five minutes, their Lieutenant decided they should move on.

"I am convinced there is nothing here to find, or we would have found it by now."

The other two were fully in agreement.

So they continued onward, tired and frustrated. For the next ten minutes the only sounds in the tunnels were the faint flickering of torch flames and the echoing of boots upon the stone floor.

But then Dorado, who was in front, suddenly stopped walking, and held his arms away from his sides.

The other two stopped as well.

Dorado pointed forward and down. "Do either of you perceive a difference in the floor ahead of us?"

de Torre did not, but Calavera nodded.

"Where the walls meet the ground, the lines of separation seem wider and deeper."

"Yes," said de Torre, "now I see it."

He believed he could guess what that meant.

Calavera lay down on his stomach and crawled forward, holding his right arm out in front of him. Every time he slid ahead one foot, he pushed down upon the floor.

The fourth time he did this, the stones ten feet beyond separated along a straight line, from one wall to the other, and the floor fell away. It was still attached to a point just in front of where Calavera was lying, so for a moment it created a sort of slide, but in the next moment the trap had
opened completely, leaving a deep pit in its place.

Calavera backed away from it, then stood up. The others carefully joined him, and together the three men peered over the edge.

They could not see the bottom.

Calavera unwound the bandage and inspected his finger. His skin was very red, but the cut had sealed; he no longer needed to keep it wrapped.

He lowered his torch and held the strip of cloth over it until it caught fire. Then he tossed the burning cloth into the pit.

It fell for a long time.

A very long time.

It fell so far that when they could no longer see it, they weren't certain whether it had burned itself out, or merely passed beyond their sight.

In any case, the ground below was very far away.

Assuming the pit even had a bottom, de Torre noted to himself.

"How do we lift the floor back up?" said Dorado, ever pragmatic.

Calavera was already considering that question.

"Since it seems impossible we could do it ourselves, I suspect we have to wait for it to rise on its own."

He turned and started walking back the way they'd come.

"Unless there's something we missed..."

It turned out that Calavera was right with both guesses. The floor did rise on its own, after ten minutes, and they did discover, near to the floor, a stone they had not noticed earlier was insufficiently mortared. Upon removing it, Calavera found that it was in the shape of a rectangle, wider than it was deep. When he replaced it with the narrower end forward, pushing it further than it could go if placed the way it had been initially, it made the faintest click, as though the stone had pushed a lock of some sort.

Calavera instructed Dorado to shove down on the trap.

He couldn't budge it.

Calavera removed the stone, and told him to push again.

The floor dropped as it had before, and they were forced to wait another ten minutes for it to return.

Then Calavera replaced the stone in the locking position, and they walked across the trap. Not one man breathed until they were safely on the other side.

After a brief pause to congratulate themselves, they continued on their way.
The tunnel twisted, then straightened, then forked, then twisted again. de Torre could not conceive of how Dorado was able to keep his bearings through all these changes, but if Calavera believed that his friend could do it, that was all de Torre required to convince him it was true.

They had been walking down a very long, perfectly straight tunnel, for some time, when they noticed that up ahead something was protruding from the ceiling.

They approached, slowly and carefully, and looked up.

It was a smoothly-carved stone cylinder, about two feet in diameter, set into the precise centre of the ceiling and extending from it roughly a foot.

de Torre walked around the cylinder, considering it from several angles. He chuckled.

"Do you know what it reminds me of? It looks like a cork in a bottle."

Dorado looked at Calavera.

Calavera looked at Dorado.

They both looked back up again.

de Torre looked at them, looking at the cylinder.

"That's impossible."

"Giant spider," said Dorado. "Rooms you unlock by bleeding on tables."

"But... the river?"

Calavera took Terentius' book out of his bag, and began searching through it.

"Now we can infer what the door set into the ceiling is for. If any circumstance sufficiently urgent were to have arisen that required this extreme measure, the builder of the aqueducts nevertheless wanted a means of preventing the river from flooding his city from below."

****

Corvus' cell was in the basement of the prison.

Pescador had raised an objection, but Cortés' response had been that the basement cells, having no windows, made escape more difficult. The Dove had had no reasonable response to that, and furthermore, however much he might distrust and despise the man, Pescador had to concede that, for the time being, Cortés was the man in charge of Fortaleza Tormentaña, and thus all such matters were his responsibility. It was not Pescador's place to interfere, even if he knew what treachery Cortés was planning.

And so Corvus was in the basement, in a cell with no windows, and thus, once his captors had departed with their torches, he'd been left in perfect darkness.

But now he could see light coming from the crack under the door.
Corvus stood up. He was manacled to a chain set into the stone wall, preventing him from taking an ambush position beside the door, but nevertheless, if this was Cortés come to kill him, Corvus intended to acquit himself well.

The door opened.

It was not Cortés.

Before him stood one solitary guard, an older man, with deep creases at his eyes and a scalp so bereft of hair that it brightly reflected the light of the man's torch. He wore no moustache, but from his chin fell a rectangle of pure white, three inches long and two inches wide.

The man made no attempt to enter, but stood in the doorway, regarding Corvus with a haughty air.

"So. You are the famous Emerald Guardsman whose arrival caused such an upheaval earlier. They tell me that Pescador respects you and Cortés fears you, but from where I am standing you do not look terribly worthy of either consideration. Tell me, Guardsman, what plan, if any, was in your mind when you surrendered to Pescador?"

"To gain entrance to this prison through means of my arrest, and then, once here, to escape."

The guard snorted. "And how did you expect to do that?"

"I would decide that upon my arrival."

The guard clutched at his belly, threw back his head, and laughed.

Then he walked into Corvus' cell, transferring his torch to the left hand so he could extend the other in greeting.

"You must be Turo Corvus. I am jubilant to make your acquaintance - I've heard so much about you! Allow me to introduce myself: I am Armando Maíz."

"Also known as Santiago."

The man stopped, literally taken aback.

"You have heard of me?"

"Of course. I am here to rescue you."

Chapter End Notes

The two people with the "honour" of having Daniel Cortés named after them are Danny Elfman and Michael Curtiz. The former, of course, is an excellent film composer, whose platters are never far from my player, most notably recently
Avengers: Age Of Ultron, which as mentioned before I play like crazy when writing this, and Batman, which I finally bought last year and has a suitably rousing mood. And the latter is the excellent film director who won the Academy Award for Casablanca, but whose greatest distinction for the purposes of this story is that he directed The Adventures of Robin Hood, Captain Blood, and The Sea Hawk, which I guess makes him the greatest swashbuckler director of all time, eh?
LOOKING up at the stone cork - for there no longer remained the slightest doubt in the Guardsmen's minds as to precisely what the cylinder set into the ceiling was - Alejandro de Torre's mind wandered away from the object's grim purpose toward the peculiarities of language.

Chief among these peculiarities was the phrase "under water." Commonly used to mean "immersed in the water," it seldom if ever was employed to describe de Torre's current situation, which was, literally, beneath the water, with the entire Rio Miño above him.

He wished, with all his heart, to remain under water, and not to find himself underwater.

The latter might constitute "deep trouble" - but now he was just being giddy.

"Here it is!" said Calavera, holding the magician's book out to them in triumph. "I cannot read Latin, but it is close enough to Spanish - and French, which I also read - for me to make out the intent. Also, the illustration of the cork is quite unmistakable."

It certainly was.

de Torre found himself wondering about the water pressing down on the cork, how heavy it all must be.

Calavera returned to his perusal. "The instructions seem to indicate an incantation must be recited, and that is presented in a language I do not recognise - it might not even be European."

"Lieutenant," said Dorado, "far be it from me to curtail your excitement, but I am compelled to ask: What in Heaven's name would possess you to research such a thing?"

Calavera shrugged.

"It's better to have the knowledge and not need it, rather than the opposite."

Dorado and de Torre shared a look. They agreed with their Lieutenant's logic, but neither man was particularly eager to see him proven right.

*****

Turo Corvus pointed at the manacle around his ankle.
"Do you by any chance have something which might help me remove myself from this?"

"Of course I do!" said Armando Maíz. "Bartolomé - the guard of my most recent acquaintance - formerly held in his possession everything an escaping spy could want: a helmet, a pike, a sword, a pistol and its accessories, a lit torch, the armband denoting his role within the prison - and, of course, a set of keys."

He jingled them in front of Corvus, a proud twinkle in his eye.

"Come, let me assist you in my rescue."

Maíz gave his torch to Corvus and crouched down to free his leg.

While he was doing this, Corvus asked him, "Have you gone about like this many times before?"

"I have gone about the prison before, but never disguised as a guard, for of course that required rendering one of them unconscious, and that's the sort of thing that would have been discovered. Instead I've been letting myself out of my cell and sneaking about at night - although of course I've not been able to carry a torch with me - and familiarising myself with the prison, waiting for the correct opportunity to escape. I did not think that, if unsuccessful, I would survive to have another opportunity."

He finished his task and stood up. Corvus tested his foot and ankle, and found everything working to his satisfaction.

"And, so," said Maíz, "when I saw from my window, approaching this place of my confinement, a man wearing the Tunic, I decided the time had at last arrived."

He gestured toward the open door of the cell.

"Shall we?"

"After you."

"Of course." He retrieved his torch from Corvus. "Given I have spent more time here than you have, I suppose I shall have to act as your host. Stay close to me; should anyone surprise us, their first impulse will be to believe you are my prisoner."

"It is unlikely anyone shall surprise us; we will see the light of their torches before they are upon us."

"Ah! An excellent point."

They exited the cell and turned left.

"Do you have a specific destination in mind?"

Maíz stopped.

"Do you know, I was so excited I didn't give it any thought."

"Have you managed to locate the grate which opens onto Terentius' aqueducts?"

"Oh! You have made good use of your time in the city!"
He looked around.

"This is not the lowest level of the prison. The access to the tunnels will of course be on the lowest level. Follow me." And he continued in the direction he'd been walking.

"So, how did you learn of these aqueducts?"

"We've had the pleasure of speaking with Miguel Portero."

"Excellent!"

But Maíz' joy at hearing his friend's name just as quickly gave way to melancholy.

"Poor Miguel. Such a treasure, and such a tragedy."

"You have not been abused by Cortés, I trust?"

"I have not. The trick, you see, is to present the precise amount of self-confidence that will not invite attack. Too much will be seen as a threat to the warden's own pride, and too little will be seen as weakness, and encourage the crueler aspects of his nature. Miguel, as you might expect, erred on the side of the former."

"But he is a friend of the Duke."

"He is a low-born friend, to the Duke's children. Although I daresay, if Miguel's pride permitted him to reveal to Salvador or Graciela what has been done to him, Cortés would be finished. But the warden knows which prisoners are suitable prey and which are to be left alone. Another reason I've been spared Cortés' vile proclivities is that I have - that is to say, Frédéric Blossier has - powerful friends in the French court. Cortés will not risk Duque Josefo's wrath by angering them."

Corvus nodded; it was not unexpected to hear that Cortés, in spite of his stupidity and arrogance, nevertheless possessed an animal's instinct for survival.

"Tell me, friend Armando - "

Maíz smiled and lowered his head; he'd also felt an immediate kinship with his fellow Guardsman.

" - as you are familiar with Cortés' behaviour, if he were to be insulted by a man more powerful than himself, a man against whom he could do nothing, but there were someone he could punish for the other's transgression, notwithstanding that it was night and the warden was tired - "

"Cortés intends to do you harm in order to exact revenge upon Pescador? We must hurry."

They arrived at a staircase, with steps leading both up and down.

"I believe the next floor down will be the lowest."

But Corvus suddenly held a finger to his lips for silence.

Maíz stepped closer to him, away from the stairs.

"What is it, my friend?" he whispered.

"I heard footsteps, at the bottom of the stairs, come to a sudden stop."
Maíz nodded. "As though whoever is down there fears being discovered."

"Precisely."

The staircase had lit torches ensconced over it, so the Guardsmen knew their light would not betray them.

But neither did the light below give anything away.

They remained motionless, and listened.

It was too quiet down there, the unnatural silence that is created when there is someone present who wants to make no noise at all.

Corvus and Maíz knew they were creating precisely the same kind of soundlessness.

There was no doubt in their minds that someone was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Nor that the party below knew that someone was waiting at the top of the stairs.

So Corvus really saw no alternative.

"Is that you?" he whispered.

From below, he heard a soft voice answer, "Is that you?"

It was Dorado.

"Lanza?"

"Turo."

Dorado mounted the stairs, and behind him came de Torre and Calavera. When they were all on the same floor, Corvus made the introductions.

"Armando Maíz, known in Isla Oestelago as Frédéric Blossier, known to us as Santiago of the Emerald Guard, may I present, also of the Emerald Guard, Lieutenant Diego Calavera, Lanza Dorado, and Alejandro de Torre."

They all shook hands warmly.

"You are well, Turo?" de Torre asked him.

But before he could answer, they all heard the sound of heavy boots descending the stairs from above.

One set of footfalls was much louder than the others; it could only be Cortés himself.

"Is that what I think it is?" Dorado said.

"Almost certainly," said Corvus. "It is Cortés and his men, coming to kill me."

"Already?"

de Torre turned to Calavera.

"So, do we face them, or attempt to leave before they can stop us?"
"We are here only for Maíz; we have no quarrel with these men."

"But the grate is too far away from the stairs," said Dorado. "They'll arrive at the bottom floor before we reach it, giving them an opportunity to shoot at our backs."

Maíz handed his pike to Corvus, and raised himself on a step, to stand taller than the others.

"Gentlemen!"

They turned to face him.

"Is this even a question?"

He tossed his helmet onto the floor, and tore off his armband.

"We are Emerald Guardsmen!"

Then he, Calavera, Dorado, and de Torre drew their swords.

"God, Esperanza, and Saint Rafael!" said all five as one.

Then they charged up stairs, surprising the enemy before they could draw their pistols.

Maíz knocked a man's sword aside and slashed him across the throat.

Corvus reversed his pike and drove it upward, striking a man between the legs. As his opponent crumpled to the floor, Corvus dropped his pike and seized the sword from his unresisting hand.

de Torre spotted the man who must have been Daniel Cortés, for he was the only one who was not wearing a helmet and carrying a weapon.

He was also the most frighteningly obese creature de Torre had ever seen.

The moment the Guardsmen attacked, he stopped and turned around, forcing his way back up through his own men.

de Torre ran after him, shoving guards out of the way with his free forearm.

Occupying a lower position than they, Dorado found himself in the novel circumstance of being shorter than his adversaries.

But he was always eager to adopt a new fighting technique.

With his left hand, he punched the man before him heavily in the abdomen, and grabbed his belt. Then he used the man's own momentum to pull him forward, tossing the guard over his shoulder and down the stairs, surprising the man behind him, who Dorado stabbed in the belly.

Calavera dodged a sword thrust aimed at his face, and ran his own sword through the man's chest. Then he

Maíz stopped dead, and leaned back.

A sword swished past him, missing his chest by an inch.

He stabbed his attacker under the ribs.
Corvus overstepped his lunge, and left his back exposed. His opponent raised his arm for an easy downward thrust.

And stuck his elbow into the flame of the torch hanging on the wall.

He jumped and yelped, all thought of the fight momentarily forgotten.

Corvus rose and struck him across the jaw with the basket of his sword, knocking the man senseless.

de Torre arrived at the floor above only ten paces behind Cortés, who was running toward an open door.

The man was a ridiculously slow runner.

de Torre caught up to him just as Cortés was attempting to close the door behind him. He thrust his sword arm out to block it. The impact of the heavy door upon his arm hurt quite a bit, but he maintained the grip upon his weapon.

Then Cortés bit him on the wrist, making him drop it.

He kicked the door open, forcing Cortés away from where his sword had fallen, and drew his pistol.

Cortés raised his hands.

"You won't shoot an unarmed man."

de Torre took aim, intending to prove the warden wrong.

But he remembered Calavera's words to Portero:

"The Emerald Guard are not assassins."

Cortés saw de Torre hesitate. He smiled in grotesque satisfaction.

de Torre felt nauseated.

But it reminded him of who this man was.

"The last time I killed a man," de Torre told him, "I regretted it afterward."

The warden's jowls spread even further apart. He was certain he was going to triumph.

But he was mistaken.

"So what I need more than anything," said de Torre, "is the opportunity to kill a man without remorse. A man whose righteous execution at my hands will enable me to recover my sense of perspective with respect to the requirements of my duty."

Sweat poured from Cortés' hair, down his cheeks, and over his multiple chins. He was beginning to suspect he was not in command of this situation.

"Your duty is to kill enemy soldiers. I am not a soldier."

"No. When you accompanied your men downstairs, intending to kill one of your prisoners,
my friend, you became a murderer."

Cortés clasped his hands out in front of him, shaking them at de Torre as if praying to him.

"Please! I'm begging you."

A stain of liquid began spreading across the crotch of the man's trousers. It reminded de Torre of the Dove's blood that had soaked his own clothing.

The Guardsman looked away from it, into the warden's eyes.

Daniel Cortés was afraid. He did not want to die.

Alejandro de Torre didn't give a damn.

He shot Cortés in the face.

A piece of the man's skull smacked into the back wall.

His lifeless body toppled clumsily to the ground.

"Over there!"

Outside in the corridor, de Torre heard two guards running quickly, toward the direction of the gunshot.

He only had time to kick his sword toward the back of the room and step over to it.

The two guards entered, their swords drawn.

"Stop!" de Torre shouted at them.

They advanced no further, but moved slightly apart.

Their eyes noted the sword on the floor, Cortés corpse, and the gun in de Torre's hand, pointed in their direction.

One of them spoke. "We heard the pistol shot only a few moments ago. You can't have had sufficient time to reload."

"I'm an Emerald Guardsman," said de Torre. "The cemeteries of Spain are filled with men whose last act on this Earth was to underestimate an Esperanzan."

One of the guards darted his eyes momentarily toward de Torre's sword.

"If you charge me, I will shoot one you, killing him and distracting the other long enough for me to retrieve my sword, whereupon it will be a matter of your steel against mine."

The two men looked at each other. They were prison guards, not elite soldiers. They did not know whether or not this Emerald Guardsman could do as he claimed, but they were certain that if he did retrieve his sword, neither of them would have a chance.

"I do not wish to kill you. If you lay down your weapons, and give me your words you will not pursue me upon my departure, I will leave you unharmed."

They looked at each other again. It seemed as though the one on the right was trying to
de Torre had one last argument to make. "Gentlemen, Cortés is already dead. He died a dishonourable man. It would be a terrible waste if you were also to die, on such a man's behalf."

The man on the left stepped further away from his companion, and slightly closer to de Torre.

"I regret, sir, that it is our duty to do precisely that."

The other turned to him, incredulous.

"Our duty? After what he did to Juan?"

"Juan was punished for disobeying his superior."

"He didn't disobey Cortés - he merely angered him! If he deserved to be disciplined, and I don't say that he did, surely you cannot agree that the punishment fit the crime!"

"It is not our place to make those decisions!"

But it was clear that in his heart he opposed it.

His friend on the right spread his arms out in entreaty and walked toward him.

"Not our place? He was our comrade, our friend. Do you remember the way he screamed? It was our responsibility to protect Juan from the cruelty of this swinish monster - for if not us, then who?"

The man on the left shook his head, desperately. "No, no!"

And then his partner tackled him to the ground.

The two of them started struggling, but the man from the right had the advantage of surprise, and was keeping his friend motionless on the floor.

"Hurry!" he said to de Torre. "If your offer was sincere, go now, and leave me and my companion alone. We need to discuss the finer points of honour and friendship."

de Torre nodded his thanks, picked up his sword, and ran out of the room, hurrying to rejoin the fray.

But when he arrived at the stairs, he discovered the fight was already over. Moving among the fallen guards, giving assistance to those who could still be helped, were Corvus, Maíz, Dorado, and...

"Where's the Lieutenant?"

Dorado's head snapped up. He looked around quickly.

"Oh, no."

And then he started running down the stairs.

The others hurried after him, de Torre in the lead.
"Lanza! What is it? What's wrong?"

When they got to the bottom of the stairs, and Calavera was nowhere to be seen, and Dorado continued without stopping toward the grate from which they'd entered the prison, de Torre realised what Dorado had deduced.

"Oh, no."

And he ran even faster, although he expected they were going to be too late.

*****

Standing in the system of aqueducts beneath Rio Miño, looking up at the stone cylinder set into the ceiling, Diego Calavera opened the magician Terentius' book to the page he had earlier discovered, the one with the incantation that would release the cork and allow the waters above to flood the tunnels below.

Bending his head to the words upon the page, he began to recite:

"Coraxo cahisa coremepe..."

It was not a language that Diego Calavera understood.

But then, the voice issuing from his mouth was not Diego Calavera's.

And the eyes reading the text were glowing, red and purple.

Just as he spoke the last words of the incantation, completing the rite, Calavera heard the sound of running footsteps, coming from the direction of the island.

"Lieutenant!"

It was Lanza Dorado.

Calavera turned to face him.

Dorado saw his eyes glowing. He stopped running.

Unsure what to do, he simply stared at his friend.

Who closed his eyes, swayed for a moment, and then collapsed to the ground.

Calavera stopped breathing.

And above him, the cork began to tremble...
Juan and Bartolomé were named for John Barry. I could not write this chapter without listening to 007; unthinkable.

The words of the incantation were stolen from The Satanic Bible (which seems only fair). They are purportedly Enochian, and unless I miss my guess, they mean, "The thunders of wrath..."

Cutting room floor

Back when I was planning this thing, before I'd written a single chapter, my plans for the addition of the team's fifth member - which I naïvely believed would happen much sooner than this - were way different:

- The Guardsmen are all in prison.
- Where they meet a schoolteacher who says he's heard of Santiago, and takes them to him.
- Santiago refuses to escape without the schoolteacher, who has been his friend during their incarceration.
- During the escape, while our heroes are running across the vast, flat ground surrounding the prison (the island fortress was a much later development!), a Recurring Villain stands on the ramparts of the prison, and makes an incredible shot (worthy of a Recurring Villain!), putting a ball through Santiago's head!
- After the escape, the schoolteacher reveals that he is the real Armando Maíz, and the deceased was a madman who he'd told about Santiago, knowing the madman would assume Santiago's identity as his own.
- Maíz is sorry for the man's death, but he felt he needed the additional protection - and clearly he was right.
- Vincente de Tarso's spy was a much shiftier character back then. Ultimately, however, I decided that kind of character wouldn't fit the overall tone I was going for with this story.

And the expression "to not give a damn" might be period, or it might not - hard to say, because it's not the sort of thing that would have made it into print! But the expression "to not give a fig" was used in Elizabethan times, and it comes from a rude hand gesture originating in... Spain. Close enough - I'm using it!

Anyway, that's it for The Temple of the Emerald God this year. I'm taking some much-needed (and much-earned) holiday time off. See you all again next year - on Sunday, the new weekly publication day! - January 10, 2016!
DORADO ran to Calavera.

He hadn't resumed breathing. It didn't look like he was going to.

Dorado rolled his friend onto his back, and pounded on his chest.

This accomplished nothing.

Corvus, de Torre, and Maíz arrived at a full run.

"Lanza!" said Corvus. "The cork."

He was standing under it, pointing upward. It was obvious what he intended for him and Dorado to do.

Maíz leaned over Dorado and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Alejandro has explained to me what transpired in Terentius' hidden chamber. I believe I know what has happened, and how I can correct it. Go help your friend."

Dorado held Maíz' gaze for a moment. The older man was asking a great deal of him after having known each other for so short a time.

On the other hand, his own attempts to restore Calavera to life had been futile. Perhaps he would have more luck with the cork.

Dorado rose and hurried over to Corvus. He crouched down, Corvus stepped onto his shoulders, and he stood up.

Corvus raised his arms and pressed his hands into the cork, trying to hold it in place.

"Is it working?"

"I cannot say for certain. I believe so. Somewhat."

It was better than nothing.

Dorado had learned over the years to be satisfied with that.

Meanwhile, de Torre and Maíz were both crouching over Calavera's body.
"He isn't breathing!"

"We saw him fall," said Maíz calmly. "He has not been dead for long."

"He's dead?"

"Yes, after a fashion. We must hurry."

But instead Maíz stopped all movement.

de Torre stared at him impatiently.

Maíz took a deep breath, then another.

He looked de Torre in the eye.

"Do you trust me?"

de Torre shrugged. "You have been an Emerald Guardsman longer than I have."

"Then lend me your knife, hold the torch close, and prepare some gunpowder."

As de Torre handed Maíz his blade, he asked, "For what?" but in a moment this became clear, as the older man grabbed Calavera's left hand by the wrist and held the knife over his little finger.

When de Torre brought the torch closer, he saw that the entire digit was purple.

He hurried to open his gunpowder pouch using only his free hand.

Maíz brought the sharp knife down, cleanly severing Calavera's finger.

de Torre poured gunpowder liberally all over the wound.

Maíz lifted Calavera's hand and wiped most of the powder away. "Easy, my boy - we don't want to burn his hand to a stump."

"I've never done this before."

"Of course not, my apologies." He took de Torre by the wrist and slowly lowered the torch to Calavera's hand. "Whereas I, regrettably, have had a great deal of practice with this sort of operation."

He brushed the flame across Calavera's wound. The gunpowder sparked, ignited, and burned very brightly green and yellow for a moment. Then Maíz blew it out.

Calavera was still perfectly motionless. Maíz placed a hand behind his back and lifted him into a sitting position. Then he violently punched him three times between the shoulder blades.

Calavera coughed, and slumped forward. His shoulders wrenched up and down.

He coughed again, and a stream of thick liquid, purple and red and black, spewed from his mouth and slapped onto the floor.

Maíz grabbed the torch out of de Torre's lifeless grip and touched it to the bile, which flamed up at once, creating a foul, nauseating odour, but no smoke.
Maíz pointed to Calavera's severed finger.

"There!"

de Torre looked.

Emerging from the hole in the finger was a worm, the same colour as Calavera's vomit had been, almost as thick around as the finger itself was, and somehow, as it continued to writhe out of its gruesome den, twice as long.

Maíz set fire to the worm, and the finger. Once again, the smell was overpowering and there was no smoke. While they burned, Maíz quickly lowered Calavera to the ground and fetched Terentius' book. Then he dropped it, open with the pages facing downward, onto the fire.

The book also ignited instantly, every corner of it catching fire immediately.

It was probably just the hissing of the fire playing with his imagination, but de Torre could have sworn he heard something scream.

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, the fire was out, leaving behind only charred stone, but no ash.

Calavera's body sat up.

He opened his eyes, gasped, and started coughing.

Maíz clapped him on the back.

Calavera choked briefly, then started breathing normally.

Dorado, carrying Corvus on his shoulders, and Corvus, pressing the cork in place, watched their friend return to life without either one having anything to say.

Once he had recovered himself, Calavera turned to Maíz.

"Thank you."

Maíz shrugged. "It is my duty to serve the Guard in any way I can."

"Lieutenant?" said de Torre softly. "Are you...?"

"All right?" Calavera inspected his damaged hand. "I remember everything that I did when... when I was not myself. I feel exceptionally foolish and irresponsible. But I am otherwise fine."

He turned back to Maíz.

"What happened to me?"

"I will explain fully when we have more time. For now, it suffices to say that since you are new to magic, you are clearly unaware of the extent to which its laws must be obeyed. You broke those laws, in all likelihood unwittingly, but the price must always be paid."

"And if it is not paid properly the first time, the price becomes greater?"

"Yes. Always."
"Is the spell I was under broken, then?"

"If you are recovered, and the book is destroyed, it should be."

"I can confirm this," said Corvus from his position on Dorado's shoulders. "As soon as Diego awoke, the pressure on the cork lessened."

"Does it still threaten to come out?" Dorado asked him.

"Yes. But whereas before it was coming out through the force of magic, now it is merely the weight of the river that presses against it."

"And this is an improvement?"

"Of course. Before, there was nothing I could do to stop the cork's movement. Now, the cork has indeed stopped, and I believe we can hold it in place for several minutes."

Dorado turned to the others.

"Run."

de Torre and Maíz hesitated for only the briefest instant before doing as instructed. But Calavera held Dorado's gaze. He suspected there was something more to be done.

"Open the pit."

"Lanza..."

"If you don't, the water will overtake us. Better a likely death than a certain one."

"You realise who you sound like."

"It can't be helped."

Corvus had never encountered this pit they were discussing, but still, "I agree, Diego."

Calavera picked his torch up off the floor and handed it to Dorado.

"You'll need this to see where you're running. Don't drop it."

And that was that.

Both men nodded to him: We'll see you again, very soon.

Then Calavera also turned and began running down the tunnel.

When they could no longer hear his retreating footsteps, Dorado tilted his head upward and asked:

"Turo, how long do you think you can hold that thing in place?"

"It is not much heavier than a sack of potatoes. This must be because of the tightness of the seal. Also," and he looked down to smile at Dorado, "I am standing on a very firm foundation. I believe I can give our comrades... seven or eight minutes."

"Good," said Dorado, looking back down so as not to strain his neck. "That should be more
than enough."

They spent the next seven or eight minutes in determined yet companionable silence, and then Corvus said:

"Lanza?"

"Your arms grow tired?"

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be absurd. Your weary arms have saved the lives of three of our comrades. That is all anyone can ask."

"Thank you, my friend. But I believe you have miscounted, and two more men will survive as well."

"Anything is possible. As I have recently discovered."

Corvus nodded to him. "I am ready."

"I'll count three and step sideways. As soon as you've hopped down, we'll start running."

"Begin."

"One... two... three!"

Corvus lowered his arms and bent his knees.

Dorado moved away from the cork.

Both men were already running back toward the city when the stone cylinder hit the ground with a tremendous crash, as water poured from the hole and rushed rapidly across the tunnel floor.

Corvus risked a quick glance behind them.

"For all the noise coming from the opening in the ceiling, the water is rather low."

"It has to spread in both directions, and the opening is not very large."

"True. Somehow I had been expecting to be pursued by a wall of water."

"I'm sorry you're disappointed."

Corvus was about to reply that he wasn't, really, but he was interrupted by a new sound, an enormous crack louder than the shot of a cannon.

"Is that what I think it was?"

"Yes," said Corvus. "The weight of the water is causing the ceiling to give way."

Behind them, the sound of the water was now much louder.

The two Guardsmen found a way to run faster.

"Turo, I have become rather angry with you."
"That is illogical, but perfectly natural."

They stopped talking, then, to save their breath for more important things.

Ever mindful of the water at their backs, relentlessly pursuing them and growing louder by the moment, the Guardsmen rounded first one corner, then another, a third, and finally a fourth, until they came to the long hole across the floor which Dorado had been expecting.

"Just ahead - do you see it?"

There was no answer from behind him.

He wanted to look back, but the water was almost as high as his ankles and he did not want to stumble.

"Turo?" he said, with urgency.

"I see it."

It was the first time in his life Dorado had ever heard his friend sound timid.

"What's the matter?"

"It has clearly been built with the intention of being too long for a man to leap across."

"From the other side, for certain, but this side affords us a lengthy run beforehand."

He omitted that the water at their feet would be slowing them down.

"You're right. I will try."

It was a far cry from the usual optimism Dorado had been hoping to hear.

He'd never before imagined that there might be some feat of agility beyond Corvus' capabilities.

He dearly hoped that this would not be the occasion in which he discovered there was such a thing.

But there was no longer any time for thought, only action. He pumped his legs, forcing them to run with even more speed than before, closer and closer to the trap in the floor, spraying water with every step, until his feet reached the edge and he pushed himself up into the air, willing himself to land safely on the other side.

When he reached the apex of his leap he realised immediately that he was not going to make it.

He let go of his torch. He would need both hands free if he wanted to survive.

As he began to fall, first toward the pit and then into it, he stretched his arms out as far as they could go, reaching for anything which might stop his descent into blackness and death.

His hands smacked down on the far side of the pit.

But he continued to drop, and his palms slid along the floor toward the edge.
Dorado pressed down with his fingers - and they caught the lip of a stone block!

He lifted himself, managing to get both elbows up and over the edge.

"Lanza!"

Dorado braced himself for the impact.

Corvus crashed into his back, flattening him against the wall and forcing all the air out of his body. Stars danced in front of his eyes.

His elbows slipped.

The two men dropped.

Dorado's fingers gripped the floor again. Somehow.

But now they were supporting nearly twice as much weight as before.

Dorado looked down. Corvus was gripping his Tunic tightly at the waist.

Behind them, a steady stream of water fell into the pit far, far below. Occasionally it splashed onto Corvus' ankles.

"Well?" said Dorado impatiently. "Up you go."

Corvus smiled at him. It was rueful, something else Dorado had never seen in him before.

"Lanza... my clothes grow wetter and heavier by the moment. You cannot hold both of us much longer."

"Climb, damn you! As God is my witness, if you try to sacrifice yourself for me I'll let go out of spite!"

"You are the only man I know who can express a beautiful sentiment in the form of an exhortation."

"Climb!"

"Yes, certainly."

As his friend scaled his back, Dorado felt certain that his tortured fingers could grip the stone above him long enough, if not for both of them to get to the top, then certainly for Corvus to reach it. Dorado was strong, he was stubborn, and he had every reason in the world to succeed.

He would hold on.

But he hadn't counted on the moisture.

As the water behind them poured over the edge, it created a mist, particles of which drifted over the pit to land on the other side, where they accumulated, making the stones damp and slippery.

Dorado did not move his fingers - he couldn't, even if he'd wanted to - but the moisture crept in behind them, at first merely tickling, then slowly, inexorably, slipping underneath and loosening his grip.
He willed his fingers not to slip. He tried to press them more tightly into the stone.

He knew it was useless.

Just as Corvus' hands reached his shoulders, Dorado lost his hold on the ledge.

And they started to fall.

But something clamped Dorado on the wrist, yanking him upward.

Pain shot through his left arm, from the wrist through the elbow clear to the shoulder.

He howled, but he was fairly certain his arm was not broken.

And pain meant he was still living.

Another hand grabbed his wrist. He opened his eyes and looked up.

Into the face of his dear friend Diego Calavera.

"And just where do you imagine you're going, Guardsman?"

Dorado smiled at his Lieutenant, grateful to the man not only for saving them, but mostly for being alive himself.

"I had been hoping to travel to the New World, Sir - if the plan remains in place."

"It does, Lanza. More than ever."

"Diego! I am pleased to see you looking much improved."

"Thank you, Turo. I can say in perfect honesty that with every moment which passes, I feel more and more like myself."

Calavera was lying on the ground above them, such that only his head and arms extended beyond the edge of the pit. In answer to the question on Dorado's face, he said:

"There is a rope tied tightly around my waist, properly braced and held a safe distance away by two of our fellow Guardsmen."

Dorado looked at Calavera's left hand, which held his wrist with only its four remaining digits. Where the Lieutenant's little finger had been, the skin was blackened, and had an angrily-looking red ring around it. Dorado had seen enough of this kind of surgery to know the hand was going to recover. Nevertheless:

"Did neither of the other two men volunteer to risk themselves at the end of the rope in your stead?"

Calavera smiled at him, and it was the look in his eye, more than anything else which had come before, that completely and fully reassured Dorado that his friend was going to be all right.

"They may have had a mind to, but I was most insistent. Now, shall we permit Turo to resume his climbing?"

Dorado reached up with his other arm and grabbed Calavera. Once the two men were satisfied of their grips, they told their friend to proceed.
More certain now of his climbing, Corvus was standing safely beside Calavera within moments. Then he helped the Lieutenant lift Dorado up and out of the pit as well.

Less than a minute after that, the three of them were with de Torre and Maíz.

Dorado looked back the way they'd come. "The water still hasn't filled the pit. Just how deep *is* it?"

Calavera held up his mutilated hand.

"Do you *truly* require the answer to every single question?"

"I did, until recently."

Corvus and de Torre laughed. Calavera and Dorado did likewise.

It was wonderful to be alive, and among friends.

Maíz walked over, and embraced all four of them at once.

"My new friends, despite what we have endured, this is nevertheless a most auspicious beginning to our adventures together. We have defeated a superior number of the enemy. We have escaped from their fortress. We overcame the traps, both physical and magical, of a powerful magician. We even cheated death itself! Between the five of us, I am confident there is nothing we cannot accomplish!"

The other four Guardsmen gave a tremendous cheer.

"And now there remains but one more thing for us to do, and then we can proceed to the New World!"

The other four Guardsmen lost their cheerfulness immediately.

de Torre spoke for all of them.

"I rather had my heart set on leaving Isla Oestelago without delay."

Maíz cleared his throat. "Ah. Of course you understand I cannot go to the New World without some of my books..."

"Nor would we want you to," said Calavera. "We will be relying upon your knowledge and expertise."

He resisted the urge to rub his hand.

Maíz continued. "I'm afraid that retrieving these books will not be as simple a matter as merely returning to my lodgings. You see, when it became clear to me that I was going to be arrested, I hid them, in a place where not even the most devious of men would think to look for them."

de Torre groaned.

Dorado muttered something about hubris.

Even Corvus looked a little pained.
Calavera suspected they had all come to the same conclusion.

"And where might that be?"

"In the home of Duque Josefo and his family."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was published two days later than promised because:

A) I am having to unlearn some habits & practices I developed when the publication day was Monday; and

B) This weekend, there was a flood in the basement. A flood. How disturbingly a propos.

Since you were no doubt wondering, Yes, I did consider finishing this chapter on the literal cliffhanger.

And finally: Believe it or not, it was only several days after I decided to kill Calavera and bring him back to life - which will have repercussions down the line, I promise - that I realised this is kind of interesting from the point of view that I named him in honour of my own rebirth.
The Wrath Of The Mad Magician

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH the Guardsmen run, jump, run again, crawl, run still more, and finally, sleep.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

AFTER silence had reigned for a few moments in the tunnel, Dorado's voice cut through their individual ponderings.

"I would like to remind you all, Brothers, that notwithstanding the importance of those elusive books to the overall success of our venture, we have more immediate concerns."

de Torre, whose mind was overcome with the possibilities inherent in entering the Duke's house uninvited as they pertained to the likelihood of seeing Graciela Lobato again - Would she be pleased to see him? Upset that he'd intruded upon her family home? Struck by his fearlessness? Pleased that in spite of the danger to himself he'd taken a moment to seek her out? - forgot himself for a moment in his longing to once more lay eyes upon that wondrous woman, and adopted an impatient tone when asking:

"Such as what?"

He was answered by a recurrence of the familiar cracking sound which announced that more of the stone above them was splitting underneath the weight of the river beyond.

The sound was louder, and therefore closer, than any previous instance.

This, to de Torre's mind, was the very definition of immediate. It banished all thoughts of Señorita Lobato to a more appropriate time.

"Of course," he said, nodding to Dorado. "My apologies."

Dorado accepted the apology with a nod of his own.

"Not at all, my young friend."

And then the five of them started running again.

Behind them, another loud crack.

They could now hear pebbles falling to the stone floor as they were dislodged from the ceiling.

Maíz chuckled.

Calavera cast a glance at him. Between breaths he said, "If there is any word you can spare, which will lighten the mood, of these proceedings, I am eager to hear it."
Likewise placing his own taking in of air above any concerns of speech, Maíz answered, "I am afraid, you will not find it, as amusing, as I do. I was merely, remarking to myself, the suitability, in our present circumstances, of the metaphor, of the sky, falling upon our heads."

"You do not, know me yet. But I promise you, I will find that humorous, in the fullness of time, and under different, circumstances."

Maíz laughed.

But then he coughed.

He returned all of his attention to his breathing.

Another crack sounded, quieter than the last two, but somehow the Guardsmen were able to determine that the rift in the ceiling was now closer to them than it had ever been.

Behind them, stone fell onto stone, and split into pieces.

Not one of the Guardsmen looked over his shoulder.

Dorado thought he heard the sound of water beginning to trickle out of the gap which pursued them. He elected to keep this from his comrades for the time being.

"Lanza," said Calavera from behind him, "have you given, any thought, as to how we might, lift the door?"

"No. In fact, I regret to inform you, that I had quite forgotten it."

But he was thinking about it now: the solid block of rectangular stone set into the ceiling, which they'd postulated was intended to drop and block the tunnel in the event the cork was removed.

"If the spell, has been broken," said de Torre, "then we should be able, simply to lift it."

He did not voice what the circumstances would be if this part of the spell had not been broken, nor did he need to.

"It may not be, as simple, as you think, Alejandro. We are enough to lift it, if we can gain, purchase upon it, but my concern, is for how smoothly, it is cut, and whether we, will be able to get, our fingers underneath it."

Dorado, the strongest of them, flexed those parts of his anatomy, to test them. He was unhappy with the results: They were still very sore from the recent exertion at the pit. Far from being reliable, he might be the least amount of help in lifting that door, depending of course upon the state of the Lieutenant's left hand.

"If all we need is something to grip," said Corvus, "we might want to consider using gunpowder to create our finger-holds."

This earned him a mostly-insincere glower from Dorado.

"Is conflagration, your solution for everything?"

"No, of course not. One cannot use it to teach a child reading, for example. Nor to play a musical instrument. Nor to woo a woman - although having said this, I now recall there was one girl in my youth with whom I was quite infatuated, and she had - "
"Turo!" said Calavera, a hint of desperation in his voice. "Now may not be the time for this."

"Of course."

Corvus turned to Dorado.

"I will tell you of Anna at a more opportune time."

Dorado made no reply. Emphatically.

"It is remarkable," said Maíz, "how he is able to talk so quickly, and not have to pause, for breath, while running."

"Turo is a man, of many talents."

"This appears to be the tunnel," said de Torre, "which held the door, but I do not see it. Perhaps, it did not fall."

"It fell," Dorado said.

And then, in the flickering light of their torches, the others were able to see, ahead of them down the corridor, a flat stone wall blocking their path.

"I regret," said Maíz, "that I no longer have, Bartolomé's pike."

"You could not have known," Calavera said.

There was something bitter in his tone. Maíz turned to confirm it.

Yes, there it was on Calavera's face: self-recrimination.

Maíz would have to address this later.

They stopped in front of the fallen door.

Dorado paused, expecting to hear the ceiling crack again.

No such noise. Thank Heaven for small mercies.

But now that it was no longer competing to be heard over their footfalls, he was certain he heard water falling from the ceiling.

Meanwhile Calavera and de Torre were trying to shove their daggers under the flat stone. Neither man was eager to abuse his blade in such a fashion, but knives are more easily replaced than one's own skin.

After a minute of great frustration, they abandoned their attempts as hopeless.

The stone was too heavy, and the workmanship too perfect. It was impossible to slip anything between the block and the floor.

From behind and above there came another cracking sound. It was much softer than the others - but in its wake the sound of rushing water was now unmistakable.

"Turo," said Dorado, "I declare myself open to accepting your gunpowder suggestion."
"Gentlemen, we may be approaching this from the wrong direction - quite literally."

The others turned to Calavera, who was studying the space where the door met the ceiling.

"This block was intended to be held in place by magic. We may not be able to lift it, but perhaps, if not too much of it extends into the ceiling, we can topple it. The only question is: How do we strike the door at its top with any force?"

"I have a suggestion," said Corvus. "If one of us were to go down on his hands and knees, providing a platform, another could, at a run, leap off his shoulder and into the door. With any luck, the strike might be hard enough and high enough to knock the door over."

The other four considered this, alternately looking at one another, to see what his companions were thinking, and at Corvus, to see how certain he was that this would work.

Not even the man proposing this idea was confident of its success.

But none of them could see an alternative.

Each Guardsman, in his own time, turned to his Lieutenant to make the decision.

"Turo, you should be the one to strike the door. I trust no one else to leap off another's shoulder with accuracy, avoiding the kneeler's head and neck."

The others nodded their agreement, Dorado with the most enthusiasm. He was certain that if he were to attempt to throw himself at the door, he would instead smash his head into the ceiling.

The selection of Corvus now left only the matter of which of those remaining would serve as his jumping platform.

It was not a prospect any of them relished.

"I volunteer," said de Torre. "Lanza's arms are still trembling from hanging with Turo over the pit, Diego should not support another's weight with an injured hand, and Armando..."

He stopped, embarrassed, but Maíz smiled and clapped him on the shoulder.

"I am old, yes. There is no insult in saying it."

"Very well," said Calavera. "Alejandro, Turo, if you please."

de Torre kneeled and placed his hands on the floor. Corvus adjusted the young man's position.

Then he trotted away several paces, turned, and ran toward him.

de Torre braced himself.

Corvus stepped onto his shoulder and leapt at the door, ducking his head.

de Torre's arm almost buckled, but he held firm.

Corvus' shoulder and upper arm collided into the door, crushing his elbow into his ribs.

But the stone moved!
Dorado caught Corvus on his way down, and helped him regain his footing.

de Torre rose, cradling his elbow.

All of them inspected the door.

It had moved half a foot, and was now wedged against the ceiling behind it.

"Once more might do it," Corvus said, with little enthusiasm.

de Torre nodded, with equal reluctance.

"This time, please jump from my left shoulder."

"I shall. And similarly, I will strike the door with my other arm."

The other three men looked on, with deep respect for their labours, unable to contribute save by standing out of the way and holding the torches.

Corvus trotted away again. de Torre dropped to his hands and knees. Corvus ran, and leapt, and crashed into the door.

This time both men shouted from the pain.

And the door didn't budge.

Corvus sighed.

"I will try one more time."

"It's wedged too tightly," said Calavera.

de Torre endorsed both viewpoints. And neither.

Corvus sighed again.

"Would you agree, Diego, that our circumstances are desperate?"

"I would."

"Then you would not object to a drastic proposal?"

"I would not."

"Here comes the gunpowder," Dorado muttered.

And, as everyone had expected, he was right. But as nobody else had an alternate suggestion, they all agreed despite the risk.

Corvus prepared a fuse. Then he stood on Maíz' back - the older man had insisted that de Torre rest and allow him to contribute in this small fashion - and poured a measure of gunpowder over the lip of the door and down toward where it was wedged against the ceiling. He inserted the fuse into the crevice, and stepped off Maíz. de Torre took the older man's place. Corvus adjusted his jumping platform one last time, lit the fuse, and walked back to where he would begin his run.

Then they waited for the fuse to ignite the powder.
Meanwhile the crack in the ceiling, no longer progressing in large increments, but now proceeding with smaller, more rapid increases, crept ever closer.

It may not have been traveling as fast as the spark on the fuse, but it was certainly traveling quickly.

The spark reached the bottom of the door, and started climbing up the fuse. It reached the top, disappeared over the edge...

And created a tremendous bang.

The door shifted, then stopped.

Corvus started running.

de Torre shouted a protracted battle cry.

Corvus joined in.

They both knew that in a moment they would be shouting for a different reason.

Neither they nor the other Guardsmen noticed what was happening to the ceiling.

Corvus leapt from de Torre's shoulder.

To save his elbows, de Torre pushed slightly up with his arms.

This gave Corvus, who was already devoting his every remaining ounce of energy to this endeavour, even more impetus.

He struck the door heavily, and it tossed him right back.

This time when Dorado caught him, Corvus was drooping in his arms.

de Torre, exhausted, rolled sideways onto the floor.

But the door fell.

Calavera and Maíz cheered.

Dorado helped Corvus stand up on his own.

"Your plan worked, my friend."

"Of course."

That was how Dorado knew Corvus would be fine.

Lying on his back, de Torre was the only one looking upward, and therefore it was he who first noticed the new crack in the ceiling. He scrambled to his feet and pointed.

"Run!"

The others looked up.

The rift caused by the gunpowder was now merging with the one from behind them, creating one very large fissure.
The Guardsmen ran.

The noise of the collapsing ceiling was now a steady rumble.

Not one of the fleeing men could say how he managed it, but all of them increased their speed.

Behind them, larger pieces of the ceiling were falling, and with growing frequency.

de Torre was in the lead, and when he rounded a corner in the tunnel he yelled:

"I don't believe this!"

The others hurried around the corner to find out why.

In front of them was the alcove where Terentius' private room and the giant spider had been.

The stone had melted.

Obviously, as part of his desire to prevent anyone from stealing his secrets, the magician had added to his spell for the cork and the door a further provision that would destroy his office and everything contained within.

It would also have killed anyone trapped inside in a hideous fashion, burned to death by molten rock.

When Maíz had broken the spell, the stone had cooled, creating what looked like the most unusual icicle.

It was not lost on the Guardsmen that if the spell had not been broken, the liquid would have filled the passage, trapping them inside the tunnel forever.

As it was, they still had to expend precious moments squeezing past the obstruction one-at-a-time, while above them the collapsing ceiling suffered no such delay.

But now, de Torre reflected, they were nearly at the entrance to the tunnel, with nothing to do but run.

Unless he had forgotten something.

"Diego! Was there anything, we encountered, before the - "

"The tunnel of flame!" Calavera shouted.

de Torre said several ungentlemanly words.

Then he added several more.

"Armando!"

Maíz dodged quickly to the side.

A falling stone missed him by inches.

"Thank you, Lanza!"
"Diego," said Corvus, "if the tunnel of flame consists of what I imagine it does, do you know of a way we can pass through it quickly?"

"No."

He remembered how many deadly tiles there had been, how slowly they had been forced to walk.

But of course, if they hadn't been walking at all...

"Alejandro! Will you be able, to recognise, the tunnel?"

"The torchlight is fading, but the tiles, on that floor, are burned into my memory."

"Good. When you arrive, drop to your knees, and traverse it, by crawling, across the floor."

"But what about, the flames?"

"They emerge, at waist height, and will pass, harmlessly overhead!"

"My new friends," said Maíz, chortling in delight despite his efforts to keep up with them and ahead of the falling ceiling, "you are, all four of you, a testament, to not only, the excellence, of the Emerald Guard, but the mad genius, of Baron de Tarso, for assembling, such men as yourselves!"

Ahead of him, de Torre stopped running, fell to his knees, and began quickly crawling forward.

A stream of flame erupted from the wall, missing his back by less than a foot.

de Torre did not so much as slow down.

In a few moments, all five Guardsmen were crawling across the deadly tiles of the tunnel of flame. There were never fewer than four horizontal blazes roaring with life at any one time, and the heat they generated was immense. Sweat poured from their faces, dripping onto the floor from their chins and noses.

But they had not come this far to be defeated by such a trifle as mere discomfort.

"While we are on the subject of mad genius," Calavera said to Maíz, "I confess, our current survival notwithstanding, that I am beginning to find myself quite overwhelmed by the magic we are facing."

"Keep your spirits up, my noble Lieutenant. We have all done very well; we shall live to fight another day."

As if to contradict him, a stone fell in front of Calavera's path. He crawled around it, commenting on its timeliness neither with words nor gestures.

Once the obstacle was behind him, Calavera said, "It is not a question of the present, but of the future. I yearn for the sanity of the battlefield, where, even when all is in chaos, a man knows what he can expect. What I am attempting to say is: Do you know enough to keep us alive when we confront the magic of the New World?"

"Ah!" said Maíz. "Your concerns are perfectly understandable, but you have no need to fear the Maya. They are a respectful people, humble before their gods. Their magic is therefore less
ambitious. Terentius was insane - his power was unbounded because his mind knew no restraint. We will not encounter magic like this again."

"I am relieved to hear it."

A small rock struck Calavera on the rump and tumbled away.

Both men were still laughing when they reached the end of the tunnel of flame and started running again.

*****

It was over.

The Rio Miño had collapsed the tunnels completely, filling them with water, which rose to within three feet of the grate in the floor of Graciela Lobato's workshop before it stopped, and eventually dropped another foot when the initial rush of inundation had run its course.

The five Guardsmen had observed this rise and fall from above, safe upon the solid floor and beneath the sturdy roof of the woodcarver's shop.

Their hostess had not been present upon their return.

de Torre had been disappointed, but not surprised.

Once they were certain there would be no further activity below, they turned their attention to themselves.

de Torre had an ugly bruise developing on each shoulder.

The discoloration on Corvus' body was even worse.

Dorado's fingers had trouble closing around the bread, cheese, and sausage they were enjoying for their breakfast. His arms trembled when he brought the food to his mouth.

Calavera's left hand itched where the gunpowder had burned it. His head felt like it was being stepped on by a horse. From time to time he would spot, out of the corner of his eye, the sculpture of the lifeless Christ in the arms of His Mother, and he would quickly look away. He was not yet prepared to consider his own resurrection.

Maíz' chest was sore, and breathing hurt him still further. He could not remember the last time he'd been required to run like that.

Everyone's leg muscles were starting to protest their recent ill-treatment.

Also, owing to the heat in the tunnel of flame, each man's lower body was marinating uncomfortably in its own perspiration.

And yet, for all of that, they were jovial.

They'd earned some levity.
Also, they were both entitled to, and desperately in need of, sleep. So after their meal they replaced the grate in the floor and covered it again, then they each found a spot to lie down and rest.

Calavera attempted to refuse the cot, but the others forced it upon him.

He was the first to fall asleep.

One by one, the others did the same, de Torre being the last. He was also the first to wake, roused by the Cathedral bells tolling noon.

He knew he would not be able to return to slumber. He was a young man who had recently fallen in love, in this very room, and all around him were reminders of the beauty of his paramour’s soul.

He rose from the floor.

But he had no idea what to do next.

After standing still for what seemed like several minutes, but was likely less than even one, he decided to make a close inspection of the works on display in the shop. The building’s curtains were drawn, both so the occupants could sleep and so that they would remain undiscovered, so de Torre lit a candle, the better to appreciate his love’s artistic hand in the darker corners of the room where she practiced her art.

He’d only had time to inspect one piece before there came a knock on the door.

de Torre waited for the visitor to go away.

He was not the least bit surprised when this didn’t happen.

The knock sounded again: more insistent, but still polite.

de Torre waited some more.

"Lady Graciela? I know you are there; I can see your candlelight flickering underneath the door. Please, will you admit me? I apologise for this disturbance, but there is an urgent matter I must discuss with you."

The voice belonged to Martín Pescador.

Should de Torre wake the others? Or would the Dove go away?

In a moment, he knew the answer to that question, for outside the workshop he heard a second voice:

"Major Pescador? Is that you?"

"Lady Graciela! Good morning!"

"Good morning. What brings you to my workshop?"

"I called at your home, but you were not present."

"I must have been on my way here already."
"Just so..."

"Major? Is something the matter?"

"Yes. If you have only just arrived, whose candle is that burning within?"

Chapter End Notes

Publishing crap:
Well, this Sundays plan isn't turning out so well. When I decided last month to try it, I had the best of intentions (of course), and although on many occasions while writing this serial it has been difficult to publish on Mondays, publishing on Sundays is clearly even more difficult. I have developed certain habits, and a lot of them are very good, but they are geared toward publishing on Monday. So: back to Mondays for now.

Also, because of the many, many other writing commitments I suddenly have, I will only be publishing new chapters every second week for the foreseeable future. Your consolation is that this means I will be posting other things here (eventually) - variety!

Writing crap:
de Torre forgot about the tunnel of flame because I forgot about the tunnel of flame. Good thing I went back and checked if there was anything else!

And then I spent ten minutes wondering how in god's name I was going to get them through it at a speed faster than the ceiling collapse. Again, good thing I checked: The flames were only at waist height - hooray!

Next week:
Time to come clean about the most blatant meta-derived name in this story.
The Prisoner's Revenge

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH it is a man's character, and not his allegiances, which earn the Guardsmen's respect.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

GRACIELA Lobato's workshop had no rear window.

The coverings on the aqueduct grate in her floor had been replaced, and there wouldn't be time to lift them, to say nothing of the noise it would generate, even assuming they could find a way to breathe under the water that now filled the tunnels.

There were too few carvings large enough to conceal a man, and Pescador would search behind all of them in any case.

All of this occurred to Calavera in an instant.

This both pleased and relieved him.

Maíz noted his reactions, and smiled.

Ever since his vanity, as he saw it, had put all of his men in jeopardy, Calavera had been trying to conceal his feelings of carelessness and shame from his men. But he knew Maíz was aware of it.

Also Calavera had been afraid. He'd been possessed by the evil spell of an insane magician, and in light of his recent failure, as he saw it, he worried that no man could truly recover from such an experience.

That was why he felt relief when his mind proved itself sharp as ever.

Maíz nodded to him, slowly. And he mouthed one word.

"Lieutenant."

Diego Calavera was a resilient man.

And he had returned.

There was only one thing to be done. So he did it.

He rose, drew his pistol, threw the door open, and stepped into the street with his pistol pointed at Martín Pescador's heart.

"Inside. Immediately. Both of you."

Pescador had been about to protest the threatening of a woman, but Graciela Lobato entered
her workshop before he could speak.

When she crossed the threshold, de Torre took a step forward, intending to greet her, but Corvus stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

His friend's face held a warning, but the nature of it de Torre could not discern.

Outside, Calavera had continued walking, and now was beside Pescador, placing his free hand against the Dove's back and guiding him toward the door.

Pescador walked inside, as slowly as he could. His tiny black eyes never left the Guardsman's face.

Calavera followed, and closed the door behind them.

"Lanza?"

Dorado was at the window, as the Lieutenant had known he would be.

"I see seven other people in the street. Four walking away, in groups of two; they wouldn't have seen anything. The other three seem not to have noticed."

"Good."

He spotted Pescador examining his bandaged hand.

"It has been an eventful few days."

Pescador shrugged. "The lot of a soldier."

"Just so."

"Wait."

That was Dorado. Something outside had caught his attention.

"One of the men outside is behaving as though he wants to convince anyone observing him that there's nothing amiss."

"Is he approaching?"

"Slowly, yes."

There was a brief silence as everyone considered this.

Still wanting to express his exultant pleasure at being reunited with her, de Torre stared at Graciela Lobato until he caught her eye.

When he did, she gave him a warning look not unlike the one Corvus had worn.

She cast her eyes in the direction of Pescador.

The Major was standing behind her, so he couldn't see her face. de Torre noted the way he stared at her back: with concern... and something more.

Protectiveness, over and above his duty. Well over.
de Torre brought his head close to Corvus and whispered.

"Do I have the same look on my face as Pescador?"

"Not at the moment, but yes, often."

That was it, then. He knew what Martín Pescador had come to discuss with Lady Graciela.

He knew it the way an animal knows what it means when the forest turns silent.

"I could go to him," said Maíz, interrupting de Torre's reverie of leaping for Pescador's throat, and referring to the man approaching the workshop. "I am perhaps not as easily recognised as the four of you."

"No," Calavera said. "There must be as little activity around this door as possible. We do not know what he intends; let us wait until we know."

Maíz nodded.

When he looked up, he saw Pescador staring at him.

In recognition.

"Frédéric Blossier! You are the reason the Emerald Guardsmen have come to Isla Oestelago!"

His eyes widened.

"And now everything begins to make sense..."

He straightened his back suddenly, and took a deep breath.

"I have information which I am certain you will find beneficial. If you give me your word that you will release Lady Graciela in exchange for it, I will share it with you."

Maíz stepped to their prisoner and extended his hand.

"Allow me to introduce myself honestly. My name is Armando Maíz. I have had the honour of being a member of the Emerald Guard for several years. I came to your country as a spy, and created the identity of Frédéric Blossier for myself. The Cardinal's Gendarmes have come to Isla Oestelago looking for something they believe to be in my possession: the journal of Guillaume Henri. The Five Stars have come here for the same item. Is there anything else you know that we do not?"

Pescador looked down at Maíz' hand. He gave some thought to accepting it, but his hands in their white gloves stayed at his side.

"No."

"Is there anything I have told you which you did not already know?"

"You have confirmed what I suspected about the Five Stars. They had a private audience with Duque Josefo yesterday, and have been making enquiries which are very similar to those of our allies."

"Do you know why they are seeking this journal?"
Pescador laughed, harshly.

"Of course not. The Five Stars believe themselves above such things as consideration for others, and as for our French allies..."

Pescador shook his head, to dispel the thoughts within. He was too good a soldier to voice them.

"Brothers," said Dorado, calmly and softly but making it sound like a shout in the silence, "our play-actor is upon us."

The Guardsmen drew their knives, except for Calavera.

He still held his pistol on Pescador, although he was beginning to find it absurd.

Discomfited with the thought of exposing Graciela Lobato to danger, de Torre looked for her reaction to the ready baring of weapons.

If she was concerned, she did not show it.

But Pescador saw de Torre's glance, and recognised it for what it was.

They locked eyes.

Deep in the forest, two predators identified each other as rivals.

A knock sounded on the door.

Dorado opened it, reached through the doorway, and pulled their visitor inside. He stumbled to the floor in the centre of the room as Dorado quickly shut the door again.

The man scrambled to his feet and held up his hands in surrender.

"Wait! Wait! I'm not your enemy!"

"Convince us."

Their guest turned to Calavera. "I saw you point your gun at Major Pescador and force him inside. You must be the Emerald Guardsmen from Esperanza! Are you going to kill him? I wish to watch!"

There followed a heavy silence appropriate to the grisliness of the revelation.

Pescador, the intended condemned, broke the silence.

"You wish to see me killed?"

"Of course!"

He tried to spit on the floor, but his throat was too dry.

"Why?"

"You're a cruel villain who takes advantage of his relationship with Duque Josefo and Archbishop. You send innocent people to Fortaleza Tormentaña, to be tortured mercilessly at the hands of Daniel Cortés."
"Nonsense. If anything, I am trying to - "

"You thrive on the excesses of power and seek to rule the good citizens of Isla Oestelago through fear, to satisfy your vanity."

Pescador stepped forward and grabbed the man by his shirt.

Calavera and the others made no move to stop him.

"I keep the peace. I devote my life to helping the people of this city, and bringing criminals to justice."

But his accuser was undaunted.

"He will make all of us criminals,

"To satisfy his appetite,

"His maw open wide like the pits of Hell,

"Devouring until nothing but his own purity remains."

Pescador released the man. He was too confused to respond.

But Graciela Lobato managed to find the words.

"Where do these verses come from? They're not your own - who's been spreading these terrible slanders?"

The Isla Oestelagan snorted in contempt.

"I would expect you to defend your incestuous lover, Lady Graciela - "

de Torre's fist tightened on his knife.

" - since it is your father and your uncle who have granted this devil his unholy powers. But the citizens of this city have suffered too long under his abuses. At great risk to themselves, the revolutionary poets of this city are finally writing the truth, and inspired by their example, the people will rise up and take back our freedoms!"

Maíz stepped up to him.

"Who are those poets? What are their names?"

He spoke softly, but it was not a tone a person could ignore.

Until this moment, Armando Maíz had been known to the other Guardsmen as a kindly older man, with a friendly nature, a gentle demeanour, and a child's excitement for adventure.

But he was also an Emerald Guardsman, personally selected by the Baron himself to spy on a hostile country.

They would never forget that, nor the danger in his voice at this moment, ever again.

The reader of poetry, cowed into silence at last, reached into the bag at his shoulder and pulled out several pieces of paper. Maíz snatched them out of his hand.
"There are four of them," he said as he glanced over the pages. "El Vengador, El Perdido, Júpiter, and El Veterano. They call themselves the Poets of the Revolution."

"How is it possible," said Pescador, "that I have never heard of these poets?"

"Because their works have only appeared in the last few days, and you have been too busy with other matters during that time."

There was pain in his voice.

The Guardsmen knew who the 'poets' were.

As did Graciela Lobato.

"No..."

She sounded like her heart was cracking.

de Torre thought his own would as well.

Maíz looked up from the poems and faced her, his eyes profoundly sorrowful.

"Our friend is a very talented man, My Lady. The power of his rhetoric is unmistakable. I expect he could have obscured himself, and made these words look like they came from different hands - if he'd wanted to."

Lady Graciela closed her eyes and lowered her head.

"Portero," said Pescador, so softly it sounded like merely a breeze. "I knew he hated me, but I had no idea..."

A gunshot sounded from outside.

Four Esperanzans sheathed their knives and drew their pistols.

Pescador almost drew his own weapon, but a noise from Calavera reminded him he was still a prisoner.

"A man," Dorado said, still peering through the window. "He's running down the street, highly excited, shouting..."

"He's announcing that Cortés is dead. There is general celebration. Others are running off to spread the joyous news."

"And here come the Doves."

Dorado went silent, and just observed.

He knew what was coming; all the soldiers did.

One develops an instinct for it.

As he watched, it was Dorado's opinion that the Doves' attempts at patient response spoke well for them and their leader, but the eschewing of sleep in a fruitless hunt for the Guardsmen was taking its toll.
Also, the people were unusually belligerent, likely a testament in equal measure to the skill of Miguel Portero and the monstrous reputation of Daniel Cortés.

One protester threw a clump of horse dung at the Doves. They let it strike them, then instructed the man to calm himself.

A group of women started shouting invective. Half the Doves turned to mollify them.

A young man stepped forward and shoved one of the Doves, who stepped back and drew his sword, still holding up his hand for order.

The young man charged him, and the Dove stepped aside, slapping him on the back and sticking out his leg to trip the youth.

The Dove's would-be assailant fell on his face in the street.

Just as a group of Doves on horseback arrived.

They tried to rein in, or ride around the youth, but two of the horsemen could not help trampling him to death.

The group of women surged forward and attacked the Doves.

Many of the other people gathering followed suit.

There was cheering, and shouting.

One of the women had obtained a Dove's pistol.

She shot him in the chest with it.

Two of the Dove's comrades cut her down.

"Lanza?"

"The people are in open revolt."

Hearing this, the poetry lover shouted

"Revolution!"

and threw himself at Pescador.

The Major slipped aside easily and sent him to the floor.

The man rolled over and was about to rise.

But Pescador's sword was at this throat.

Three people shouted at once.

"Pescador!"

"Major!"

"Martín!"
But they needn't have worried. Pescador held his sword steady, just under his attacker's chin, and stared into the man's eyes, eyes full of uncompromising, unreasoning hatred.

Pescador's eyes, on the other hand, contained many conflicting emotions, chief among them regret.

"I am not what you think I am."

The other man exhaled, and relaxed.

He was confused.

Because he believed the verses of the Poets, but he believed the man in front of him as well.

Pescador looked at Calavera.

"My men need me. As do my people. Am I your prisoner?"

"No."

Pescador sheathed his sword. He removed his white gloves, tucked them into his white sash, and walked to the door.

Then he turned to Lady Graciela.

His eyes may have briefly glanced at Alejandro de Torre along the way.

"Are you content to be left in their care, My Lady?"

"They mean me no harm, Major."

He nodded, mostly to himself.

Then he addressed Calavera.

"Do not be here when I return."

"We shan't."

And then Major Martín Pescador, leader of the Doves of Isla Oestelago, drew his sword, nodded one last time to the woman he loved, and walked out into the riot.

Chapter End Notes

And now, as promised, it is time for me to come clean about the most blatant derived name in this story: Isla Oestelago.

Most of the names in this story are derived from people who've inspired my writing in this genre (or genres). Not this time. Isla Oestelago is derived from two of my favourite crime writers: Ed McBain and Donald E Westlake. Oestelago is a pretty blatant smushing together of the Spanish words for west and lake, and Isola is of course the Italian word for Isla, and happens to be the name of my favourite fictional island, the city where McBain's 87th Precinct is located.
And you know how Miguel Portero is named for Michael Giacchino and Brian Tyler? So are El Vengador, El Perdido, Júpiter, and El Veterano, honouring their music for, in order, the films in the Avengers franchise, Lost, Jupiter Ascending, and The Expendables.

Finally, d'you want to hear something funny? Writing this chapter is the first time I realised Martín Pescador and Miguel Portero have the same initials! In fact, three times during the editing of this chapter I caught myself having written the latter surname when I intended the former.

Two Weeks From Now:
Cool facts about jungles, prisons, and clergymen!
The Riot Of Isla Oestelago

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH Dorado goes to a tavern, Maíz goes to his former lodgings, Corvus goes up, de Torre goes down, and Calavera goes to church.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MAÍZ joined Dorado at the window. As the two of them observed the events taking place in the street outside, the others in the room remained still and quiet.

None of them had anything to say. They were listening. And considering.

They heard shouts of anger. The pounding of hoofbeats. The cries of people in distress. The clash of weapon upon weapon.

On occasion, a gunshot.

And above it all, the commanding tones of Martín Pescador, obviously exerting himself as he called out to his men, to the Gendarmes who were his allies, and most importantly, to the people of Isla Oestelago, trying to restore order to the chaos, peace to the streets.

Maíz spoke one of the things they were all thinking.

"Martín Pescador is a brave man."

He did not turn to face her, but out of the corner of his eye de Torre saw Lady Graciela lower her head and close her eyes.

Maíz turned to Calavera.

"Lieutenant."

"Armando."

Maíz tilted his head and smiled in acknowledgement: He’d used Calavera’s rank to indicate something significant, and Calavera had responded in kind. It pleased him.

But he had something grave to discuss.

"This is not the first time I, serving as a spy for the Baron of Girona, have been at the centre of an incident in which Spanish soldiers were going to be killed for reasons they did not fully understand."

"You are not responsible for the Twelfth of Valencia, and you are not responsible for this, either. If any one man is responsible for what is taking place outside... "

"It is Miguel Portero. The dearest friend I have in this city. A man who assisted me in my duties as an Emerald Guardsman."
"He assisted all of us," said de Torre, surprising himself with how much those words pained him to speak.

Lady Graciela lifted her head suddenly. There was anger in her eyes, but not at him.

"He deceived everyone. Even his childhood friends." She turned to Maíz. "He was - or is - a performer. He presented a character to us that we wanted to believe, and so we did. He could have confided in us, trusted in the love of his friends. But instead he plotted revenge. That was his choice alone. We are not to blame for what he has done."

Maíz nodded to her in thanks. His eyes were damp.

The noise outside had grown louder.

Dorado turned from the window to face his Lieutenant.

Calavera nodded to him.

Then he turned to the others.

Corvus shrugged. \textit{Of course.}

de Torre's eyes glanced over at Lady Graciela; that was all the answer Calavera needed.

And the Lieutenant already knew where Maíz' heart lay.

Calavera turned back to Dorado. "It seems we're all in agreement."

As one, five men began inspecting their weapons.

When de Torre reached for his Tunic, Lady Graciela touched his arm.

He forced himself to ignore the prickles that spread all the way up to his shoulder, across his chest, and down to his toes.

"You don't mean to \textit{wear} those, do you? The Doves and the Gendarmes won't realise you're trying to help - and they will not have the time to stop and arrest you."

de Torre placed his own hand over hers.

Lady Graciela looked down at where their skin touched.

When she looked back up at him he almost forgot what he had been about to say.

But he was a good soldier. He knew his duty.

"We have to wear the Tunics. They're who we are. What we are about to do is what the Emerald Guard represents."

"Also," Dorado said, "it's a message to the people rioting: We do not endorse this action."

He looked at the poetry lover, who was still sitting on the floor, deep in thought.

The man realised he'd become the centre of attention, and looked up.

"You cannot stay here when we leave," said Calavera. "What do you intend to do?"
"I will go to my wife and children, and make certain they are safe. Then we will stay indoors until this is over."

"And afterward, when someone asks you what happened here today?"

The man looked to Lady Graciela, who seemed very much at ease in the company of these reported enemies of Spain. He looked at the men in question, who were willing to risk their own lives to restore peace to his city.

He looked at the pages of venomous poetry still gripped in Maíz' hand.

"I will say nothing. I believed I had seen something which, to remember it now, is so clearly absurd I am embarrassed to repeat it. I knocked on Lady Graciela's door, she invited me in for a moment, and I looked at her wood carvings. They are truly beautiful, if I may say so, My Lady. Mere minutes afterward, I heard without the sounds of the riot beginning, and so I made my excuses and returned immediately to my family."

Calavera held his gaze for a moment, then nodded, satisfied.

The man turned to Lady Graciela.

"My Lady, I apologise for intruding where I had no business... into a situation which I was too ignorant to understand."

"I accept your apology - and I thank you for your appreciation of my work. Now rise, for in a moment you shall have to return to your family."

He did so, and the Guardsmen finished their preparations.

Maíz hesitated for a moment between balling the pages of Portero's poetry and placing them in the fireplace, or stuffing them into his bag. Ultimately he decided upon the latter.

Calavera opened the door and indicated that the poetry lover was to exit, which he did silently and with all haste.

When the door was shut once more, Calavera asked Lady Graciela:

"Is it known to many that you have a shop here?"

"Most of the people who live nearby or do their business in these streets are aware of my shop."

"And they know who you are?"

"Yes," she said, beginning to understand the thrust of his questions.

"Then you may not be safe here. We will escort you to your home."

Her voice grew cold. "I had been under the impression you intended to devote your efforts to suppressing the riot."

"That is our intent, My Lady, but we will not abandon you, for it isn't safe. You can not remain here, and you will be recognised in the street. Therefore you must return to your home, under escort. I had not intended for all of us to accompany you, only de Torre."

She turned to de Torre. He looked back at her.
The mixture of hope and concern in their eyes reminded the other Guardsmen of simpler times: anguished and desperate, perhaps, yet full of joy.

"That is, if you do not object."

Calavera had not been able to help himself. But truth be told, he hadn't tried very hard to resist, either.

"I do not object," said Lady Graciela, her expression and tone indicating much more than that.

"Then you should leave next," Calavera said. "Is it possible to travel to your home via the underground tunnels?"

"Yes, most of the way."

"Then that is the route I would recommend you take."

He turned to de Torre.

"Do you recall where we said we would meet should we become separated and have to leave the city?"

"I do."

"Then meet us there, and afterward we'll..." He caught himself because he remembered Lady Graciela.

"... discuss how next to proceed."

Which would involve breaking into her family's home.

de Torre nodded his understanding. Then he looked each of his comrades in the eye, bidding them farewell.

"Gentlemen," said Lady Graciela, "it has been my honour to be your prisoner. May God preserve you all."

Then Calavera opened the door, and the young couple exited.

When Calavera closed the door behind them, he looked troubled.

The others knew his question without him having to speak it.

"He will fight like ten men," said Maíz.

"And it is a kindness to give them more time together," Corvus said.

"Besides," said Dorado, "you know better than to try and keep those two apart against their will."

They took a moment to imagine such an attempt. None of their scenarios ended well. The only question was which of the two young lovers would prove more headstrong.

"Very well," said Calavera, with a clap of his hands. "Thank you. Armando, is there
anything you require from your former lodgings?"

"I concealed my Tunic, weapons, and several other items in the common room."

"Then that is where we will go, offering assistance to those who require it as the situations arise. Should we become separated, Armando: On the Northern road, at the last crossroad before the city walls, is a grove of trees. Do you know it?"

"I do. As I recall, it is large enough to conceal four or five men, should they happen to be hunted by the local authorities."

"Just so. Are there any other questions?"

"I presume," said Dorado, "we are to make every effort to avoid taking a life?"

"Everyone's. Including those of the Gendarmes."

"If I encounter Carandini, I make no promises."

"Nor would I ask you to. Is there anything else?"

He waited for a moment. There was nothing.

"In that case, gentlemen, I believe we are ready to proceed."

He opened the door. The four Guardsmen left the woodcarver's shop.

Corvus locked the door behind them.

All around them, people were shouting, running, and fighting.

They did not see Pescador. Nor did they see de Torre and Lady Graciela.

"This way," said Maíz, and he began trotting away down the street.

The others caught up to him, and they moved together.

Behind them, somebody shouted:

"Look - it's the Emerald Guardsmen!"

There was a loud cheer.

When that faded, they heard the sound of men on horseback chasing them.

Corvus looked over his shoulder.

"Everyone in the streets is parting for the horses. The people may be agitated, but they are not foolish."

Calavera sighed heavily. "We knew this was going to happen. We'll have to separate. I'll go with Maíz, and if the two of you would do us the favour of appearing to be the slower runners, I'd like you to draw the horsemen away from us."

Dorado and Corvus nodded.

Then they moved off to the right and slowed their pace.
Calavera and Maíz ran faster, and turned left at their first opportunity.

"I perceive," said Maíz, "that we find ourselves, running, once more, without having sufficiently, reposed."

Calavera was motivated to advise him to conserve his air and his energy, but that would have required speaking, and he was not certain he could do it.

"Guardsman - in here!"

A man was standing in a doorway, waving them over. The pursuing horsemen had not yet rounded the corner. Calavera and Maíz all but leapt through the door, and their saviour closed it quickly behind them.

The Guardsmen struggled to catch their breath, while outside they heard hoofbeats pass by their door without stopping.

"Thank you," said Calavera, once he was able.

"Bah! You kill Doves. That makes us allies."

Calavera and Maíz had nothing they wished to say in reply to that.

Instead they considered their host. He was of medium height, older than Calavera but younger than Maíz, with a full beard and a prominent belly. He walked with a cane and favoured his right leg.

His kitchen table was set for four. The meal, although meagre, appeared to be only half-eaten, as though it had been abandoned rather suddenly.

"Were you dining when the riot began?" Calavera asked.

"We were!" said their host, laughing. "But as soon as it started, we knew we would never have a better opportunity."

"An opportunity for what?" Maíz asked, as any polite guest would.

Their host laughed again. The sound was much less pleasant this time around.

"For months we have been planning how best to divest the Cathedral of St.James of some its lighter and more valuable items. In all the confusion at the moment, and with the Doves otherwise occupied, the time is ideal!"

He paused to laugh. Even Maíz was beginning to find their host's laugh difficult to tolerate.

"In fact, the situation is so opportune that we've decided to expand our ambitions. I wish I could have accompanied them, but not with this." He tapped his cane upon his leg. "Still, perhaps that is for the best, for now I have encountered you, and I can send you to assist them."

"Assist them in their theft?"

"Well, that as well, but we have a more appropriate use of your talents. We mean to kill the Archbishop! In all this confusion - "

Calavera punched the man in the face, knocking him senseless to the floor.
Not for a moment did he regret striking an invalid.

He was becoming exceptionally weary of gleeful people who wanted him to commit murder.

Also, he was not pleased that he and his comrades were becoming more dispersed.

"I will see you at the grove," said Maíz.

"Yes."

Maíz departed, leaving the door open.

Calavera counted ten, then followed.

He trotted through the streets rather than running, for he would need his energy when he arrived at the Cathedral.

From time to time he had to push his way through a crowd of people. On occasion there were those who thought to object, but the look in his eye dissuaded them.

He was spotted only once by his enemies, a group of two Doves and two Gendarmes, but they let him pass, for they were occupied with defending themselves from a larger crowd of people armed with shovels and fire irons.

He noted with satisfaction that they were making every effort not to injure anyone.

Tomorrow, when the insanity of the moment had passed, all of them, soldiers and citizens alike, would be neighbours and friends once more.

Calavera rounded a corner, and before him was the Cathedral.

There were several horsemen in the courtyard, ordering people to calm themselves and return to their homes. They did not see him, for he was approaching from the side. He turned at his first opportunity, intending to enter the Cathedral from one of the doors at the rear.

He was not the first to have this idea.

One of the Cathedral's back doors had been left open. Nobody with legitimate business within would have been so careless.

The door was undamaged. It seemed that Corvus was not the only capable picker of locks in the vicinity.

Calavera entered silently, carefully.

There was a crash from deeper within.

He ran toward it.

Along the way he passed a priest, sitting on the floor, his back against the wall, with blood on his chest and a hole in his shirt. His eyes were open, staring at nothing.

Calavera shrieked like an owl descending upon a rodent.

He wanted the men who had done this to hear him, and to understand their death was upon
them.

He had certain unshakable beliefs about the murder of holy men.

There was another crash, and he heard the sound of wood splintering.

But then he was in the right corridor, at the end of which was a door, damaged but still closed, and in front of it five men, three of whom had pistols in their hands.

The other two held a long bench they were using to ram the door.

He took a deep breath, and just stood there, in the middle of the corridor, his arms relaxed at his sides.

They noticed him.

And they were delighted.

"Guardsman! You're just in time!"

Calavera drew his pistol, pointed it at the speaker, and pulled the trigger.

The man jerked and fell like a dropped marionette.

The bench crashed to the floor. The two remaining men with pistols aimed their weapons at Calavera.

He stepped to his side, out of the corridor.

Two gunshots sounded anyway.

He stepped back into the corridor, and drew his sword.

Three of his opponents drew their own swords. The last one removed a pouch from his belt and hurriedly poured powder into his discharged pistol.

Calavera strode toward them.

"What are you doing?" one screamed at him. "You hate the Inquisition as much as we do - we're allies!"

Calavera maintained his pace.

"Say something!"

He didn't.

The three swordsmen stepped back and readied themselves.

The man reloading his pistol finished with his powder and began untying the pouch holding his ammunition.

He knew he wasn't going to be fast enough.

One of the swordsmen thought to rush Calavera, but when he looked to his companions and saw that neither was prepared to join him, he hesitated.
And then Calavera was upon them.

He slashed the man with the pistol across the neck and face.

The wounded man screamed and stumbled backward. He dropped his gun and pouches as his hands flew to his injury.

This finally made the others realise that they had no choice, that they would be forced to fight the Guardsman whether they wanted to or not.

They charged him.

Calavera stepped to his left and slashed one man across his sword arm.

The sudden movement hurt his knee.

Also, his legs were tired. This fight might prove more difficult than he'd expected.

In fact, considering he was facing three adversaries, and they were fresh, he might be in some trouble.

Two swords came at him. He parried them, and stepped aside, slower than he normally would have.

He bumped into the man with the wound on his face. As the man staggered away, Calavera grabbed him with his free hand and threw him into his companions.

Ripping open the wound in his hand.

Stars danced in front of his eyes, and he was forced to step back, losing his advantage.

One of his opponents stepped forward and thrust at his chest.

Calavera knocked the man's sword aside and stabbed him in the gut. His eyes widened and the light behind them started to fade.

The man with the wounded arm moved around his falling comrade and came at Calavera several times. Calavera parried, but didn't have the energy to strike back.

He retreated, and his heels struck the discarded bench. He almost toppled backward over it, and as he twisted his body to keep his balance his attacker missed his ribs by mere inches.

His uninjured opponent leapt forward. Calavera had no choice but to fall to his knees and parry upward.

He was in a great deal of trouble.

He rolled over the bench, which blocked his adversaries just long enough for him to scramble to his feet.

It was inelegant and desperate, but he'd had no choice.

The two remaining swordsmen paused, weapons at the ready, waiting to see what the Guardsman would do.

The Guardsman did nothing. He was breathing too heavily, and his knees wanted to
The man with the wound on his face was recovering himself. He was weak, and could not see very well, but he knew he had a better chance of surviving with a sword in his hand than without. He unsheathed his weapon.

With three quick strides Calavera came up behind him. He thrust his sword through the man's back and out the other side. As he withdrew his blade he shoved the dying man toward his comrades.

They knocked him aside and surged forward. Calavera slashed the closer one across the eyes.

The other stabbed at his chest, and he barely managed to bring his sword around and knock the thrust aside.

His arm was becoming very tired.

He took two steps back and out of the way, forcing his enemies to regroup. The man he'd slashed across the eyes had lost one, and had a deep cut in his nose, but he was still in the fight. His companion was the man whose arm Calavera had struck at the beginning.

This man's arm was also tired.

Calavera thrust at his face.

The man threw his sword up to block.

Calavera spun his wrist and changed his trajectory.

His opponent was too slow to respond, and Calavera pierced him in the chest.

The last man attacked.

Calavera withdrew.

And his foot slipped in some blood.

He hit the stone floor heavily with his tail-bone. His ears started ringing and his head throbbed, matching the pulse of his wounded hand.

His opponent stepped forward, eager for the kill. Calavera's sword was out of position.

He kicked the man in the knee and rolled out of his way.

The man fell behind him, and Calavera rolled back, driving his left elbow into the man's wounded nose.

His opponent screamed, but Calavera didn't hear it. He was moments away from unconsciousness, and he needed desperately for this man to be unable to take advantage of his helplessness.

There was a pistol lying near to hand. Calavera let go of his sword and grabbed it by the barrel. Then, lying on his side, he slammed the handle into the man's throat, once, twice, a third time, and possibly a fourth and fifth, until he felt something give beneath the blows and his opponent began convulsing.
Still lying on his side, Calavera held on tightly to consciousness and waited for the man's jerking to stop.

When it finally did, he rolled onto his back, and allowed all tension to leave his aching body.

Just before he succumbed to unconsciousness, it occurred to Calavera to wonder whether it was, in fact, the Archbishop who was on the other side of the door.

Corvus looked over his shoulder again.

"Only half of the horsemen are following us. The rest have turned to pursue Diego and Armando."

Dorado glanced back and confirmed this. "We'll have an easier time evading them if our numbers are smaller," he said.

"And an easier time still if we run not in the street, but on the rooftops."

Dorado was not convinced that in his current state he would be able to keep his balance on a rooftop, but since even at his best he would never have been able to outrun a horse on flat ground, he decided Corvus' plan had merit.

"I'm willing play mountain goat if you can find us a ladder."

"I was thinking perhaps a barrel, which we could jump onto, and then leap for a low-hanging - oh."

Much as Dorado had not been looking forward to hearing the end of that sentence, the interjection did not sound much better.

"What is it?"

Corvus had looked over his shoulder again, and now he slowed his running.

"A crowd moved in front of the horseman at the rear, and he stopped so as not to trample them. Then they pulled him from his mount."

Dorado shook his head; things were not going well.

"Stop and go back. I'll lead the horsemen away from you."

"Thank you, my friend."

"I'll see you at the grove."

Corvus tapped him on the shoulder in farewell and ran toward the nearest house, where he stopped for just a moment to watch Dorado, using his height to full advantage, raise his sword above his head and start swinging it round, running all the while.

Most of the Doves had seen Corvus separate from Dorado, but all of them decided that the large madman with the sword was a greater priority. They urged their horses through the mass of rioters, pursuing him.
Corvus turned and ran back to where he'd seen the horseman unseated.

He was aware that one of the horsemen had reconsidered, and was turning his horse to chase after him instead, but he did not turn around; the fallen Dove’s life might depend upon the timeliness of his arrival.

But when he did arrive, the crowd was too thick for him to push aside.

"Let me through, please. Please, let me through!"

He drew his pistol and fired it into the air.

The crowd parted.

"Thank you."

He'd arrived just in time. The Dove was in a sorry state, bleeding from several cuts on his face, and barely able to keep his eyes open. He'd been beaten with fists, boots, sticks, and other weapons.

"Move away from that man."

He gestured at them with his pistol, and they complied, even though the weapon was now empty.

Rioters, by their very nature, give little thought to their actions.

By this time the other Dove had arrived, and Corvus waved to him with his free hand.

Also without thinking, confused that he was being hailed rather than attacked, the horseman reined in his mount.

Corvus pointed at two of the men still gathered around the injured Dove.

"Place him gently over this man’s horse."

They did as instructed.

The mounted horseman, realising at last that this Guardsman had saved his comrade's life, was uncertain what to do next.

"This man needs help. Take him to safety."

"Yes. I will." He turned his horse in the direction of the Doves' barracks, but then paused, and looked back at Corvus.

"Thank you."

"It's nothing you would not have done for me."

He was not entirely convinced this was true, but he hoped that from this moment forward, it might be.

The Dove nodded, and then went on his way.

Left alone, Corvus spotted a water barrel underneath a low-hanging eave. He trotted to it,
hopped on top of the rim, leapt off of that, grabbed the eave, and hauled himself onto the roof.

And then the bruises on his shoulders howled in agony.

At least his legs were still strong. For the most part.

He ran across the roof, in the direction Dorado had gone, and when he got to the side of the building he jumped over the alleyway, onto the next rooftop.

And landed awkwardly, stumbling and almost losing his balance.

He'd done far too much running and jumping already today.

As he caught his breath, he looked out over the streets, searching for his friend.

Dorado was a tall man, with distinct hair. Corvus would have recognised him anywhere.

But he was nowhere to be seen.

Corvus was trying to decide what to do next when a sound off to his side made the decision for him.

He turned.

Standing on the roof to his left was Reginald Starkey of the Five Stars.

His face wore the sort of smile one instinctively distrusts, even though it is not unkind.

"Good day to you, Guardsman."

"And you, sir."

"When we first met, you did not reveal your affiliation to me and my companions."

"It did not seem the time."

"Yet now you wear your Tunic openly, and stand where anyone can see you."

"People seldom look up."

"That is true."

He smiled more widely. Some of the warmth vanished.

"But I looked up. And I saw you."

"So you have come to assist me?"

He would have liked for that to have been true. He was fairly certain it wasn't.

Starkey confirmed this with a shake of his head.

"Perhaps I could assist you, if we were to come to some sort of arrangement."

Corvus' pistol was empty, and his body ached in several important places.

"What do you have in mind?"
Starkey was no longer smiling.

"Don't be coy. You know we want the journal."

He did, but it was best to have it confirmed.

"I do not have it."

"Then give me your word you will give it to me, and I will assist you."

"I do not believe I require assistance as urgently as that."

Now Starkey's face was downright hostile.

"I believe you do."

And he drew his pistol.

"Surely you do not mean to kill me?"

"Of course not. I merely mean to deliver you into the custody of my gracious Spanish hosts."

He pointed it at Corvus.

"Although, rest assured, I will not hesitate to kill you if I must."

From what he'd heard of the man's reputation, Corvus was fairly confident that, even at this distance and even while they were balancing on rooftops, if Starkey shot at him, he would hit.

"In that case, I am coming to you."

And Corvus started to run in Starkey's direction.

This left the Star in a quandary. He did not want to shoot a surrendering man, but what if Corvus were attacking?

He did not know Corvus well enough to realise that if the Guardsman intended to surrender, he would have said so already.

Corvus reached the edge of his roof, and jumped, straight toward Starkey, and with such velocity that it would be impossible upon his landing to avoid a collision.

Which indicated, Starkey reasoned, that the Guardsman intended to collide with him.

This was no surrender. Starkey fired.

But Corvus was rolling forward, and the ball passed over his back.

He landed in a somersault, and as he sprung out of it he aimed his feet directly at Starkey's chest.

But the Star was already moving out of his way, and switching the grip on his pistol to use it as a club.

So rather than land on his feet and be struck in the back of the head, Corvus reached out and grabbed Starkey by the wrist, pulling the man toward him and changing the direction of his
sault. In mid-air, Corvus rolled to his side and over Starkey's arm, intending to pass over him entirely and throw the man face-first to the ground.

But with his other hand Starkey punched Corvus in the chin.

The Guardsman landed badly, and what little strength he had remaining left him entirely.

Starkey stumbled for several steps, but managed to keep his balance.

Having thus righted himself, the Star turned to face Corvus, intending now to club him with the pistol out of anger.

Corvus still lay on his back. He was unable to lift himself.

Starkey walked over to him.

Corvus rolled away.

Starkey stepped quickly forward and tried to stamp on Corvus with his boot.

But Corvus was rolling too quickly.

They both knew he could not do this for too long: He was running out of rooftop.

Nevertheless, he kept rolling.

"You fool - stop!"

Corvus stopped, just at the edge of the roof.

Then he rolled back toward Starkey - quickly.

Starkey realised what Corvus intended, and stopped walking, but it was too late. Corvus smashed into his shins, sweeping his feet out from under him.

Starkey made the mistake of trying to rise before he'd properly landed, and instead of standing up, he slipped. His legs shot out over the edge of the roof, and he landed heavily on his stomach. Then the weight of his legs started dragging him over the edge of the roof.

Corvus rolled back and caught him by the collar.

Starkey seemed quite surprised.

"It is nothing... you would not... have done... for me."

The Star had no reply to that. With Corvus holding onto him, he pulled himself most of the way back up.

"Are you... out of danger... of falling?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Corvus let him go, closed his eyes, and gave in to the darkness.
"Look - it's the Duke's daughter!"

"Grab her!"

de Torre was not going to let them grab her. As she kept running, he stopped and turned around.

They were too close for him to draw his pistol or his sword, so he punched one in the face and kicked another between the legs.

Three fists came at him. He knocked one aside, stepped out of the way of the second, and let the weakest hit him.

In the shoulder, which he'd forgotten was badly bruised.

He broke that man's nose, punched another in the side of the head, and swept the feet out from underneath a third.

"Alejandro!"

He stepped back and drew his pistol.

Those men who were still standing stopped advancing and glowered at him.

"Alejandro!"

"Run away. Now."

They looked at one another for a moment, then turned and fled.

de Torre did not know what they thought they'd heard in his voice, or seen in his expression, but he was grateful for their misapprehension.

What he'd actually been demonstrating was exhaustion, and despair.

If they'd charged him, they would have won.

He would not even have had the time to fire his weapon.

de Torre put his pistol back into this belt, and turned to call back to Lady Graciela that he was on his way, but she was standing right behind him.

If the men pursuing her had not been scared off...

"We should be on our way."

"I've located a way into the tunnels. That's why I was calling you."

She hurried to the opening, and de Torre followed as quickly as he could, hoping she wouldn't notice how much difficulty he was having.

When they arrived, he unsheathed his knife and held it out to her.

"Take this, so you can defend yourself should the need arise."

She reeled back as if he'd slapped her.
"I will *not* take that - you forget yourself, sir! I am an artist; I use *my* knives to bring forth the natural beauty of the world, not to engage in ignoble slaughter!"

Perhaps it was her insult to his honour, or his anxiety about what had almost happened to her, which made him react the way he did. In any case, if he'd been less tired he certainly would have been able to stop himself before saying:

"If you would prefer to be without a weapon at this time, that is of course My Lady's privilege. I only hope your precious nobility will be a sufficient comfort to you when dirty fingers start clawing at your clothing and throat!"

She turned away from him and sobbed.

It was the most terrible instant of his life.

Neither of them moved for a few moments. Then Lady Graciela pointed at the tunnel entrance she'd discovered, and entered without a word.

de Torre followed her inside and down the ladder, not knowing what he could say to undo the hurt he'd caused.

And to restore the possibility of the future he wanted with her.

When she arrived at the bottom she began walking immediately, forcing him to hurry to catch up with her.

Or was that the wrong thing to do?

Was there something he was supposed to say?

Whatever it was, it didn't matter.

Her grief was agony to him. He would do or say anything to take it away from her.

Suddenly she stopped, and turned around.

Her eyes were full of tears.

He realised she'd been walking away because she hadn't wanted him to see them.

"My Lady - "

She threw her arms around him.

His skin flushed with surprise and delight. If only he were able to properly enjoy this moment!

But the lady was trying to speak through her sobbing.

"Forgive me. Please forgive me, my dear Alejandro. I insulted you without cause. I was - I *am*... frightened."

He was about to tell her that was to be expected, but then he realised there was more to it.

"And you are angry with yourself for being frightened?"
Her grip around him changed, and this answered his question.

He was starting to know her well.

"I am the daughter of a Duke."

"Yes, and this means you are not permitted to be frightened?"

"Of course I am permitted. But I am not permitted to act as though I am."

He drew back - without breaking the embrace - so he could at look her.
And he tried to give her the same playful look he'd seen her wearing countless times before.

She laughed, and shook her head.

"Is that distorted grimace somehow intended to resemble me?"

It had worked!

He grinned at her. It felt more natural than his previous expression.

And by the look on her face, the lady preferred it.

She tightened her arms around him, drawing de Torre's body closer to her own.

And she kissed him.

After a moment, he remembered to kiss her back.

It was... transcendent.

Never in his life had he felt more elated, more relieved, more at peace.

But of course it could not last.

When she stopped kissing him she also broke their embrace.

He almost cried out at the loss.

"This is not the time," she said.

"No."

"But I do not regret it."

"Good! Nor do I."

"And I still cannot accept your weapon."

"I understand."

"We should be on our way."

"We should, yes."

She wanted to kiss him again, he could see it plainly, but instead she turned and began
walking down the tunnel in the direction of home.

She had excellent discipline.

She was, after all, the daughter of a Duke.

de Torre caught up to her, and walked beside her.

Some day they would have to do this while holding hands.

The Guardsman reflected that perhaps he should focus his mind on his duty.

"Will these tunnels take us all the way to your home?"

"No, the palace was built only three centuries ago, well after Terentius had ceased playing his little games. When we exit the aqueducts, we'll still have several blocks to traverse before we arrive at the gates. With any luck, the riot will not have spread that far."

de Torre doubted they were going to have that kind of luck.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, during which the Guardsman let his mind wander to what might be happening with his comrades. Lady Graciela's voice shook him out of his reverie.

"Are you feeling poorly? You've been walking more slowly."

"No, I'm fine... Well, truth be told, we had a very eventful evening, from which none of us emerged at our best. I've slept and eaten since, but the recent exertion has undone most of the good that provided."

That playful smile of hers returned.

"Well then, Alejandro, perhaps, before this day is over, it shall be I who rescues you."

It was a very welcome smile.

"My Lady, it would be both my honour and my privilege."

"Of course it would." And she nodded wisely.

They both laughed.

But not too loudly.

They spent the next half hour or so in companionable silence, Lady Graciela allowing de Torre to dictate their pace without making it feel like she was slowing down to accommodate him, for which he was grateful.

And, truth be told, he was starting to feel better than he had after the fisticuffs. He suspected that had as much to do with the company as anything else.

And then they came to the end of their journey underground. Lady Graciela indicated a set of rungs set into the stone wall.

"This is the closest exit to the palace gates."
"You know these tunnels very well."

"We spent a great deal of our childhood exploring them, my brother Salvador, myself... and Miguel."

de Torre remembered the man's performance at *The Cock and Hen*, jumping and kicking and laughing. What fun it must have been, to go on an adventure with him!

But now of course that could never happen again.

"Do you wish to go first, my brave protector?"

"Yes, I do. I believe I am sufficiently well that I shall not faint on the way up and fall down upon your pretty head."

They laughed again. It felt good.

He pecked her on the lips.

He was thrilled that it pleased her, moreso that she'd been caught by surprise.

They both wished there could be time for something more.

But instead de Torre turned and started climbing out of the tunnels.

It wasn't until they were back on the street that they heard the noise.

A large group of people was approaching. And from the words they were shouting, they were heading for the palace.

"This way!" Lady Graciela said, tugging at his arm.

They ran.

de Torre's head began pounding immediately.

From behind them came the sound of galloping hoofbeats - a Dove on horseback! Lady Graciela turned to greet him.

de Torre turned as well, but more cautiously, since he did not know whether this Dove would realise their goals were temporarily aligned.

It was his caution that saved his life.

The horse was indeed that of a Dove, but the man riding it was not. He wore the apron of a blacksmith, and he shouted

"Death to tyranny everywhere!"

while swinging a hammer at de Torre's head.

Had the Guardsman not been prepared for an attack, the hammer would have cracked his skull. Instead, de Torre moved aside at the last moment, and the weapon merely struck him a glancing blow.

It was enough to knock him to the ground.
He tried to rise.
He could not.
Warm blood trickled down the side of his face.
The blacksmith turned his horse around for another pass.
de Torre drew his pistol.
He could barely see.
He waited until the horse was close enough, then he pulled the trigger.
The sound made him black out.
He woke to the sensation of Lady Graciela slapping his face.
"Alejandro! Wake up! Wake up!"
He did, to some extent. And, with her help, he managed somehow to stand up.
Although he still couldn't see properly.
Then he felt Lady Graciela raise his foot and place it into a stirrup.
He lifted himself, again with her help, and landed across the horse's back.
Lady Graciela climbed smoothly into the saddle.
Of course she could ride; she was nobility.
She urged the horse forward, and the first jolt de Torre felt was the last.

Without the Tunic to identify him to anyone as a friend or foe, and save for the boy he'd carried across the busy street to his older sister, Maiz arrived at his former lodging-house without incident. He went straight to the common room.

And discovered someone was already there.

"My friend. It is good to see you again, although I wish I could be happier about the circumstances."

Portero turned around quickly, and dropped the carpet he'd been cutting with his knife.

The cushions had already been ripped open, and the bookshelves knocked to the floor. Portero was covered in soot. He'd been searching very thoroughly.

He laughed. It was not a pleasant sound.

"I know you hid your belongings somewhere in this room. You told me you did. I was looking for them; I hoped to surprise you. I did the same for the Guardsmen: I retrieved their horses before the Doves could confiscate them."

The poor man was seeking his friend's approval.
But Armando Maíz could not give it.

"What have you done?"

Miguel Portero fell to his knees. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He dropped his knife and shook his fists.

"They betrayed me, Frédéric! My friends. Salvador and Graciela had the power to release me from prison, and they did nothing. Nothing! It was only when I needed them most that I discovered my friendship meant nothing to them at all."

"That isn't true."

"He broke me! Daniel Cortés destroyed my arm, and took away my music, my very soul. If Salvador and Graciela had intervened in time, if they had given my suffering any thought, perhaps the arm could have been healed. Perhaps I could have been saved."

"You can still sing, my friend. Magnificently."

"And I can write, can't I? All those verses. The Poets of the Revolution. I have written a great deal since my captivity - but nothing to be proud of."

"Your pen is but one of your voices. God is where you find him."

"No."

Portero stood up. He pointed through the window at the chaos outside.

"This is my new art. This is what I have created. I have stirred the emotions of my fellow creatures, and with my gifts I have driven them to hatred and violence. Miguel Portero died in Fortaleza Tormentaña. What you see before you now is a creature of evil, the thing that Daniel Cortés created."

"I see only a friend in pain. A strong man who can heal."

"A friend..."

Portero looked into Maíz' eyes. He waited a long time before continuing.

"You are the last friend I have in the world, and I do not even know your real name. Don't tell me! It is better I should never know. For you are leaving this city of my birth, and after today I shall never see you again."

"Miguel..."

But he had no words of comfort to offer.

Portero nodded. His truth had won.

"The thing which causes me the most grief is I still love them. Graciela, Salvador, they still hold a cherished place in my heart. I can never forgive them, but I will always love them. Can you tell them that, for me?"

"I do not imagine I will ever see them again."

"Perhaps not. But you will outlive me. I hope. Goodbye, my friend."
And he walked past Maíz and out the door.

The Guardsman had wanted to reach out to him, but he knew the gesture would have been refused.

Maíz waited until he was certain he was alone. Then he moved a chair into the correct position, stepped onto it, reached over a beam in the ceiling, and removed this possessions from behind it.

Nobody ever thinks to look up.

He stepped off the chair, draped his Tunic over it, and fastened the belt around his waist. Then he lifted the Tunic to his lips, kissed it, and said:

"When the castles are ruins,

"And the cities ash,

"Love will sustain us,

"For Love cannot be conquered,

"And it embraces all things."

Whereupon he placed his head through the opening and let the cloth fall over his shoulders.

Armando Maíz, Emerald Guardsman, was home again.

He took one long breath, in and out.

Then he placed some money on the mantel for the damage to the common room, and stepped out into the streets of Isla Oestelago.

A block away to his left stood a dozen angry people cheering a burning house. Between them and their entertainment stood Miguel Portero, waving his arms and shouting.

"No! No! This is never what I intended! Listen to me! I am Miguel Portero - you have all heard of me! I am the one who wrote as the Poets of the Revolution! They were all personas I created! And I was wrong! This violence is senseless! You are only hurting yourselves!"

But the people were not listening. They did not care who he was.

The back of the burning building collapsed.

A child screamed from somewhere inside.

Instantly, Portero turned and entered.

Maíz ran over as quickly as he could.

Another part of the house fell in.

Thick smoke was pouring out of the ceiling, windows, and doorway.

Maíz blinked back the pain it caused his eyes, breathed through his sleeve, and entered the conflagration.
Despite the smoke and the flames, it did not take him long to locate Portero.

The performer had almost made it out. When the ceiling had collapsed the second time, he’d jumped out of the way.

And instead of crushing his head, the falling timbers had landed upon his back and legs. But his outstretched arms still held the small child he'd gone in to rescue, safely aloft and away from his broken body.

He saw Maíz and smiled.

"I knew you would save me... my friend."

He coughed, shallowly, unable to take a proper breath.

A stream of blood coursed out of the corner of his mouth and puddled onto the floor.

Maíz took the child out of his arms. It was frightened, and quiet, but alive.

"My friend, I cannot..."

He stopped to cough the smoke out of his lungs.

Portero misunderstood what he had been about to say.

"I did not mean... you could save my body... my friend. But perhaps, if there is any hope," and he looked at the child in Maíz' arms, "you could save... me."

And then Miguel Portero, singer, musician, poet, died.

Maíz turned to leave with his precious burden.

But a timber fell directly in front of him, enveloping him in smoke and sending sparks into his face.

He covered the child as best he could, and breathed hot air into his lungs. He staggered around the timber, choking on the smoke and unable to see.

His knees buckled, but he recovered and kept going.

He slipped and fell onto his knees, but he kept the child from striking the floor. He kept moving, crawling toward the sound of voices.

And suddenly he was outside, breathing fresher air.

He still could not see. He held the child up, and someone took it from him.

He never would learn whether the child was a boy or a girl.

Armando Maíz toppled to the ground, able at last to breathe properly, but overcome by his exertions.

Just before the darkness took him, his vision cleared enough for him to perceive a man standing over him, wearing a white sash.
Dorado was very much looking forward to voyaging to the New World.
On a ship, nobody would ask him to run. For weeks.
He'd been doing altogether too much running lately.
And the horses behind him were getting closer.
But he was approaching a tavern.
And many taverns have back doors.
He reached the door just as the first horseman was upon him.
The rider was so intent on Dorado he never saw the sign above the door until he hit it with
his face and it threw him from his horse.
The tavern was empty: Except for two people cowering at a table in the corner, all the other
patrons were out in the street.
Dorado ran straight through to the back.
There was a door! He almost couldn't believe it.
And in the alleyway behind the door stood three Doves.
"Well, that's more like it."
He raised his sword.
His opponents threw up their hands.
And then Dorado realised how young they were, and what it meant that their swords were
still in their scabbards.
He directed his sword at the one in the middle.
"You three are hiding!"
They nodded, frightened out of their wits.
"How long have you been Doves?"
None of them seemed about to speak, so Dorado wagged his sword underneath the middle
one's chin.
That made him much more inclined to answer questions.
"Two - two days! We joined after you Guardsmen attacked the Cathedral."
"That seems a brave thing to admit to a Guardsman with his sword at your throat."
"Well," said the one on the left, "we have since learned that it was Alberto Guzmán who
attacked you."
"And how much training have you received in your two days as protectors of Isla
Oestelago?"
"Almost none." It was still the one on the left speaking for the three of them. "Under ordinary circumstances we wouldn't even be patrolling the streets, but Major Pescador had every available man looking for you. And then the riot erupted."

"Whereupon, rather than discharge your sworn duty to the people of this city, you chose to hide like cowards?"

"No! No, Señor Guardsman, sir - "

"Dorado."

"Señor Dorado, sir - "

"For the love of God."

"We're not afraid. That is, we are, of course we are, but more than that we don't know what to do. We don't wish to hurt anyone, but some of the citizens wish to hurt us."

Dorado sighed.

He sheathed his sword.

"Come with me."

"Sir?"

"The Guardsmen and the Doves have declared a temporary truce for the duration of this riot. We have been deputed, and now I am deputing you, recruits. Do you swear to follow me and obey my orders without question?"

"We do," said the three of them, almost in unison.

"Then come with me."

They nodded vigorously, relieved to know at last what they were supposed to be doing.

Dorado led them out of the alleyway, then looked for people who needed help.

He was not surprised to discover more options than he had men.

"Do any of you know where the nearest physician is?"

"I do."

"That man needs the physician's immediate attention. If he can't walk, carry him over your shoulders. If any man attempts to impede you, draw your sword and order him aside."

"And if he refuses?"

"Can either of you answer that? You, there's no need to raise your hand, just speak up."

"Use the sword, but sparingly?" said the Dove who'd been standing on the left.

"Correct. That man is trying to keep you from saving someone else's life. That's the same as if he were directly attacking him. Now go."

While that Dove hurried off, Dorado pointed at two men fighting on the ground in the
middle of the street. Each man was trying to roll on top of the other and subdue him. One of them wore a filthy sash which had once been white.

"You - get behind the one who isn't a Dove and kick him to the ground. Then drag him out of the street before he gets trampled."

"Do I arrest him?"

"You don't have time to take anyone to the jail. He'll wake up with bruises and a headache; that's all the justice he'll receive today."

The second one hurried away, leaving Dorado with the one he trusted the most.

"The fire," he said, pointing at the very tavern he'd run through earlier. Someone within must have knocked a candle onto a puddle of alcohol. "Organise the people standing around to grab anything that will hold water and form a chain from the trough to the tavern."

The Dove ran off without another word, not even in acknowledgment.

That one had promise.

Dorado looked at each of his three deputies in turn. They had their situations well in hand; it was time for him to leave.

Except that, through the crowd of people in the street, he saw striding toward him Lieutenant François Carandini of the Cardinal's Gendarmes.

Carandini noticed that he'd been seen.

He drew his sword.

Dorado did the same.

The crowd parted as they walked toward each other.

They met in the middle of the street, and their swords struck together once, twice, three times.

Then Dorado took a step back.

Each strike had hurt his fingers, and holding up his sword was difficult after all the time his shoulders had spent supporting Corvus' weight.

He was going to lose.

And from the expression on his face, Carandini knew it.

The Gendarme attacked, aiming low, then up, then low again.

He was forcing Dorado to tire out his arm even further. The Guardsman's sword was so heavy he thought he would drop it.

He certainly wanted to.

Now Carandini came at his centre, thrusting, thrusting, thrusting, moving too quickly for Dorado to even think of anything but defence, and driving Dorado back, step by hurried step.
Tiring out his legs as well as his arm.

Then Carandini suddenly stopped, and straightened himself up.

He looked Dorado over from head to toe, his smile the very definition of mockery.

He could have defeated his opponent long before now, and he wanted the Guardsman to know it.

Dorado would have liked to comment unfavourably upon his adversary's honour, but he was unable to take enough air into his lungs.

He thought of reaching for his pistol.

But Carandini could step forward and impale him before the weapon was even out of his belt.

Which did not leave the Guardsman many options.

He bent his knees, as though ready to collapse.

Then with the last of the strength in his legs, he leapt forward.

A searing pain ripped through his side, and he knew Carandini's sword had caught him.

But his surprise attack had caught Carandini as well. His shoulder slammed into the man's middle - which probably hurt Dorado more than Carandini - and knocked the wind out of him as Dorado tackled him to the ground.

But that was the end. If Carandini had not managed to cut him, and if the Gendarme had fallen badly, perhaps Dorado would have been able to strike him again.

Instead, Carandini pushed Dorado away and got to his feet, while Dorado was too tired even to open his eyes.

"Stop!"

Dorado recognised that voice.

"I order you to step away from that man!"

"I do not answer to you."

"In my city, you do."

Ah, yes. Dorado recognised the voice now.

It belonged to Martín Pescador.

Dorado would have liked to have stayed awake long enough to discover which man, the Spanish Major or the French Lieutenant, was going to win.

But he didn't.
Ha-haa!

So last chapter, when I was namedropping Donald E. Westlake, I forgot to mention something important: He wrote *The Hot Rock*. That's a crime story in which the titular diamond is stolen... eventually. See, during the initial theft one of the crooks gets arrested, and swallows the rock, so they have to break him out of prison, which they do, only to discover that while he was in holding he passed the stone and hid it in the police station, which means they have to break into *there*, &c &c. There are something like five or six capers in the novel; I always lose count. But basically, as soon as I decided to name Isla Oestelago after the author of *The Hot Rock*, I decided it might be fun for the story in my city to reflect the central idea of Westlake's novel. So first our heroes have to escape from a Cathedral, then they discover their gear's been seized, and they have to break into a post building, after which (give or take a tavern brawl and a night of sneaking through the streets) they are *finally* able to free the man they came to Isla Oestelago to rescue, only to learn that his books are in the home of the Duke! I'm having a blast writing it; I'm sure he did too. It sure reads like he did.

And now, on to the Author's Notes I promised two weeks ago.

1. As I've mentioned, I use *The Online Etymology Dictionary* a lot when writing this story, to make sure the words I use are (more or less) period. And what word important to this story did I recently discover is *not* period? Jungle. Yes, I am writing a Swashbuckling Jungle Adventure, and when I get to the New World I am going to have to find ways around using that word. Exciting! (Although... I have since checked, and the word has appeared twice in the story already. I must have neglected to check it. Maybe, since the barn door is already open, I shouldn't close it?)

2. Fortaleza Tormentaña is named after where I live, the Township of North Stormont. Storm is *tormenta*, mountain is *montaña*, and I mashed 'em together.

3. Esteban, Archbishop of Isla Oestelago, is named for Steven Spielberg and Stephen J. Cannell. One pretty much (re)defined the jungle adventure genre, and the other created (among many other things) my much-beloved *The A-Team*.

Finally, something I have never mentioned before: TOTEM is what I call this story for short. It's *almost* an accurate acronym, and it fits the story pretty well. And the reason I mention this now is so I don't have to keep saying "this story" all the time, particularly when I tell you this is the longest chapter TOTEM has ever had, and ever will have. When I finished the last chapter, obviously I knew this chapter would be the riot, and in that moment I knew I wanted everybody to pass out by the end of it. So why not make this chapter exhausting as well? I consider 4000 words to be the high end of TOTEM chapter length (even though the longest chapter exceeds that by more than 800 words), and prior to this one there were only five chapters longer than 4k. So I decided that if I wanted this chapter to be exhausting, I should aim to double that, for a total of 8000 words. I certainly felt I had enough ideas for it. So this chapter is insanely long on purpose: 9496 words in Word and 9460 according to AO3. And, of course, that ludicrous size is the reason this sucker published a day late.
The Palace Of The Duke

Chapter Summary

*IN WHICH* the Guardsmen, despite the nearness of their enemies, enjoy repose, companionship, wine, even a song.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**DORADO** awoke from a pain in his side.

He hissed and turned his body so he was no longer lying on the wound.

The surface he was on moved beneath his weight.

He was on a soft mattress.

A bed.

Wait.

How was it possible he was awaking in a *bed*?

He opened his eyes.

He was in an opulent room, lying in a supremely comfortable bed, and covered with a beautiful thick blanket.

He moved his hand to the wound Carandini had given him.

It was bandaged.

He sat up.

de Torre sat up with a start.

And the agony in his bandaged head almost made him collapse back down onto the mattress.

But he managed to remain upright, and closed his eyes tightly to fortify himself against the pain and the dizziness.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw he was not alone.

There was a man standing beside the door.
He was dressed in the modest finery befitting the servant of a wealthy household.

"Who are you?" Maíz asked him.

"I am but a humble servant," the man answered with a short bow.

"And who do you serve? More to the point, where am I?"

"You are in the palace of His Grace Josefo Lobato, the Duke of Isla Oestelago."

"Well," Maíz thought, "that makes certain things easier."

"Do you have any news of my comrades?"

"All of them are here in this wing of the palace," said the servant attending on Calavera. "Some received injuries during the riot, but they have been treated."

The Lieutenant manipulated the remaining fingers on his left hand. There was discomfort from his wound, but no pain. The physician who'd bandaged his hand had exceptional skill.

"And are we prisoners?"

"Not at all. It has been vouchsafed safe by Major Pescador that if you and your comrades were to be welcomed as guests and treated as such, you would comport yourselves accordingly."

"Then I'm a guest."

"If that is the way it pleases you to view your present circumstances, then yes."

Corvus looked around the room.

"You will find your possessions placed on and around the writing desk."

Indeed he did. And his Tunic was draped respectfully over the chair.

"You may wear your Tunic or not, as you please, but you are respectfully requested not to wear your weapons while a guest in the palace."

"Of course."

Then he thought of Dorado.

"What is the time of day?"

"It is shortly after nine o'clock on the morning. You were brought here yesterday."

"Good," said Dorado, turning in the bed and placing his feet on the floor. "Then I still have time."

He rose - carefully! - and walked to his bag, from which he removed the bottle he'd been given in the Black Curtain. As he'd been instructed, he dipped his finger into the liquid within and
pressed it diligently to the bottom of his mouth, underneath his tongue. Then he closed his lips around his finger and sucked the remaining liquid off his finger.

He was aware of the servant watching him, wondering what Dorado was doing.

The Guardsman would not have satisfied his curiosity even if he'd known the answer himself.

Corvus was dressed in a long white shirt, not his own. Some sort of balm had been applied to his battered shoulders, pungent yet soothing. His clothes were on the seat of the writing desk chair, washed and folded.

His hand went to his ear. The gold hoop was still in place.

He suspected this was in deference to the possibility the jewelry possessed religious significance.

In his case it didn't, although it did represent a spiritual connection that would endure eternally.

"Am I free to leave the palace, if I wish?"

Calavera's servant nodded.

"You are. But it is hoped that you and your comrades will remain until dinner this evening. There will be many guests present, with much to discuss between you."

The servant was well-rehearsed. And Duque Josefo had composed his script carefully.

Calavera had no doubt whatsoever who would be present at dinner, and what they would be discussing.

The servant cleared his throat in that most polite fashion of demanding attention that is the first skill required of every man in his profession.

"If I may, sir, your Tunic has a hole, which we would be happy to mend for you."

"I appreciate the offer, and my host the Duke's generosity, but the hole is my responsibility."

In many ways.

"As you prefer. And lastly, His Excellency the Archbishop requests an audience at your earliest convenience."

"At my convenience?"

"Indeed. He was most insistent upon that point."

Well.

"All the same, now that I am awake, I think I had best not keep him waiting."
The servant said nothing.

"If you please, sir, there is someone without who wishes to speak with you."

de Torre's chest tightened.

He leapt out of bed - he had to get properly dressed!

- and his head objected so strongly to the sudden movement that de Torre lost his footing and stumbled forward. His legs gave out, but he caught himself on the chair.

The servant hurried to his side, and helped him right himself.

"Are you all right?"

"My head is throbbing quite painfully, and I feel I've acted stupidly, but otherwise I am reasonably well, thank you."

Nevertheless, he sat down in the chair.

And only then did the servant remove his hand from the Guardsman's back.

In general de Torre resented being controlled, but this time he was grateful, and impressed.

He noticed his companion was waiting for something.

Of course, the visitor! He'd almost forgotten.

He tried to keep his voice calm as he said, "And who is it that wishes to see me?"

"Major Martín Pescador of the Doves."

That was not the name he'd been expecting - and hoping - to hear.

Nevertheless...

"Will you kindly help me dress myself, please?"

Maíz walked to the window, to see what lay on the grounds before him.

He had learned much about the rooms and corridors of the Duke's palace, in his capacity as spy residing in a country hostile to his own.

The view through the window showed him an ornately-pebbled path that wound around elaborate fountains and thick trees.

Beyond that was an enormous expanse of tall hedges, cut to form a labyrinth, and beyond that, the Rio Miño.

"Do I have the honour of being in the palace's Northern guest wing?"

"You do, yes."
"And we are not the Duke's only guests, are we?"

"You are the only guests in this wing, sir."

"Of course. Captain Coléreaux and Lieutenant Carandini of the Cardinal's Gendarmes are guests here as well, as are the Five Stars."

"They are."

"But we are being kept separate."

"Yes."

"Until dinner, of course."

"Yes."

There!

Something in the man's impassive demeanour had changed, just for a moment.

But Maíz had noticed.

He was, after all, in the service of the Baron of Girona.

The servant had an opinion about his master's other guests, an opinion it was outside his purview to have.

Dinner promised to be very interesting, indeed.

"One last question. If my comrades and I were to meet in the common room, and we wished to speak privately..."

"My colleagues and I are fully at your service. If we are dismissed, we will retire."

"Excellent. Then let me get dressed and we will be on our way. As you might expect, my comrades and I have much to discuss."

There was a knock on the door.

The servant waited for Calavera's leave to respond to it.

Which astonished the Lieutenant, considering who the visitor must be.

He nodded, and the servant opened the door, admitting Esteban Lobato, Archbishop of Isla Oestelago.

Then the servant caught Calavera's eye, and, seeing what he expected, respectfully withdrew, leaving the two men alone.

Calavera decided he must tell the Duke his people were exceptional.

But that was for dinner. He had more immediate concerns at the moment.

He briefly looked his visitor over, seeing a thin man, of average height, with a sharp nose
and a thin mouth. The lightness of his hair indicated some Portuguese ancestry, but his eyes were very dark.

And they had seen a great deal.

"Your Excellency, how may I be of service?"

The Archbishop chuckled without moving his face.

Calavera couldn't determine how he'd managed it.

When he spoke, the holy man's voice was as without inflection as his countenance.

"Lieutenant Calavera, it is I who must be in service to you. I owe you a debt, for surely without your intervention yesterday I would have been overrun by those brigands and viciously murdered."

His voice was soft, almost a whisper, but Calavera could hear the power within, the unquestionable ease with which this man would address an entire Cathedral full of the faithful.

And although Esteban Lobato spoke of his own brutal assassination with all the emotion one might devote to counting on an abacus, there was no doubting his sincerity.

Calavera found himself profoundly moved by it.

"Then you were, as I'd imagined, the person on the other side of the door those men had been attempting to breach?"

"I was one of them, yes. And your words confirm my suspicions that your intervention on my behalf was entirely deliberate."

"Of course!"

The Archbishop chuckled again.

He could have been Vincente de Tarso's brother.

"Is it so strange to be surprised that you would risk your life to save my own? On several occasions, I have entreated His Holiness Pope Urban to excommunicate your entire nation."

Calavera shrugged. "We are both faithful servants of God, Your Excellency. Our differences merely concern how best to serve Him."

The Archbishop nodded, not in agreement with Calavera, but as though the Guardsman had just confirmed one of his unvoiced suspicions.

In the silence that followed, his dark eyes looked deeply into Calavera's own, the way a predator pushes through the night with its gaze, searching for unsuspecting prey in the darkness.

Yet despite the intensity of his scrutiny, Calavera did not feel threatened.

The Archbishop nodded again, having once more confirmed something for himself.

"I will confide in you what my brother cannot speak, trusting that you will in turn share this information only with your fellow Guardsmen and no other."
He paused, but not for Calavera to speak, so the Lieutenant didn't.

"My brother has welcomed the representatives of a fellow Catholic country into his duchy and his home, but our allies have not been entirely honest with us. For this reason, the Duke wishes to hasten their departure, but of course he cannot insist, for that would be impolitic.

"At the same time, he has invited other guests into his home who have been perfectly forthcoming in their intentions. Regrettably, if he were to assist these guests in their endeavours, he would be working contrary to the aims of his other guests, who it is important that we support in whatever way possible despite their duplicity."

The Archbishop examined Calavera once more.

"And then we come to the five of you. Soldiers and spies in the service of a hostile nation."

"Forgive me, Your Excellency, but - "

"Yes, you intend to remind me that Esperanza bears Spain no ill will, that the enmity only extends from Spain to Esperanza. I need no such reminders."

And further, he was not to be interrupted again.

Calavera understood.

"Based upon what our allies have at last seen fit to divulge, the Duke, myself, and Major Pescador have deduced that you Guardsmen are here for reasons similar to those which have brought the other two groups to Spain and to Isla Oestelago. Logic would dictate that we do everything in our power to prevent you from succeeding... but honour might require something different.

"During yesterday's uprising, you risked yourselves to save the lives of the people of this city, including soldiers who are your enemies. You made this choice freely and without hesitation, whereas our allies had to be persuaded, and even then they cooperated only with reluctance, while the Duke's other guests, men of renowned skill and bravery, demonstrated they only employ those attributes when it can procure them some personal advantage. Therefore, despite what politics may require, the three of us are more inclined to offer our support to you Esperanzans."

"Even Pescador?" Calavera asked before he could help himself.

The Archbishop frowned.

It was an unsettling expression, not the least because it was the first he'd demonstrated.

"Martín is a fine man and an exemplary soldier, unshakeable in his convictions. That is precisely what the Holy Inquisition requires of its authorities. But this rigidity has often been misunderstood by the people. Further, my brother and I were slow to accept his insistences that a man we both trusted to keep the peace was abusing his position, and Martín's discretion in that matter led the ignorant public to assume that he was that villain's cohort, rather than his opponent. And, as we saw yesterday, a collection of poorly-received actions can easily be exaggerated by those with a talent for rhetoric so that they appear as something far greater and more sinister. Martín has been a victim of Portero's unjustified poison for years, but the truth of the matter is very different. In fact, had it not been for his direct intervention, one of your men would have been killed yesterday. And your status today as guests in the palace rather than prisoners on the island is due in large part to his recommendation."
Calavera nodded. "I expected as much, Your Excellency. I meant him no disrespect. I was merely surprised at the extent of his sympathy."

The Archbishop returned the nod; the matter was closed and forgotten.

"And that is the full extent of the message I have to convey. Over dinner, we Isla Oestelagans will observe how you and the other two groups comport yourselves. Then we shall retire to make what I expect will be a very difficult decision."

"Is there a chance, at the end of that deliberation... "

It was a difficult question to ask.

But Esteban Lobato knew what it was.

"That you and your comrades will be placed under arrest? There is no chance of that whatsoever. At the very worst, you will be put on board a ship bound for a country that is at war neither with Spain nor with Esperanza. Fortunately, we have a very large port, and there is one such ship available."

A joke? Calavera could scarcely believe it.

But before he could recover, the Archbishop had something else to say.

"All of that, however, is for this evening. For now, Lieutenant Calavera, I should like to offer you my personal thanks for saving my life and the lives of the three men who were trapped behind that door with me. Further I insist that you ask something of me, that I might repay the debt I owe you."

There was one specific concern which had been haunting Calavera since his time in the tunnels of Terentius, and before him was the perfect man to resolve it.

However, this was also a difficult question to ask.

"Your Excellency, recently I was... " he did not want to speak the most precise term aloud, "... compelled to perform certain actions, during which time I was not in control of myself. I wish to know whether, as a result of this experience, I have been... tainted."

The Archbishop stepped closer to Calavera.

And put his hand on the Guardsman's shoulder.

"Of course, my son. Come with me to the chapel, and I will offer you Communion. That will settle the matter one way or the other."

"I am not a fool, de Torre."

"I never took you for one, Pescador."

"I know that you have developed a certain affection for Lady Graciela. And," he took in a deep breath through his nose, "I know that it is reciprocated."

de Torre nodded. "And since I know you are not a fool, Major, I take it for granted that you are aware I have witnessed your own affection for Lady Graciela, which she likewise perceives -
but does not reciprocate."

Although de Torre would not have imagined his posture could become more severe, Pescador stiffened.

He did not like being at a disadvantage. Nor was he accustomed to it.

"Good. Then our positions are clear. You are a gentleman."

It was not a question, de Torre noticed.

"Yes."

"Then as a gentleman, I would ask you to do what is best for the lady."

"It has never entered my mind to do otherwise."

"You have taken a vow to the Emerald Guard."

"I have."

"You will not forswear yourself and resign, to reside in Spain."

"Of course not."

"Then any future you might have with Lady Graciela would be in Esperanza."

de Torre didn't answer this time. He saw where Pescador's thoughts were taking them.

"In order to wed Lady Graciela, you would ask her to leave her family, to abandon her duty to the people of Isla Oestelago, and to shame her father and uncle by uniting in holy matrimony with an enemy of Spain."

"Esperanza is not Spain's enemy."

"His Royal Highness the King of Spain disagrees."

"Then out of love for his daughter, His Grace the Duke of Isla Oestelago should petition the King to change his position."

"You are being insultingly disingenuous."

"I am being passionately obstinate. It is a prerogative of young lovers."

"If you press your suit, you will put the woman you profess to love in an impossible position."

"The position already exists. She can decide for herself how she chooses to resolve it."

"It is easy to pretend she is your only consideration when her present inclination matches your own selfish desires."

"All desires are selfish."

"You believe me to be unsuitable for her."

"Of course!"
"Because we are dissimilar."

"Yes."

"But the fact is you know neither of us very well. I believe our differences will complement one another."

"Nevertheless, she doesn't love you."

"She hasn't had a chance to pose herself the question. She's a childhood friend of Miguel Portero, a proven lunatic who turned an entire city against me."

"The lady is capable of forming her own opinions."

"Provided there is no one on hand to interfere."

"I will not be accused of deception, sir."

"No insult is intended. Your interference is perfectly understandable."

"I thank you for your consideration."

"Nevertheless... it is detrimental to her."

"I reiterate: That is not for us to decide."

Pescador sighed; his shoulders drooped.

"We have achieved nothing."

"You did not expect me simply to capitulate."

"I had hoped you would see reason."

"Your points are all well-taken. We have simply reached different conclusions."

"You cannot pretend that your conclusions have been arrived at independently of your personal desires."

"Neither of us can."

Pescador sighed again.

Then he took a deep breath.

"Tonight after dinner, the Duke and the Archbishop, with myself offering counsel, will determine what is to become of you and your comrades. It has already been decided - at my recommendation - that at the very least, you will be at liberty. I will not go back on my word, but honour does not prevent me from pursuing you, de Torre, and waiting for you to commit an act that is contrary to the best interests of Spain, whereupon you will have given me no choice but to respond accordingly."

"You will not increase Lady Graciela's estimation of you, Pescador, by arresting or killing me."

"You insist on viewing my motives as simple selfishness. But I would rather she choose any
man in this city, or this country, over an Esperanzan, most especially a member of the Emerald
Guard. Despite my own aspirations, I am thinking primarily of what is best for her."

"Which you continue to assert is for you to decide, rather than the lady herself."

"Whereas your insistence that her present inclinations be the only factor is a facile position
to adopt when you are the one who stands to benefit the most from her momentary infatuation."

de Torre took a deep breath.
Pescador did the same.

They realised they were only one or two rejoinders away from committing themselves to
something their host the Duke would never have countenanced.

"I think we understand each other perfectly."

"Yes."

"Good day, Pescador."

"Good day, de Torre. I will see you at dinner."

"A bed! After all my time in captivity, such a thing as I woke to find myself lying upon was
- Diego! At last you are here!"

As Calavera entered the common room, he smiled and nodded to the other four
Guardsmen.

"Gentlemen, I am pleased to see you all looking so well."

He was also pleased to see that, despite having been given leave to do so, none of them
were wearing their Tunics.

Relations within the home of Duque Josefo were rather ambiguous.

"You look tired!" said Maíz. "Well, so do we all. Sit, please. Would you like some wine?"

"Nothing in the world could please me more."

"There is food as well."

"Just the wine will suffice for now."

"We were becoming worried, my friend. Do you bring news?"

"My news is that I am not damned. I have this on the highest possible authority."

"Good, good!" Maíz said, as though Calavera had just informed him there would be
sausage for supper.

Which perhaps was just as well.

Maíz gave him some wine.
"Now that we are all together once more, somewhat battered but not indelibly harmed from our recent adventures, to what shall we raise our glasses?"

Silence descended.

The first instinct of every man present was to salute their country, but that did not seem appropriate given their current location.

Corvus was the first to hit upon the perfect subject.

"To peace."

"To peace," de Torre answered immediately.

"To peace," said the others together, and they all drank deeply.

When the moment was complete, Maíz spoke again.

"And now, regrettably, I have some tragic news for all of you. Our friend and comrade, Miguel Portero, is dead."

The others looked away from him, at their wine, at the floor, at whatever indistinct view might help them best contemplate the hardship of loss, the sorrow of madness, the unjust power evil has to tarnish joy, and, above all, the inexpressible beauty of our brief time together on this Earth.

"Before he left us, he expressed deep regret for the violence his verses had incited, and his very final act was to sacrifice himself to save the life of a young child."

"Your scars will never heal."

de Torre could hear, in his memory, the voice of the old woman from the Black Curtain, as though she were sitting right beside him.

He raised his glass.

"To Miguel Portero."

"To Miguel Portero," the others said.

They all drank.

"He died a hero," said de Torre.

"However the historians of Isla Oestelago choose to remember him," Calavera said, "he will be remembered in Esperanza as a man of bravery and nobility."

"I think, my friends," said Maíz, "he would have most preferred to be remembered as a musician."

There was another moment of quiet reflection.

After this, Corvus reached behind his chair for a guitar nobody but Dorado had realised was there.

"In honour of our departed friend, and as a pledge of my devotion to the rest of you, I would
like to share with you all my Oath of an Emerald Guardsman."

The silence grew more profound.

"That is, if you do not mind."

"Not all, Turo," said Dorado quietly. "We'd be honoured."

Corvus picked out some brief notes, and hummed to himself until he found the tone he wanted. Then he played, and sang, a melody consisting not of words but only of sounds.

Beautiful...

Haunting...

Defiant...

And, ultimately, inspirational.

Without saying anything specific, Corvus' song conveyed everything there was to say about the man, the Guardsmen, and what they meant to him.

It was perfect.

When he was finished, more than one of the men present found his eyes had become moist.

One of these was Maíz, who nodded solemnly to Corvus.

"Thank you, my friend."

"It was my pleasure."

"If you do not mind my asking, based upon your harmonies and your jewelry, you are Gitano, are you not?"

"I do not mind at all. I am proud of my heritage. My mother was Gitano, yes, and my father was a Spaniard."

Dorado looked at Calavera, to see whether this information was a surprise.

It was not; Calavera had known already.

But Dorado had not.

Perhaps because of the many times he'd expressed his distrust of the Gitano people within Corvus' earshot.

Corvus turned to him.

Dorado tried to find something to say.

But Corvus rescued him.

"You think of me as a Guardsman, and as a friend. A trusted friend. I have always known this, Lanza."

This was all the reassurance Dorado needed; Corvus would never lie to him, for any reason.
Yet still he was moved to make amends.

"Until this moment, owing to the circumstances of my recruitment, the only two men who have ever heard my Oath were the Baron and the Captain. But now, with your permission, I would like to share my Oath with you as well."

None of the others could speak. All of them, even Maíz, knew how dearly Dorado held his privacy. This, from him, was a great gift.

Understanding their silence to mean respectful attention, Dorado took a deep breath. Then he recited his Oath:

"Under the sword
We swore a bond
That we'd be true in this life and beyond.
And when I fall
With a wound in my heart
My Brothers will carry me
Under the sword."

In turn, the other Guardsmen shared their Oaths as well.

Then they refilled their glasses, so they might drink a salute to their country after all.

After this, they spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon in relaxed and pleasant discourse, conversing upon topics primarily trivial, but occasionally serious.

And although several hours passed, and it was uppermost in their minds (with the exception of de Torre, for whom allowances must be made), there was one specific topic which they avoided altogether.

Until one of the servants humbly intruded upon their privacy to inform them that the dinner hour had arrived, whereupon de Torre waited until they were alone once more to at last give voice to it.

"I must confess, for all that we cannot say we are precisely on friendly terms, I am not comfortable with the notion that at some point we must steal from our host."

"We will not be stealing," said Maíz. "We will be retrieving my books, which I have merely been keeping here without the Duke's knowledge."

There was no sense arguing with that, so none of them did.

Instead they rose from their seats in silence, exiting the common room and following the servant down the corridor to where their dinner awaited them, along with the Five Stars, Sébastien Coléreaux and his Gendarmes, Martín Pescador of the Doves, and the entire Lobato family.
Happy Anniversary!

Yes, in the epic-length notes to the epic-length last chapter, I neglected to mention another reason Chapter 46 is so long: It's the Double Sized Anniversary Special. That's right; The Temple of the Emerald God has now been publishing for over a year!

From the Hundred Year War to the Crimea
With a lance and a musket and a Roman spear
To all of the men who have stood with no fear
In the Service of the King
- The Clash, The Card Cheat

Many moons ago, when I decided each Guardsman would have a personal Oath, I thought it would be cool to have a scene where all five of them share their Oaths with each other, and while thinking about that scene and some of the men's Oaths I just could not get that stanza out of my mind. (Not that I really tried very hard, to be honest.)

Dorado's Oath is an adaptation of a song I have been in the middle of writing for years called, yes, Under The Sword. The title was inspired by the opening line of A Principled Man by Steve Taylor, and when I finally get around to writing, then recording, mastering, and pressing the album, Under The Sword will be available to all as part of my long-play consisting entirely of Swash Rock. Until then, I shall have to content myself with Gloryhammer, who I listen to quite a bit while writing TOTEM, and also when not.
Chapter Summary

_IN WHICH secrets are revealed, hiding places are uncovered, and new mysteries arise to take their place._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

DUQUE

Josefo's dining table was round, and set for eighteen people.

The Guardsmen were the last to arrive. Already present were the Duke, Duchess Tatiana, Graciela and Salvador Lobato, Archbishop Esteban Lobato, Martín Pescador, the Five Stars, and, representing Cardinal Richelieu's Gendarmes, Captain Sébastien Coléreaux and Lieutenant François Carandini.

de Torre wanted to catch Lady Graciela's eye, but she was trying very hard not to look in his direction.

When he noticed Pescador watching him, de Torre decided to follow her example.

He leaned toward Dorado and said, "I had been expecting more Gendarmes to be present."

Dorado snorted. "That is your sense of equality, my friend. It does not always apply. There are five of us, and five Stars, so no doubt you were expecting the final group of adversaries to also contain five men."

"Lanza, I believe you are correct!"

"Remember that all three of us have a different relationship with Spain, and therefore with the Duke. The Stars are guests and not soldiers, we are... whatever we are at the moment, and the Gendarmes are allies and soldiers. Only the officers would have been invited to stay here; the rest of the men are no doubt sleeping in the barracks, if there is room, or else on the ship which brought them here."

"By Heaven, you men _have_ been rather busy, haven't you?"

The voice was deep and generous, and the man striding toward them suited it perfectly. Duque Josefo was tall and broad-shouldered, with thick black hair and a thick black beard. de Torre had never seen a bear, but this man closely matched every description of them he'd ever experienced.

The Guardsmen lined up for him, but his pace never slowed.

Just as de Torre was certain the Duke could not help but crash into Calavera, the indomitable mass came to a sudden stop directly in front of him.

"You must be Lieutenant Diego Calavera."
He gave a short bow. "I am, Your Grace."

The Duke looked down at Calavera's bandaged hand.

"Did you incur that loss during yesterday's tragedy?"

"No, Your Grace, that finger was lost while I was leading my men in a secret assault upon Fortaleza Tormentaña."

All the other voices in the room ceased.

Everyone looked at Duque Josefo.

Who stared directly into Calavera's eyes.

Then he smiled, and started laughing.

His laugh, like everything else about him, was so full and so boisterous that de Torre had to cast a quick look at the ceiling to assure himself the chandeliers overhead weren't shaking.

The Duke clapped Calavera on the shoulder. "Good! That's the spirit of this evening - honesty! I abhor deceit. And while we are on the subject..."

He stepped in front of Maíz.

Maíz bowed, more deeply than Calavera, and without looking away from the Duke's eyes.

"You have been a guest in my home before. You gave me a false name, Frédéric Blossier. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Your Grace, I deeply regretted the deception at the time, for I had already come to esteem you highly, but of course I had to obey my duty, and therefore I cannot apologise for the deception. My true name is Armando Maíz."

"And you came to Isla Oestelago as a spy in the service of Baron de Tarso."

"I came here as an Emerald Guardsman in the service of Esperanza, yes."

The Duke snorted. "By Heaven, Maíz, you have some skill with rhetoric. You presume to amend my words at the same time you claim to agree with them."

Maíz wisely decided not to respond.

The Duke smiled again. "I have always appreciated your wit."

Maíz smiled back. "Thank you, Your Grace."

Into de Torre's mind appeared a very clear image: the two of them, sitting facing each other in the Duke's study, deep in after-dinner discussion until the sunrise.

His Grace moved down the line to welcome the others. He was surprised by Dorado, clearly unaccustomed to having to look up at anyone. He took an immediate liking to Corvus, embracing him in a fashion that reinforced de Torre's likening of him to a bear when he asked the Guardsman whether he was the one who had earlier sent for the guitar and Corvus said, "Of course," then asked whether there was a song His Grace would like to hear him play.
Lastly the Duke stepped in front of de Torre, and his mood became serious.

"You must be Alejandro de Torre."

de Torre bowed as low as his sore head permitted without making himself dizzy.

"Your Grace, I am."

"You saved my daughter's life."

"As I understand it, Your Grace, it was she who saved mine."

The Duke's bark of laughter nearly knocked de Torre backward.

"She did, at that! What a remarkable young woman, by Heaven! A father can only do so much to raise his children; after that it falls to their own characters to determine what sort of adults they will become - and in that, I have been truly blessed."

He faced first Graciela and then Salvador, and through the thick blackness of his beard his face shone brightly with pride.

He turned back to de Torre, blinking two or three times.

"I was blessed as well that Graciela had you at her side yesterday."

de Torre humbly looked away, not at the lady, but at Pescador.

The Major was keeping his face inscrutable, but not without some effort.

de Torre felt he was being given an unfair compliment, that the only reason his rival for Lady Graciela's affection had not been at her side the day before was because he'd been obeying his duty, and acting no less bravely.

But then he remembered Dorado's words about his desire for equality being occasionally inapplicable.

"Thank you, Your Grace."

The Duke appeared confused for a moment, as though he'd been expecting a lengthier response, but as the response given was nevertheless perfectly satisfactory, he moved on to other things.

He took a step back and motioned for his family to join him.

"This is my wife, Duchess Tatiana."

The lady would have been stunningly beautiful, were it not for the coldness in her eyes, which seemed to de Torre as though the mischievous playfulness her daughter had inherited had at some point in the mother's life become corrupted, hardening into a cold severity.

She was wearing black. de Torre couldn't imagine her in any other colour.

Duchess Tatiana made no effort to smile nor in any other way welcome her guests.

"I am in mourning," she said, her tone unmistakably accusatory, "for the good people of Spain who died in yesterday's violence."
Calavera and Dorado shared a quick glance of commiseration, which was how they kept themselves from indelicately pointing out to their hostess that it was not they, but rather some of those same good people of Spain, who had been responsible for the violence.

For his part, Duque Josefo simply continued the introductions.

"My son, Salvador."

If Graciela took after her mother, Salvador was a youthful combination of his father and uncle. His hair and build were similar to those of the Archbishop, but in the roundness of his features and the force of his exuberance he was every bit the Duke's son.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," he said, presenting the case rather lightly.

Clearly, he was overjoyed to be in the presence of Emerald Guardsmen.

"And I believe you have all met my daughter, Graciela."

"Gentlemen. I am pleased to see you are all well."

She did not look at de Torre.

de Torre did not look at her.

Duchess Tatiana made a noise in her throat signaling that her highly distasteful duty had come to an end. She turned and walked away from them.

The Duke was displeased with her, and ashamed for his guests. He felt he should say something, but was uncertain what.

His daughter had no such hesitancy.

"Please excuse my mother, for the sake of my father if for no other reason. She despises the five of you on principle, and is angry with the Duke and the Archbishop for their reluctance to simply burn you at the stake."

The Duke was appalled.

"Graciela!"

His son came to his rescue.

"I pray you, Guardsmen, guests, ignore this pettiness. All families have their small differences, which are best kept private, away from public scrutiny."

"Quite right," said the Duke, and that should have put an end to it.

But the young man had made the mistake of implying that his sister's viewpoint was a trifle, something few siblings close in age have ever tolerated.

"Private?"

The Duke raised his eyes to the heavens. He was now helpless before the avalanche.

"Our mother's bullish refusal to greet our guests without even the pretence of courtesy can hardly be called private."
"She has a firm moral conviction."

"Hah! She would accuse Torquemada himself of lacking commitment!"

"The excesses of her viewpoint are merely a reflection of her passionate devotion to God."

"But God is merciful, and forgiving. Mother is not. Perhaps she hasn't been paying proper attention to Uncle Esteban's sermons!"

This was clearly not the first time they were having this disagreement.

And beneath his dense beard, Duque Josefo's face was turning red. He was on the verge of shouting at them, the way one does to silence young children when they quarrel.

Corvus clapped his hands together very loudly and stepped out of the line.

"Your Grace, this is a positively enchanting dining hall. I notice that it is in the form of a rectangle, which can be divided into two squares. The table occupies the square furthest from the entrance, leaving the other square completely open for you to greet your guests. Is this by design?"

"Er, yes."

"And those doors, on the other side of the table from us. They are for the servants, and lead to the kitchen, do they not?"

"Yes!"

"And this is not the only dining room in the house, is it? The other is smaller, and more intimate, with the more common rectangular table?"

"Precisely! This is what I call my Political Hall, where the shape of the table makes it more difficult for guests to feel slighted by where they've been seated."

Dorado also stepped forward. "I see the table is large enough for twenty settings. What do you do when you have twenty-five guests to entertain?"

The Duke stopped chuckling. He blinked at Dorado.

Then he started laughing again.

"Well, in that instance, I guess I would have no choice but to risk offending five of them!"

"Or you could avoid dinner altogether," said Corvus. "And throw a ball, for example."

"Hah! I'll bear that in mind!"

While the Guardsmen had been diverting their host's attention away from the regrettable demonstration of rivalry between brother and sister, Archbishop Esteban, the uncle of the kin in question, had approached them quietly from behind.

He calmly stared at them until they realised he was there.

Salvador and Graciela turned to face him.

He continued staring calmly at them.
They walked away, in different directions.

Then the Archbishop stepped up beside his brother.

"Ah!" said the Duke when he saw him. "You Guardsmen must excuse me for a moment. Before we sit down to dine, I have an important affair of state to finalise."

Duque Josefo hurried from the room, and Archbishop Esteban watched him leave.

Calavera observed all of this closely.

It confirmed his estimation that the Archbishop was a man in whose company one should be very careful indeed.

A few moments after the Duke had departed, the Archbishop said, in a loud voice:

"Everyone be seated, if you please."

But of course he wasn't really making a request, nor was it conceivable to believe he was.

Calavera observed everyone as they went to the table.

Pescador was the first to respond. He had the instincts of a soldier. Also he was one of the men who had devised the plan for the evening.

Helios Silvestros of the Five Stars was next. Calavera was struck once again by how thin the man was. But he expected the eagerness on his face as he approached the table was due less to hunger than it was to an overall appetite for life itself, and therefore also for the sensations, gustatory among them, that life had to offer.

As though to confirm that theory, Maíz was next.

Duchess Tatiana surprised Calavera. He'd expected her to resent being given orders in her own household, but instead she followed the instructions without hesitation.

Calavera had momentarily forgotten that she was a devout Catholic, and her brother-in-law was also her Archbishop.

Lucifer Sandström was next. While the Duke had been greeting the Guardsmen, the giant man had been engaged in what he fully believed was a lively dialogue with Simargl, gesticulating and laughing while the tiny, reclusive man merely nodded from time to time as he glowered at the other people in the room, intensely scrutinising and assessing every last one. When the Archbishop's call to dinner penetrated through to Sandström's awareness, he clapped his hands together loudly and rubbed his belly. He continued talking as they walked, while Simargl continued appraising.

The Russian's eyes met Calavera's, and a shiver went up the Lieutenant's spine.

Sandström and Simargl were followed closely by John Starling and Reginald Starkey. Calavera was struck by how naturally they moved as one to stay close to their comrades.

Their reputations as individuals were exceptional, but as a team they would be quite formidable.

Salvador Lobato stayed as close to Starling and Starkey as he could, trying not to let his admiration overcome him.
Nevertheless, they noticed it.

It was nothing less than what they had come to expect.

And feel they deserved.

Lady Graciela moved to the table quickly, grateful to have something to do, and thus distract herself from her desire to stare at de Torre.

Pescador arrived at her chair before she did. He pulled off his gloves, put them in his belt, and held the chair out for her. Then he sat down beside her.

Archbishop Esteban held out Duchess Tatiana's chair for her. She thanked him, and crossed herself before taking her seat.

Coléreaux and Carandini were the last to arrive at the table. They had been taking their time, observing the others, looking for weaknesses to exploit at a later date.

This last was conjecture on Calavera's part, but he had confidence in its accuracy.

Coléreaux and Simargl locked eyes upon one another.

The hatred between them was almost as strong as that between Dorado and Carandini.

But unlike the latter two, who would have liked nothing better than to beat each other to death with their bare fists, the Gendarme and the Star appeared as though each would prefer to stick a dagger between the other's shoulder blades, shaming the object of his enmity by catching him unaware.

When everyone had been seated, only Archbishop Esteban remained standing.

And then Calavera understood what "important affair of state" had required the Duke to leave.

As he'd done in Calavera's room that morning, the Duke's brother was about to speak with a candour that a host could not permit himself in front of his guests.

The dining hall grew quiet.

The Archbishop waited for that stillness to settle before he broke it.

"While waiting for the Duke our host to return, let me set to rest any doubts some of you may have as to whether or not an honest discourse is in your best interests. Based upon what we have been told, what we have observed, and what we have discovered through our own researches, Duque Josefo and myself are aware of the following:

"First, that the Gendarmes of France, the Guardsmen of Esperanza, and the Five Stars have all come to Isla Oestelago in search of the journal of an explorer and hermetic by the name of Guillaume Henri, whose great achievement was to travel to New Spain, specifically a Maya settlement they call Tipu. Henri was the only member of his expedition to survive and return to Europe, although thereafter he was cursed with an inability to write or speak.

"Second, that this journal was last in the possession of a man who formerly called himself Frédéric Blossier - the man who has now revealed himself to be the Emerald Guardsman Armando Maíz."
Maíz nodded his head in a general fashion to all those present.

None of whom were surprised by the Archbishop's revelations.

"Third, that this journal - along with some other books of related interest, including Maíz' own annotations on Henri's writing - is no longer in the possession of the Guardsman, nor is it among the possessions he left behind in his former lodgings when he was arrested."

This also seemed to be known to everyone.

"Fourth and finally, the Duke and I are aware that the reason all three groups seek these books is because they intend to travel to Tipu, thence to follow the path taken by Guillaume Henri, albeit more successfully, and discover the ancient temple the Maya erected to their emerald serpent god, Yaxax'tun."

Many of those at the table were surprised by this revelation, not at the details of it, but that these details were known to the Isla Oestelagans.

Archbishop Esteban waited for the various reactions to run their course.

"Gentlemen, I trust my full and complete understanding of your goals and conflicts makes it clear to all of you that any deception at this table will be discovered. During our discussions tonight, assume I know everything.

"Tonight your characters are being tried. Those of you who might be most offended by this are those who should be most grateful for a second opportunity to prove yourselves. As we sup together, and discuss the situation, comport yourselves nobly, and above all else, honestly. As of this moment, all of you are equals. After the meal, the Duke, myself, and Major Pescador will retire to decide who will receive our favour, and what form it will take. Your behaviour at this table will determine our course of action."

He sat down.

A less assured man might have asked those present if they had any questions, to confirm he'd been understood.

But this evening was a test, and any man who did not understand everything fully from the beginning was certain to fail anyway.

The Archbishop of Isla Oestelago had no reservations about denying each and every man present.

Into the silence that followed the Archbishop's speech, they heard the returning footsteps of Duque Josefo.

All present decided he should have the next word.

"I thank you for your patience, everyone. Now, shall we eat? For by Heaven, that lamb smells delectable!"

The meal and discussion which followed were a singular affair, in which three men asked questions of twelve others, all of whom employed various means to remain perfectly honest while revealing as little as possible.
The Gendarmes were evasive.

The Guardsmen gave as many details as they could, and when they reached the limit of what they felt they could divulge while remaining faithful to their trust, they simply apologised and said they could say no more.

That left the Five Stars to talk - at length - about their plans. Their interest in the temple was to bring its treasures back to Europe for the glory of their patron, the Tsarina Eudoxia of Russia, and to further their own legend.

They had nothing to hide. Why should they? They were the Five Stars: Their success was assured.

"And yet," said de Torre to Starkey, "as I understand it, Turo Corvus had to save you yesterday from terrible injury."

Calavera gave him a look. He could understand that the young man had grown tired of their boasting, but this impetuousness did him no credit.

Unfortunately, de Torre was staring too intently at Starkey to notice Calavera's warning.

Starkey's condescending smile turned into an ugly scowl.

"That is as you understand it, young pup. But you were not present."

"No, I was escorting the Lady Graciela back to her home. Exactly what protection were you providing to the citizens of this city during yesterday's riot?"

Starkey's hand tightened on his dinner knife as though he intended to drive it through de Torre's throat.

Perhaps he was, in fact, thinking about it.

"What I was doing, young pup, was bringing to justice a dangerous man."

"Turo?"

"Hush, Lanza."

"And I succeeded where the Doves had failed."

Now it was Martín Pescador's turn to tighten his grip on his knife.

"No doubt because of your clever plan," said de Torre, "which was, apparently, to manoeuvre my friend into a situation where he was forced to pull you back over the roof of a building, this rescue making him too tired to resist you."

Several of those assembled were about to interject, but Sandström thwarted them all, by laughing so loudly Duchess Tatiana had to put her hands to her ears.

"This is most entertaining! A duel of words, between a young man of extraordinary determination, and the greatest swordsman in Europe!"

"Captain Martial Corzo is the greatest swordsman in Europe."

The voice held such absolute finality that it stunned the entire table into silence.
Calavera realised with no small astonishment that the voice had come from himself.

"Well," Starkey said to him with a cruel smile, "perhaps some day we shall have the opportunity to put your misinformed opinion to the test."

"For my part," said Calavera, "I don't seek a conflict of arms between the Emerald Guardsmen and the Five Stars."

Certain of his team's worthiness, and thus unaware of the insinuation in Calavera's words, John Starling laughed.

"Of course not! You know our reputation - the Five Stars cannot be defeated!"

"I am happy to hear you say that," Duque Josefo said, his volume and tone putting a firm and immediate end to the present topic, "for it means that my son will be in safe hands when he accompanies you to New Spain."

Salvador gasped, and his eyes grew wide. This was to be an adventure - with the Five Stars! His greatest dream was coming true!

None of the Five Stars shared his enthusiasm.

"Your Grace," Starling said, "while we are honoured by the faith and trust you're putting in us - "

Archbishop Esteban tilted his head slightly.

Starling caught the hint. He closed his mouth at once.

The Duke paused, to make certain there would be no further dissent.

"The conflict between the three of you has cost Isla Oestelago dearly. My son will accompany the Five Stars to New Spain as my representative, to claim our share of compensation for what this city has lost."

He could not impose this condition on his allies the Gendarmes.

And he certainly could not expect his enemies the Guardsmen to agree to it.

But he could, and would, oblige his guests the Five Stars to respect his wishes, or face the consequences.

While, for the most part, Duque Josefo did not appear to be as frightening as his brother, he could be every bit as threatening when the opportunity called for it.

"Your Grace," Silvestros said into the silence that followed, "I am certain your son will be a worthy addition to our team."

"And furthermore, Your Grace," said Sandström with a wide, earnest smile, "it was very wise of you to place him with us."

The rest of the dinner passed in silence.

When it was done, the ladies departed the Political Hall first.
"Gentlemen," said the Duke, "the twelve of you are now expected to return to your respective wings for the evening. Breakfast will be at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, after which we will inform you of our decision."

The guests nodded and rose.

Salvador did the same, but the Archbishop touched him gently on the shoulder.

"No, Salvador," said his father, "you remain behind as well."

The young man's face flushed with pride and excitement.

The Guardsmen returned to their common room in silence. Only once the servants had left them alone did Maíz speak to his comrades.

"I will go now, and retrieve my books."

"I will come with you."

"No, friend Turo. If I am discovered, it will be better for all of us if I can claim I was acting on my own."

None of the others believed it would be as simple as that, but they chose to honour his wishes.

"Would it not be better to wait until the household is asleep?" de Torre said.

"I expect they will double the guard this evening."

"I would," said Calavera and Dorado.

"Also, it is best to finish this business as quickly as possible, for in this palace tonight, anything can happen."

There being nothing further to say, he left his friends and returned to his room.

Once there, he slung one bag over his shoulder, removed a coil of rope from another, tied an end of the rope to his bed and flung the rest out the window, then climbed down the rope to the grass three stories below.

After twenty minutes of stepping softly and listening carefully, he arrived at his destination: The Duke's private library.

It was a small room, with shelves of books extending from floor to ceiling. The centre of the library held a couch and a chair arranged around a short table. Against one wall was a higher table with two glasses on it, and several bottles. On the opposite wall was a portrait of the Duchess Tatiana as a young lady, as tall as the woman herself.

Either the painter had been generous when rendering her eyes, or his subject had been happier in her youth.

Maíz moved to the couch and went down on all four. He felt along the bottom of the furniture.

The stitches he'd sewn into it were torn open.
He reached his hand inside the hole he'd cut several months ago.

His books were no longer there.

He stood up, and tried to think what he should do next.

Someone nearby failed to breathe quietly enough.

"You can come out, my friend; I know you are there."

He turned and faced the portrait.

It swung aside on a hidden hinge, revealing Salvador Lobato.

"How did you know there was a secret passage back here?"

"I didn't know; I only suspected. The painting is incongruous with the intent of the room: A man does not make a retreat for himself such as this and then place a portrait such as that within it, no matter how deep his affection for his wife may be."

The young man shrugged. Maíz' observation was merely another one of the many things he expected to understand only when he was older.

"As for how I knew it was you behind the painting, my friend Miguel Portero has often told me tales of your adventures together as young boys, exploring caverns, forests - and underground tunnels. Which reminds me...

"I have something important to tell you, my young friend, and dinner did not seem the appropriate time."

Salvador sighed heavily.

"Miguel is dead, isn't he?"

Perhaps he was not as young and inexperienced as he believed he was.

"Yes. He perished saving the life of a young child."

Salvador nodded; the manner of his friend's death suited the man he remembered.

"And before he died, he asked me to deliver a message to you and your sister. He said he will always love you both, unconditionally."

Neither the story nor the message were perfectly truthful, but Maíz' relating of them was honest.

Salvador Lobato started crying, for his friend, for the loss of him, for regrets, and for times long past.

"We abandoned him, when he was in the prison, and then he... I can't believe what he did yesterday. I cannot understand it."

Maíz reached into his bag.

The poems he'd obtained in Lady Graciela's workshop were still there. He handed them to the deceased performer's childhood friend.
"You knew him better than anyone else in the world. Perhaps you will read these with clearer eyes than mine, and perhaps they will help you understand."

The young man accepted the pages, looked down quickly to see what they were, then folded them and placed them in his pocket.

"Thank you. I don't what else to say."

"There is no need for anything further. You will keep Miguel's memory alive; I trust you to do that in the finest possible fashion."

Maíz paused for a moment to allow the young man to put his thoughts in order.

"And now, if I may change the subject..."

Salvador chuckled. "You are going to ask whether I took your books. I only learned of them this morning, and if I'd had the time to seek them out I certainly wouldn't have thought to look in your enemy's home!"

Maíz laughed along with him, but only half-heartedly.

Someone else had his books, as well as Guillaume Henri's journal.

He and his comrades would have to find out who that was.

But for now...

"May I ask, have the Duke and the others reached a decision this quickly?"

"Not yet. They only wanted me to stay behind so they could ask me how trustworthy I find each of the three groups to be. They are much more well-versed in political thinking than I am, so I expect they'll be deliberating long into the night, whereas they credit me with having a certain form of emotional perception, which I flatter myself they find useful in this instance."

Maíz was tempted to ask the young man what assessment he'd presented to the rulers of Isla Oestelago, but that would have been indelicate.

Besides, he already had a pretty good inkling.

"Well, my friend, since the object of my search eludes me for the time being, I had best return to my room before Martín Pescador is once more roaming the corridors."

"Please do me the honour of allowing me to escort you. No one will question your presence in this part of the palace while I am with you."

"It will be my pleasure. And while we walk, you can relate to me the history of this place!"

"I would be delighted."

But their pleasure and delight lasted only a brief time. As they rounded the fifth corner of their perambulation together, Maíz heard a sound behind them which his instincts warned him were dangerous.

Without even knowing why, Maíz pushed Salvador Lobato to one side.

But the dagger flying through the corridor struck the young man anyway.
From around the corner where the weapon had originated, a man started shouting:

"Help! Help!"

His voice was very loud despite being stifled beyond recognition.

"The Emerald Guardsmen have murdered Salvador Lobato!"

Maíz looked down at his young friend.

He was lying face-down, the dagger having fallen out when he landed.

His blood was already spreading out across the floor.

From around the corner, alarmed and angry voices were shouting, and heavy, booted footsteps were rapidly approaching.

He wanted to make certain Salvador was alive, but even if he was, there was nothing the Guardsman could do to help him.

So Armando Maíz turned and ran.

Chapter End Notes

Duchess Tatiana is a dedication to my grandmother, Tanya Lyskun, who died last year, shortly before I started coming up with names for the Lobato family. And then, since her name never came up again (Salvador's been mentioned a few times in the context of Portero's childhood friends), I forgot what it was, until I looked it up to write this chapter. This is probably for the best, because if I'd remembered who she was named for while developing her character this week, Duchess Tatiana might have turned out very different!

Salvador is named for Salvador Dalí, just because he's Spanish and he's always been one of my favourite painters. Until relatively recently, my plans for the son of Duque Josefo were very different from what wound up on the page. Find out what those differences are next time, on... The Temple of the Emerald God!
An Evening's Tranquility Shattered

Chapter Summary

*IN WHICH there is much shouting, running, and cursing.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**WHEN** they heard the gunshot, the four Guardsmen rose as one.

The others turned to their Lieutenant.

"Gather your things. This morning we were told we could leave. So we are."

"Weapons?" Dorado.

"Wear them. A gunshot has sounded; under that circumstance no guest can be faulted for readiness to defend himself."

"And our Tunics?"

Calavera paused, an unnatural thing for him to do once action was called for. Yet the circumstances had him badly conflicted. There could be no question that a weapon being discharged inside the palace so late at night meant only danger for them, but the precise details of that danger were yet to be determined. If the Guardsmen were under attack somehow, they should wear their Tunics. If the threat to them were more indirect, sporting the emblem of the so-called enemy of Spain would be seen by their hosts as an insult at best. At worst, it could be taken as a declaration of hostility, which would destroy the good will they'd built with the Lobatos and plunge them directly into armed conflict with the Doves.

What did honour demand?

He realised he'd waited too long to give his answer. The other three were regarding him with various expressions of concern.

Well, if Diego Calavera found himself undecided on a matter of honour, he knew there was one man among his company whose views on such things were never less than perfectly decisive.

"Alejandro?"

The young man reeled back, stunned that his superior should ask his opinion at such a time. But he recovered quickly: His Lieutenant was relying upon him.

"We have reason to believe the household is threatened somehow. It is our duty as Guardsmen to defend the innocent, and incumbent upon us while we do so to wear our colours prominently, thus proclaiming everything they represent."

"Gentlemen, there's our answer. Gather your possessions and meet outside this room in three minutes, swords buckled and identities proclaimed."
They hurried to their rooms, Corvus announcing that he would gather Maíz' things, since he traveled the lightest.

As Dorado strapped his sword belt around his waist, he remembered the last time he'd used his weapon. Carandini had not only defeated him, but shamed him as well. The Guardsman was never going to forget that, not until the Gendarme lay dead at his feet.

But a moment later, when he raised his arms above his head to drape the Tunic over his shoulders, he did precisely that, straining the wound that Carandini had cut into his side. He hissed, and cursed himself for a fool.

His bag was on the floor, and it stung to bend over for it. He grabbed it by the strap and dragged it impatiently toward him, barely noticing the sound it made as it passed the armchair, although he would remember it later.

Then he hurried back to the common area, arriving later than all but Corvus, who emerged a moment later from Maíz' room.

When they were all together, Calavera's face grew solemn. He had something important to tell them. The others gave him their full attention.

"Kill no Spaniards."

They nodded.

"Let's be on our way."

Dorado was only too eager to comply. His Lieutenant's order had made no mention of sparing the French, nor in particular a man of mixed French and Italian parentage.

Calavera caught his eye; he knew what Dorado was thinking. The look on his old friend's face gave him tacit permission to do as he desired, should circumstances permit, provided and only if he emerged the victor.

They hurried down the corridor, Dorado in the lead.

Calavera kept pace with de Torre. "You appear somewhat distracted."

"I confess that I am. This is not the manner in which I would have chosen to leave the palace."

"Before we sail from Spain, you will see her, and have an opportunity to speak with her again. You have my word."

"In that case, Lieutenant, there now remains only one thought in my mind."

"Excellent."

Calavera looked over his shoulder, to see whether Corvus needed any form of bolstering or reassurance from his Lieutenant.

Of course he didn't; Corvus was Corvus.

It seemed that all around him, just out of sight behind every corner, men were pursuing
him.

Maíz knew this was a trick of his imagination, but also that it was uncomfortably close to the truth.

As he ran, he could make out two distinct footfalls behind him, but there may have been more. Occasionally one of his pursuers would shout, ordering him to stop, or calling out for any nearby guards to join in the chase. Their voices were loud, but not loud enough to be heard in the Northern wing, where his comrades were going about their business unaware that there were palace guards - or more likely Doves - on their way to arrest them for the attempted murder of the son of the Duke of Isla Oestelago.

Maíz prayed it was only an attempted murder.

But there was nothing he could do about that for the time being. For now, he must concern himself with warning his friends. And for that, he needed something louder than a mere shout, a distinct sound that no experienced soldier could fail to recognise instinctively, nor fail to react to immediately.

He searched his memories, picturing in his mind's eye every room in this palace, and found what he was looking for merely two rooms away.

Maíz ran past an adjoining corridor, noticing a man's shape as he passed. Then he heard a new voice cry out, and an additional set of footsteps starting running after him.

Did that make five pursuers now, or only four? He guessed the latter, and was intensely motivated to look over his shoulder and check, but that would slow him down.

Besides, he was at his destination.

Trying to look everywhere at once, in case the room should be occupied, he burst into a large, comfortable hall, with a fireplace along one wall.

And a pair of ornamental pistols on display over the mantel.

Maíz ran faster, almost a sprint, and when he was close to the fireplace he leapt into the air, snatching one of the pistols off the wall. He landed heavily, but kept his balance, and came to a stop. He turned and faced the arch through which he'd entered.

The men pursuing him were now rushing in. He noted with satisfaction there were, in fact, only four of them.

He raised his pistol at them, as though it were practical and not empty, as if he were about to fire.

Three of the men hurried out of the way.

But the fourth did exactly as Maíz had hoped. He drew his own pistol, quickly, hoping to fire first.

Maíz gave him the moment he needed, then moved sideways just as the guard pulled the trigger.

The gunshot echoed loudly in the room. It stung Maíz' ears, but he was glad for the pain. The shot would be heard in the Northern wing, not very loudly, but loudly enough. The Guardsmen
would recognise it for what it was, and take appropriate action.

Maíz ran from the room, dropping the pistol. For a mere decoration, it had served his purposes in exemplary fashion.

"There he is!"

They were running across a balcony overlooking a large hallway, with a staircase running along each wall. Dorado, who was still in the lead, pointed at an opening below them from which Maíz was emerging, closely followed by six of the palace guards. Dorado waved for Maíz to come up the stairs to them. Then he stopped running, and drew his pistol.

The Guardsmen behind him also stopped.

Maíz hurried up the stairs. His pursuers, none of whom had slowed their running to draw weapons, simply raced up the stairs after him.

When they got near the top, Dorado fired.

His shot smacked into the wall three inches in front of the lead guard's nose, sending dust and small chips into the air.

The man instinctively recoiled, and the man right behind him ran into his back, causing the lead guard to stumble face-first into the stairs while the man who'd hit him bounced backward, jostling the man behind him, who likewise stopped and was hit from behind, and so on until all six men were in various states of lost balance, with the man in the rear tumbling backward down the stairs.

Maíz tried to laugh, but he was out of breath.

While Dorado quickly reloaded, all of them took a moment to draw air into their lungs. Corvus handed Maíz his possessions, and the older man nodded his thanks. But their foes were also quickly recovering, so soon they were on their way once more, with Maíz leading the way.

"What happened?" Calavera asked as they ran.

"I went to the Duke's private study, where I'd hidden the books, but they were gone! Salvador was there, but he swore he didn't have them. We were on our way back when someone threw a knife at him from the shadows. Then the assassin shouted out that the Guardsmen had killed the son of the Duke! So I had to run, while others pursued me, and now here I am."

"Is he dead? Salvador"

"I hope not. He might be. I... I didn't have time to make certain."

His tone said he should have taken the time anyway. Calavera disagreed.

"Of course you didn't. Whoever ambushed you, and shouted the accusation, putting all our lives in jeopardy, never gave you the opportunity."

Maíz looked only partially satisfied. It would have to do.

"Are you certain Salvador was his intended victim?"
"Yes."

"Then we are halfway to figuring out who is responsible."

As he said this, Calavera remembered Dorado's account of Sébastien Coléreaux's skill in throwing a knife at Luis Sierra. That was something to consider at a later date, once they were free of this immediate crisis.

For his part, Dorado was also searching his memory. Something had happened recently, and at the time he hadn't given it proper attention, but he was certain it was significant. What was it?

He cast his mind back. It must have been after the gunshot, but before Maíz had rejoined them. The wound in his side still throbbed, impeding his thinking.

Wait.

The wound was pertinent, somehow. He was sure of it.

Think!

He'd put his Tunic on, causing himself pain, and in that pain he'd reached for his bag...

And heard a sound.

Glass striking wood.

Damn!

He reached into his bag and felt around, knowing he was not going to find what he sought.

He didn't find it.

"Damn!"

Dorado came to a sudden halt.

The others also stopped running, in various states of confusion and concern.

"Lanza?"

He looked at his Lieutenant.

"I have to go back."

Four incredulous faces stared back at him.

Lanza turned to Corvus.

"I left the bottle in my room."

Corvus didn't need to ask which bottle he meant. He turned to the others and shrugged.

"He has to go back."

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Each man had something he wanted to say.

Meanwhile, from every corner of the house there came sounds of shouting and running.
The entire palace was awake, and hunting them.

Dorado quickly turned and started running back the way he'd come.

He didn't want to give the others a chance to say what they were thinking.

In their place, he'd have been thinking the same thing.

After a moment, his comrades continued on their way.

"Their rooms are empty!"

"Search them thoroughly! Make sure they aren't hiding!"

The voice giving orders wasn't Pescador's; Dorado was relieved.

Pescador would have thought to ask if the Guardsmen's possessions were still in their rooms. This leader would be somewhat easier to fool.

Dorado had to use trickery; there were too many men to take on directly. Also, it would be more difficult to overcome any number of guards while disadvantaged by the need to spare their lives.

Lastly there was the consideration that his side was causing him significant discomfort.

The longer he waited, just around the corner from where these men were gathered, the greater his chances of being discovered. But he didn't have any clever ideas for a distraction.

So he resigned himself to a childish idea.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, "Outside! Everyone! The Guardsmen have left the palace! We'll have to stop them before they escape the grounds!"

Dorado waited a moment, then risked a look around the corner.

The guards were looking to their leader for orders, but he was uncertain what to do.

Dorado tried again.

"Everyone, outside! Outside! Everyone!"

He was certain it wouldn't work.

Yet, incredibly, it did.

The leader was a weak man, incapable of taking his own initiative and yet unwilling to appear indecisive. And so, faced with such a confident suggestion of how to proceed, even from an unknown source, he acted upon it.

"You heard them - outside! Now!"

He turned away from the rooms and hurried off, not even checking to see if his men followed him.

But they did, and a few moments later, Dorado was alone in the Northern guest wing.
He ran to what had been his room, dropped down in front of the armchair, and looked underneath.

Sure enough, there was the bottle he'd received from his saviour behind the Black Curtain. While he'd dragged the bag across the floor, the bottle had struck the leg of the chair and slipped out.

Dorado grabbed it and stood up. He shoved it deep within his bag.

And then he ran his hand along the bottom of the bag to make certain it was there.

A sound from the window caught his attention. It wasn't the men he'd fooled into leaving these rooms; they couldn't have gotten outside so quickly.

He stepped to the window. In the dim light of the moon, he saw a group of men advancing upon the palace, their swords drawn.

None of them wore the white sashes of the Doves, nor any other distinguishing badge.

Nevertheless, Dorado had a grim suspicion he knew who these men were.

He reached under the bed and retrieved his chamber pot.

It was not empty. So much the better.

He tossed it out the window, onto the men below.

Its advent was met with much surprise and cursing.

In French.

This confirmed Dorado's fears.

These mysterious men were Coléreaux's Gendarmes. Under cover of night, they'd surrounded the palace, and were now advancing upon it, no doubt intending to kill every man within who threatened their plans to discover the secrets of the temple of Yaxax'tun for the greater glory of Cardinal Richelieu and France.

The Guardsmen were trapped.

Chapter End Notes

We're back! At long last.

Obviously, we have lots to discuss, but for now I'm just going to let this Triumphant Return stand on its own.
I wanted to call this Chapter "Guards! Guards!" or maybe "Gardez l'Eau," but those wouldn't have really fit the established tone.

The word 'advent' used in the sense of 'important arrival' dates from the mid-1700s, but I've decided not to care just this once; it stays.

See you next week. Yes - next week!
A Matter Of Honour

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH one man jumps out a window, another topples over a railing, and several others encounter various walls.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"GENDARMES! We're being attacked!"

Calavera, Corvus, de Torre, and Maíz were passing a staircase, and the shout came from above.

Immediately there came more shouting, as well as thumping and clanging.

The four Guardsmen ran up the stairs.

"Where's the stable?" Corvus asked Maíz. This had been their destination.

"After these stairs, it's a mere ten feet down the corridor."

"Good."

"And up here," Maíz said, "is where we'll most likely find the chambers of the Five Stars."

It was just as well he'd warned them, for a moment later they heard a terrible roar, like an enraged bear, and someone flew sideways into the wall above them. The man was killed upon impact, and his lifeless body tumbled down the stairs. The Guardsmen drew their weapons, stepping over him and into the corridor where the fracas was taking place.

What awaited them, despite their many years of experience, was like nothing they'd ever seen.

In the centre of the corridor stood Lucifer Sandström, wearing only an unlaced shirt that reached halfway to his knees. Despite his state of undress, and the fact he brandished only a pillow to defend himself, he was trouncing the several armed men who surrounded him. His arms were long, and the speed of his movements belied his enormous size as he parried their swords with his cushion while his other hand punched, shoved, and on occasion lifted and tossed, his enemies.

Surrounding him were three of his comrades, likewise engaged. Helios Silvestros held his untied breeches up with his left hand while his right wielded a sword that darted into and out of his opponents as quickly as a viper. John Starling was likewise shirtless and in bare feet, but his trousers were tied to his waist. Perhaps, de Torre reflected, he'd worn his to bed while the older man had not. In any case, Starling's exposed flesh was of no more concern to him than it was to the other two, as he and his rapier were ably and lethally demonstrating.

For his part, Reginald Starkey was dressed in the same clothes he'd worn to dinner, with the addition of his sword belt, and he looked superbly comfortable and confident as he engaged three
swordsmen at once. Six men already lay dead or dying at his feet.

That left only Simargl, but when from the open door beside him de Torre heard several men scream and howl with terror, followed by sounds of gurgling and choking, he knew which room belonged to the Russian. He turned to look, and saw four men rolling on the ground, clawing at their throats, their eyes agape with pain and the certainty of death. He could see no sign of what had caused this, which he decided was just as well.

He did, however, see Simargl, naked and pulling up his trousers. de Torre looked quickly away, so as not to form any lasting memories. Despite himself, he did recall a bright red mass of scars, the sort created when flesh is set afire.

None of the men the Five Stars were fighting bore insignia that might denote their allegiances, but whenever one of them shouted, he did so in French.

Calavera turned away from the fighting, and indicated the Guardsmen were to go back downstairs.

It was clear the Five Stars had matters well in hand.

They descended onto the floor immediately below, where they could converse.

From above came the crushing thump of Sandström throwing another hapless opponent into a wall.

Calavera voiced what they were all thinking. "Their assailants are Gendarmes, officially the allies of our hosts, but they came in the middle of the night, uninvited and unidentified. They're assassins, ordered by Coléreaux to kill his enemies while we slept. Lanza may not yet be aware of their presence; I'll go back for him while the rest of you escape."

He expected this proposal to meet with resistance. He was right.

"I should be the one to go," Corvus said.

"No, I will," said de Torre.

"Neither of you is going."

"Respectfully, Sir, I'm the youngest, which makes me the least -"

"I'm his Lieutenant. Lanza is my responsibility."

"I've ridden a horse through a palace before."

They'd all known Corvus was going to win, somehow.

"All right," said Calavera. "Go."

Corvus nodded to them, and ran down the corridor, looking out each window as he passed. At the last one, he stopped, and opened it.

Then he turned, waved to his comrades, and leapt out.

Although they were three stories up, this surprised none of them.
Dorado ran from his room and down the corridor. His boots echoed loudly on the floor, but he reasoned that with two hostile forces now seeking him within the walls of this palace, the situation required speed over silence.

As he crossed the balcony where they'd earlier rejoined Maíz, several guards on the floor below started pointing at him and shouting.

Then three more entered from the doorway at the end of the balcony, blocking his path.

He stopped running, and drew his sword.

Seeing this, the palace guards stopped as well.

Dorado raised his weapon above his head, the point directed at the three men before him.

And, with a battle cry terrible enough to rival the bestial roar of Lucifer Sandström, he charged.

He'd been ordered by his Lieutenant not to take any Spanish lives.

But the three men in his way had no way of knowing that.

Unwilling to advance, and unsure how to safely withdraw, they held their ground and waited.

They expected the Esperanzan to try and smash his way through them, like a cavalry charge.

They were utterly unprepared for him to suddenly fall to his knees, and close the distance between them by sliding along the floor.

One guard managed to recover fast enough to lower his sword, but Dorado easily knocked it aside. As he collided with their knees, he stood up and pushed the guards away from him.

The one in the middle flew over Dorado's tall shoulders and landed heavily on his back, knocking the wind out of his lungs. The man closest to the railing toppled over it. He landed atop two of his comrades, saving his life but assuring all three would have terrible headaches when they woke up.

The guard closest to the wall bounced off it, only to have Dorado shove him back into its unyielding solidity. He dropped to the floor.

Dorado took a breath, and was about to resume running, but once again three armed men blocked his path.

He turned, but there were now also men behind him.

These new arrivals were all Gendarmes.

And they were about to encounter the palace guards rushing up both sets of stairs.

Then things would get interesting.

Corvus had been in many palaces before. Most of them stabled the horses in a separate
building, some distance from the main one, where the animal odours would not infringe upon the sensibilities of the proper lords and ladies within.

But some, and Maíz had earlier indicated this was one, had been built with the stables attached to the palace itself. It was common in such instances for the two to be connected by means of a tunnel not part of the palace's initial construction. In Corvus' experience, the placement of such a unit between two larger structures created a sort of recess, well-shielded from the rain and thus an excellent place to store hay for the horses.

As he ran away from his comrades, down the palace corridor, Corvus looked through every window, to see whether this palace's stable had such a recess.

It did.

And it was possible, from the last window, to jump onto the hay below.

He was in a hurry to reach the stables, after all, and the quickest route is often a straight line.

So he jumped, and landed safely, three stories below, in a soft pile of straw.

"What was that?"

Undoubtedly the man speaking was a palace guard. Corvus scrambled onto the roof of the stable as quietly as he could.

As he did, he heard two men come around the side of the building, to inspect the sound which had come from the haystack.

Most people, when jumping onto a pile of straw, slide down the pile to the ground below.

Corvus was not like most people. Further, he expected that these men, when inspecting a noise on one side of the stable, would leave the other side unguarded.

So he slipped down the roof and landed quietly on the opposite side.

He was alone.

He quickly entered the stable, released a horse from its stall, and led it outside.

Whereupon they were promptly spotted in the lamplight of the returning guards.

"You there - !"

But whatever else the man had been about to say, Corvus did not stay to hear it. Instead he vaulted onto the horse's back, grabbed a lit lantern from its hook, and drove the horse in a direct line away from the palace.

In the darkness before him, unseen men shouted in anger and concern.

Corvus had spotted them when he'd jumped out the window, a group of shadowy figures approaching the palace with their swords drawn. No doubt these were more Gendarmes, trying to decide how best to avoid the guards and enter the building unnoticed.

But now a horse was riding straight at them, and they were shouting, so everyone knew they were there.
One of the palace guards blew a whistle, which was immediately answered by another from somewhere on the grounds. From that same direction came voices calling out to their comrades.

Having thus discharged his guest's duty by advising his hosts of an intruder, Corvus turned his horse away from the Gendarmes, throwing the lantern in their direction.

As the light got closer, the men became more visible, struggling against each other in the darkness. One unfortunate was unable to move his comrades aside fast enough, and the lamp struck him in the head, knocking him senseless to the ground.

The lantern fell among the Gendarmes and remained lit, advising all of the advancing palace guards precisely where their nighttime visitors were.

To the sound of armed men clashing behind him, Corvus rode his horse back to the palace and Dorado.

Meanwhile, Maíz led Calavera and de Torre to the stable via the more customary route, down the stairs and ten strides along the corridor. This brought them to a door which he promptly opened.

The smell of horses washed over them, pungent but most welcome.

They continued down an arched tunnel made of rough wood, with a floor of packed earth. At the end of that was another door, sufficiently open so that they could see the stacked hay beyond. They moved swiftly, but as quietly as they could manage.

However, when they entered the stable, they discovered the men who'd been guarding it were busy elsewhere.

With a sigh of profound relief, de Torre hurried to prepare his mount. He'd expected the others to do the same, but behind him Calavera was looking at Maíz.

Who'd stopped in the doorway, and wasn't moving.

"I noticed," Calavera said, "when everyone else was volunteering to go back for Lanza, that the man who knew the palace best was conspicuously silent."

Maíz took a deep breath. "I should have liked nothing better than to return for him, but I have important business elsewhere. And, now that I have led you here..."

"You are going to saddle a horse, and leave with us."

Calavera's voice was dangerously calm.

But Maíz merely shrugged.

"I'm sorry. I cannot."

"I order you to come with us."

"Honour demands that I do otherwise."

"Honour demands that you leave your personal revenge aside and obey your sworn duty to your King and country."
"Don't presume to lecture me on matters of honour!"

Maíz' fists were clenched, and he shook with fury.

The force of his rage made de Torre take a step back in shock.

But Calavera, aside from gently placing his hand on his sword, remained perfectly still, his gaze never wavering from Maíz as the man continued shouting at him.

" Honour comes easily to a soldier; it's never tested. You have an enemy, he's been clearly identified, and you march toward him. Your duty is obvious, and you have but one direction: The honourable man follows it; the dishonourable man does not. But what of the soldier who serves King and country not on the battlefield, but as a spy? The man who poses as one of the enemy, who is charged with learning everything he can about them, and therefore seeks their company, ingratiates himself to them. The man who, if successful, is eventually invited to share their bread, and their hearth fire. The man who listens to their stories, who tells his own in turn, who shares in their laughter and their tears, who comes first to know them and then to love them, who can no longer think of them as faceless and nameless strangers confronting him with weapons on the other side of a battlefield, but as his friends, for whom betrayal would be unthinkable, for they have no idea that he whose life is now forever entwined with their own first came among them with the intent to do them harm! What is that man to do? What does honour demand of him?"

Realization crashed upon de Torre like a wave:

Maíz had been asking himself these questions for a very long time.

His passion spent, his grief given voice at last, Maíz stopped, and fought to get his breath back under control. He looked straight into Calavera's eyes and waited for his commander's reply.

Which was immediate.

"You're right. You must go. Honour demands it."

Maíz nodded, relieved, grateful. "Thank you."

He straightened, and nodded to de Torre as well. Then he turned and ran back down the tunnel, back into the palace.

de Torre resumed preparing his horse. He waited until Calavera was doing the same before he dared ask.

"Where's he gone?"

"To kill the man who ambushed Salvador Lobato."
Week Two of the Triumphant Return!

I've got lots and lots to say, which is already written, but this section has a character limit, and that's going to require some creative editing on my part.

For now, I just want to thank three people:

- Jo (jmathieson).
- ereshai.
- Elizabeth Perry (watersword).

You three are the reason *The Temple Of The Emerald God* is back. I cannot thank you enough. I love you all.
IN WHICH an unused fireplace nevertheless sheds light on several things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

SALVADOR Lobato's attacker came to a bend in the corridor, and, lowering himself so that his head would not be at the level of any potential watchman's gaze, he cautiously peered around the corner.

Empty.

He crept into the corridor and quickly proceeded to the door halfway down, on the right. This was the door to Salvador Lobato's bedchamber.

He knew this, because he'd been here before.

He withdrew a set of tools and picked the lock in less than ten seconds.

He'd done this before, too.

He didn't bother, while doing it, to look up and down the corridor. He was not permitted to be here; if a guard were to see him it wouldn't matter that he were compounding his offence by defeating the young man's security, and the checking would only cost him precious time while he was exposed.

As he entered Salvador Lobato's room and closed the door behind him, he chuckled to himself at the thought of some novice, pausing in his work to confirm he was unobserved, suddenly looking straight into the eyes of a guard he could have avoided had he not paused in the first place.

He removed a short candle from his belt, and lit it.

Not for him that sort of childish mistake. He was a man of experience. And, of course, undeniable talent.

"The books are not here."

There was a man behind him.

And the man was aiming a pistol at his back.

With the flints in one hand and his candle in the other, even a man of his considerable skill wouldn't be able to reach one of his weapons before the Guardsman fired.

And it was an Emerald Guardsman behind him.

Armando Maíz.
"If you drop the candle, I will shoot you."

He'd considered doing that, wondered if it would be sufficient to cause surprise, and a moment's delay. Maíz was informing him that it would not.

"Stretch your arms out, away from your body."

He did as instructed.

"Drop the flints."

Again, yes.

"Turn slowly to face me."

He obeyed.

There was a look on Maíz' face he'd never seen before. At dinner, he'd gotten the impression the Guardsman was, despite being an elite soldier and a skillful spy, something of a naïf, too full of the joys of life to be taken entirely seriously.

There was nothing joyful in Maíz' eyes at present. And even less of the naïve.

Only death.

One in the recent past, and one to come.

Reginald Starkey had been found out.

"How did you know?"

"In due time, I will be only too happy to list for you those blunders which, through your blind arrogance, exposed you. But for now," and he waggled the pistol ever so slightly to punctuate his desires, "I would like for you to step backward into the centre of the room."

Starkey complied, and as he did, in the light from the window and from his candle, he studied Salvador Lobato's bedchamber.

Anything might be important later.

The room was a simple affair, with the bed centred on the wall to his right. Across from that was a fireplace, which bore no signs of having ever been used. Behind Starkey were the window and an armoire, and on the wall which he faced was a small shelf of books, as well as the door, in front of which Maíz stood, his pistol ever pointed at the centre of Starkey's body.

"Stop there. Raise the candle above your head. Now, with your other hand, slowly remove your pistol and drop it to the floor.

"Kick it under the bed."

He considered kicking it lightly, so he might be able to retrieve it later, but he could see Maíz would not tolerate such disobedience.

So he kicked it properly, sending it far away.

No matter; he would find other means to gain the upper hand, somehow.
"Now, remove your main gauche - with two fingers only - and drop it to the floor."

Maíz was taking no chances that Starkey might try and throw it at him.

"Now, slowly, the dagger in your boot."

It was implicit he was to use only two fingers again.

Doing as instructed was awkward with the candle held above his head, but no doubt Maíz intended it thus. Starkey took note: This man was not to be underestimated.

"And now, shake out the dagger in your left sleeve."

He'd not been expecting the Guardsman to notice that one.

"Now, very slowly, both arms raised above your head, turn around."

He did, and was three-quarters around before Maíz stopped him.

"Ingenious. Did you design that pouch yourself?"

_Damn!_

"I did. But I had someone else sew it."

"Remove the dagger from there as well."

He did. Now Maíz was satisfied he held no more weapons concealed upon his person.

Which, regrettably, was true.

But he still wore his sword.

"Kick the knives under the bed."

He did.

Without shifting his pistol away from Starkey, Maíz moved from the door to the fireplace. When he spoke, his voice was strong, but sad.

"Salvador idolised you."

"Of course. Everyone idolises us. That doesn't make him our responsibility."

Maíz nodded. "That was your first mistake. The Five Stars were the only ones who stood to benefit from Salvador's removal."

"He would have been a liability to us."

"Perhaps he would have surprised you."

Starkey snorted. When he spoke, his voice dripped contempt.

"He might have measured up to the standards of the Emerald Guard, but never to the Five Stars."

"So you waited for him, after dinner, while your companions retired to their individual
rooms for the night."

Maíz was telling Starkey what had given him away.

When the Guardsmen had come upon the Five Stars fighting the Gendarmes, he'd been the only one fully dressed.

"It was you who shouted the warning, and roused them from their sleep."

"It was."

"And of course it wouldn't have been Coléreaux or Carandini who attacked Salvador and blamed the Guardsmen; they already had a plan to deal with us. In fact, your shouting after the ambush woke the household, and ruined their plans for secrecy and surprise."

"I did everyone a favour."

He smirked.

Maíz returned it with a look of disgust that was almost palpable.

"You waited, in hiding, and when Salvador emerged from the dining hall, you followed him, to this room. Then you entered, hoping to kill him in private - but he was gone."

Starkey forgot himself for a moment, and looked past Maíz.

At the fireplace.

"Of course," said Maíz, his satisfied tones taunting Starkey for that momentary lapse. He rapped his knuckles on the mantel. "An unused fireplace. There aren't even any fire irons beside it, or so much as a single log. You deduced, correctly, that a young man with such a fascination for adventure would be enamoured with the notion of a hidden passageway, and how else could he have disappeared from a room with only one door? So you ran to the fireplace, located the mechanism, and revealed the tunnel - which, I presume, led to the library?"

Starkey conceded with a nod.

"Since you were there, you searched the room, and discovered where I'd concealed the books - but the hiding place was empty. You had to hurry. You came upon me and Salvador in the corridor, but neither of us had anything in our hands. So, you resolved to return to this room, to see if Salvador was the one who'd liberated the documents. How were you to know he didn't have them, since you'd arrived at the library too late to hear him tell me so?"

"Nevertheless, your primary reason for following Salvador in the first place was yet to be realised, and now you could make life difficult for the Guardsmen as well. So you threw a dagger at an innocent young man, and accused someone who would sooner die than do him harm."

Starkey granted him an elaborate bow.

"A wise man knows how to make the most of his circumstances."

"Yes, but a good man finds ways do that without soiling his honour - although I expect you consider such concerns beneath you. I must confess, however, I'm surprised that your leader sanctioned such a cowardly act."

Again Starkey snorted.
"Starling didn't know what I was planning. I knew better than to ask his permission."

Maíz nodded. "That is as I expected. It's a comfort to know that Salvador's admiration for one of you, at least, was well-founded."

He took a deep breath. "That young man always had such romantic dreams. He left no book unread, no cavern or tunnel unexplored. He practiced with swords, pistols, and muskets, and learned everything he could about exotic places, dangerous creatures, even fiendish devices intended to trap or kill the unwary.

"He was ready for adventure. But he was expecting to face it directly, not to be stabbed in the back in his own home."

Maíz took another breath, to steady himself.

"I will miss him terribly. And you will die for what you did."

Starkey smirked again.

"What are you, a self-proclaimed man of honour, proposing to do? Shoot an unarmed man?"

It was Maíz' turn to snort with contempt.

"Are you perhaps hoping to talk me out of it? Damn me, but you don't need to. Set the candle in the centre of the room and step back."

After Starkey had done that, Maíz placed the pistol on the mantel and drew his sword.

"Men like you will never understand men like me. You see goodness and virtue as weaknesses, to be exploited. You're unmoved by the notion of an accounting in the next life, unable to see beyond your present greed and ambition. But this selfishness also makes you blind to the rewards of virtue in this life: Goodness and charity attract reciprocal acts of generosity."

Starkey drew his sword.

"Is that what you believe this is? An act of generosity? For Salvador Lobato? Even if he were still alive, he wouldn't benefit from you throwing your life away for a foolish ideal."

Maíz saluted Starkey, and readied himself. "You seem awfully certain you're going to emerge the victor."

Starkey returned the salute, and assumed his own position.

"I'm the greatest swordsman in Europe."

"So you keep having to tell everyone."

That earned him an ugly look.

And then Starkey attacked.

He was fast, efficient, and utterly in control. Maíz was an excellent swordsman, but he was barely able to block his adversary's first attack before the man was riposting, and thrusting, and riposting again, forcing the Guardsman to step back so Starkey couldn't take advantage of the wide gaps his desperate parries were leaving in his defences. Starkey lunged, and once again Maíz had
no opportunity to think, only to move instinctively, blocking then dodging then parrying then
*jumping backward* as Starkey's sword missed his midsection by a hair.

    When he landed, his enemy's sword was already there, slashing him viciously across the
shins.

    Maíz fell forward, catching himself with his left hand as his knees slammed painfully onto
the floor.

    Starkey stepped back, swinging his blooded sword in front of himself and laughing.

    The Guardsman took a moment to catch his breath. His cuts were not very deep, but his
recent exertions had left him with barely enough energy to stand back up, while his opponent, if
anything, had been invigorated by their exchange.

    Starkey might very well be the greatest swordsman in Europe. Certainly his skill far
exceeded Maíz' own.

    He knew he couldn't win. And Starkey knew it, too. Supremely confident of his victory,
and enjoying the humiliation of his opponent, he gave Maíz all the time he needed to stand up,
ready his sword, and prepare some sort of tactic.

    Maíz stepped sideways, and Starkey did likewise. In this manner they traced a circle,
halfway around the room, until Maíz suddenly lunged - but it was a feint - and as the point of his
sword drove toward Starkey's exposed shoulder the other man's weapon moved incredibly fast and
cought him on the wrist.

    Maíz withdrew his arm with a yelp, but Starkey swung heavily at him, and he was forced to
block the attack. It was hurried and clumsy, as his foe had expected, and when Starkey's blade
smashed into his own the shock aggravated the wound in his wrist and made him lose his grip on
the sword.

    He watched helplessly as it flew away from him, clattered against the armoire, and dropped
inelegantly to the floor.

    Starkey laughed again, the hateful sound ringing off the walls.

    Maíz inspected his wrist. The injury was not severe, but it would need to be bound, and
soon.

    Both men knew he was not going to get the opportunity.

    Starkey stepped back, placed his left hand on his hip, and pointed at Maíz' blade with his
own.

    "Go on. Pick up your sword. Try again."

    But instead of accepting the offer, Maíz did something that caught Starkey completely
unprepared.

    His face turned red, his features contorted in pure rage, and he started shrieking at the top
of his voice.

    "*Never!* Do you hear me? You killed Salvador, my friend. *You are never going to leave this
room alive!*"
He drew his main gauche.

And gripped it by the blade.

He intended to throw it!

Starkey lunged for the fireplace. He dropped his sword, grabbed the pistol off the mantel, aimed at Maíz, and pulled the trigger.

Something cut his hand. He shouted and dropped the pistol.

His palm was bleeding.

The pistol hadn't fired.

Maíz straightened, and flung his main gauche negligently onto the bed.

He smiled. All traces of his former madness were gone.

Starkey's hand felt like it was being stung by a thousand bees. His arm was going numb from elbow to shoulder.

And his throat was starting to constrict.

"I warned you," said Maíz, "that Salvador learned everything he could about ingenious devices. And what better way to learn than by building them himself?"

"He called it the Scorpion. An unpleasant name, but I believe he named it for the poison he used. Or perhaps because the creature rears back to strike, an analogy for the way this pistol's deadliness is returned upon the person who would use it. I advised him that it was a deadly toy to keep in one's bedchamber, but he argued that it was more than a toy, and should any man break into his room and steal this pistol with the intention of using it, that man would deserve the fate he'd invited upon himself."

Starkey dropped to his knees. He was fighting to breathe, and he knew he was going to lose.

Maíz approached him, saying softly, "I never intended to kill you myself. That privilege belongs to my dear friend, Salvador Lobato."

It was the last thing Reginald Starkey heard before he collapsed, lifeless, to the floor.

Maíz stepped away from the body.

And then a panel within the fireplace slid aside, revealing an opening large enough for a man to pass through in a crouch.

Through that opening stepped the Archbishop of Isla Oestelago.

He was holding a lantern in one hand and a candle in the other. He placed the former on the mantel and held the other up to Maíz.

"I presume you left this for me?"

"I did. I wanted you to wait, to hear what he had to say."
"How did you know I was going to come here, and by that route?"

"I didn't know; I hoped. I reasoned you might trace Salvador's steps back to the library, and discover the rips in the couch. You then might have concluded, as Starkey did, that Salvador was in possession of the books. So you would come to look for them in his room, taking a route which would not expose you to the several dangers which are besetting the palace tonight. Thus I set the candle, and when Starkey arrived, I took my time with him, hoping you would arrive to hear his confession."

Esteban Lobato nodded his confirmation.

"Your faith served you well."

It was as close to a compliment as Maíz could expect.

"Then the Guardsmen are exonerated?"

"Of the attack on my nephew, yes. As are the rest of the Five Stars. You made a point of asking about their complicity."

"This entire affair has sickened me to the core. I couldn't... There had to be some clarity, some truth."

The Archbishop nodded, satisfied.

For a moment they both stared at the dead man on the floor, contemplating him in silence.

Then Lobato looked up at Maíz.

"You recognise that you are my prisoner."

"Of course."

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Chapter End Notes

Yes! Two literary conventions involving one piece of architecture:
- The detective 'leans' on the mantel as he reveals how he solved the crime; and
- The gun placed on the mantel is 'fired' by the end!

How do you like that, eh?

... God, it's good to be back.

The last fourteen months or so didn't go at all the way I expected, in all kinds of ways. So, what happened? Well, you may recall that when this serial started, the chapters were short. Chapter One was less than one thousand words, and the first seven were all under two thousand. Then gradually, they started getting longer, and longer, occasionally very long. These lengths became the norm, and the two thousand word chapter became the exception. Heck, after the first seven chapters, only nine of the
next forty-one are shorter than 2500 words! That kind of length, or more to the point the amount of time it demands of me, is a huge strain on my schedule. My writing speed is usually in the neighbourhood of 800-1000 words an hour, but because of the style of this story, more florid than my usual contemporary tone, 500 is what I usually manage. So 2500 words takes me five hours. Then there's editing, and the amount of time a chapter requires to edit is of course dependent on its length, which means that a long chapter is long twice.

That's why I switched to publishing every two weeks: to give myself the opportunity to write half the chapter in the time I had one weekend, and finish up the next. What happened instead (of course) was that I only ever wrote on the second of the two weeks, and in the meantime the story's momentum suffered in my head. Then I came to Chapters Forty-Six, Forty-Seven, and Forty-Eight, which averaged 6431 words each. As you might expect, they took a lot out of me. And the average for Chapters Forty-Nine and Fifty threatened to be even longer, because I wanted to get out of Spain by the end of them, since I'd gotten out of Esperanza in Chapter Twenty-Five.

(Makes sense, right? Twenty-five chapters in Esperanza, twenty-five in Spain, and fifty in New Spain (including the final chapters detailing the return to Europe), which would make for a very satisfying hundred chapters, with half the overall chapters taking place in the New World - since, after all, this is supposed to be a jungle adventure.)

Great plan, right?

Except Oh My God that left me with a tonne of things to resolve in the last two chapters of Spain. Two mysteries! The Escape from the Palace of the Duke! Tying off everything that needed tying off in Europe (which, you might expect, in some way involves a last conversation between a certain pair of young lovers), and setting up the crossing of the Atlantic. All told, I estimated these items would take me eight thousand words per chapter. But before I could even begin to write them, I had to figure out the answers to a few questions in my head, and decide how everything I wanted to do was going to play itself out, then structure that entire mess so it fit neatly and satisfyingly into two chapters.

It was too much. The first week blew by like a fastball, and before I knew it I was entering my second weekend without having answered a bunch of the things I needed to answer, never mind having tackled the playing out and the structure. I struggled all weekend, and by the end of it I still had unanswered questions. I was finding it tough not only to answer them, but to find the discipline to sit down and work on them. Same thing for the next weekend. And the next...

I'd allowed myself to become overwhelmed by this story I'd started in order to relax and just have some fun writing.

Weeks became months, and all that time added up to well over a year. So... Now I'm back, but with a new plan. Which I've already revised, natch.

More on that - Next Week!
Peril In The Palace

Chapter Summary

IN WHICH the evening is further prolonged by unwelcome visitors.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**CORVUS** wanted to enter the palace through the widest possible doorway, and since, in his experience, kitchens often had large exterior doors, he directed his horse toward the side of the palace which had the most light spilling from its windows. He reasoned that there would still be activity in the kitchen after the large repast, and that this activity would generate sufficient heat that the servants within would open the door to admit the cool night air.

He was correct on all counts, although the door to the kitchen was somewhat smaller than he'd anticipated. His horse required convincing, but Corvus was able to convince her (he had a sense about these things) to push through the tight opening. They both ducked their heads low and entered the room.

Inside, three young women were washing the evening's dishes at several sinks and basins, overseen by an older woman who was counting the dried items and putting everything away in its proper place.

They were very busy. Corvus and his mare managed to get halfway through the kitchen before they were spotted.

Whereupon one woman shrieked and dropped a roasting pan onto the floor, where its extremities banged and echoed off the stone several times, creating an awful racket.

Causing the horse to whinny and rear back - although not too far, owing both to her rider and the proximity of the ceiling.

But all this noise caught the attention of two palace guards, who entered the room with their pistols drawn.

And hesitated.

Which Corvus had been hoping would happen. He leaned far to his left, placed one hand gently on the shoulder of a different washer-woman, herself too stunned to react, and with his other hand pointed at a serving tray.

"Pardon me," he said gently, "but would you please be so kind as to hand me that tray?"

Finding it too soon to make sense of this situation into which she'd suddenly been thrust, the young woman acceded to his request without thinking, pulling the utensil out of the sink and placing it in Corvus' free hand.

"Thank you most kindly."
He raised himself back upright and faced the guards, who by this time had recovered themselves and were aiming their pistols at him.

"You! You're under arrest! Dismount at once, slo-"

Corvus flung the tray at them.

One guard moved out of the way, and the other fired. His ball clanged off the tray, sending the projectile harmlessly to the floor, and the tray spinning off in the opposite direction - right toward his comrade.

The edge of the heavy utensil struck him on the elbow, and the guard howled, making everybody else in the room wince. They knew precisely which part of his elbow had been hit.

Corvus coaxed his horse forward, and she seemed only too pleased to have something to do, particularly if it meant exiting this loud and humid area, and also if it meant throwing her weight into two of the creatures causing the clamour.

The mare stepped between the guards, knocked them to the ground with a quick shake of her shoulders, and carried Corvus deeper into the palace.

While saddling their own horses, Calavera explained to de Torre how he and Maíz had deduced the identity of Salvador Lobato’s assailant.

Then they mounted, and Calavera was about to urge his horse forward.

But there was a look of grave concern on de Torre's face.

"Diego... Maíz is a fine swordsman, but I don't believe he's good enough to defeat Starkey."

"He's not."

de Torre considered this. Calavera had known what Maíz was leaving them to do, and both men had surely been aware that Maíz was the weaker swordsman.

Yet Maíz had gone anyway. And Calavera had let him go, alone.

Someday the young Guardsman aspired to have the wisdom of these two men, to come to these conclusions so rapidly.

He also hoped to have their faith.

de Torre nodded to his Lieutenant.

Calavera smiled back.

And they were on their way.

Surrounding Lanza Dorado were over a dozen men, congregating at the two junctures where the stairs met the balcony. Engaged as they were in fighting each other, they hadn't yet been able to turn their attention to him.
But Dorado knew that would soon change.

In fact, no sooner had this cheerful thought entered his mind then one man from each side of the balcony disengaged from his mass of fighting men and advanced on him.

The one facing Dorado was a palace guard, the one behind a Gendarme. So Dorado spun smartly around, took two long strides toward the Gendarme, stepped back one pace and drove his elbow into the face of the rapidly-approaching guard behind him, then stepped again toward the confused Gendarme and slashed him open from right shoulder to left hip.

He inspected the man behind him. The guard was flat on his back, unconscious.

But Dorado's actions had attracted the attention of his comrades on the floor below. They were now pointing their pistols, trying to adjust their aim so they could shoot him either above the crosspiece or between the supports of the railing.

He couldn't stay on the balcony, and he couldn't leave it by either end.

So he sheathed his sword, lifted his foot onto the railing, and, as two pistol shots sliced the air behind him, he leapt off of it.

It was a beautiful room, with a very high, domed ceiling, from which hung two iron chandeliers the size and design of carriage wheels. It was toward the closest of these chandeliers that Dorado's leap carried him, his arms outstretched to catch it.

As another pistol fired and missed him, Dorado's arms landed on the edge of the chandelier, causing it to swing forward, and himself with it. He slid along the side of the chandelier, past the wrists and over the palms -

And his strong fingers closed on the edge, catching the swinging chandelier and holding on tightly, his dangling legs continuing forward as the suspended ring reached the apex of its arc.

There was another shot, and one of the chandelier's candles disappeared in a spray of wax. The chandelier started swinging back, taking Dorado with it. He pulled with his arms and raised his chest on top of it. A pistol ball clanged against the iron ring somewhere to his right. The chandelier reached its summit, and started swinging forward again, while two more pistols fired. Dorado heard them strike the ceiling.

On the balcony behind him, the Gendarmes had won one skirmish and the guards the other, so the victors were now meeting in the centre.

Dorado got his knees up onto the chandelier as it started swinging backward again. Below him, most of the guards had fired, and were reloading, but two of them were off to the side, trying to be sure of their target before shooting.

They were standing beneath the other chandelier.

Gripping the suspension rope in the centre of the chandelier to steady himself, Dorado drew his main gauche. As the chandelier slowed, stopped, and swung forward again, he stood up, pushing hard with his legs to increase the swing's momentum, and slashed at the rope.

It didn't sever.

But it did fray very, very badly. It started unraveling.
The swinging chandelier reached its apex. Dorado jumped again.

One of the two men beneath him fired, and missed.

Dorado landed on top of the second chandelier, stumbling forward and catching himself on the rope.

He sheathed his blade, and quickly started putting his gloves on.

The other chandelier’s rope snapped.

Dorado drew his pistol. He preferred his hands to be bare when wielding a weapon, but the gloves were going to be necessary.

As the first chandelier fell to the floor, the guards beneath it shouted warnings and jumped out of its way. None of them were hit, but they all tumbled to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs, their efforts at reloading rudely abandoned. A pistol ball bounced away and rolled into a corner.

Dorado’s hand let go of the suspension rope and grabbed it on the other side of the pulley. Then he aimed his pistol down at the spot on the wall where that rope was tied to a cleat.

He fired.

His shot hit the rope, badly damaging it but again not severing it outright. Like its cousin, it started quickly unraveling.

Dorado stowed his pistol and grabbed the rope with both hands.

The rope snapped. The chandelier started to drop.

As the loose end of the rope raced upward and through the pulley, Dorado tightened his grip on it, slowing the chandelier’s fall as best he could. He smelled the smoke of rope chafing leather, and hoped his gloves would be sufficient to prevent his skin from being burned in a similar fashion.

The guards below him hurried to get out of the way of the heavy iron ring falling toward their heads.

Just before the chandelier crashed into the floor, Dorado tightened his grip and pulled, stopping the fall for an instant so his legs wouldn’t suffer the full impact. Then he let go entirely, and fell flat onto his chest.

The second guard who’d been beneath that chandelier, the one who hadn’t yet fired his pistol, did, and the ball passed harmlessly over Dorado’s back.

The Guardsman hopped to his feet and drew his sword in one quick motion.

The Spaniards dropped their empty, useless weapons and raised their hands in surrender.

Dorado took a moment to look around the room.

There were two men remaining on the balcony, exhausted but still fighting.

The guards who had avoided the first falling chandelier were mostly standing, but were not yet in any condition to locate their pistols, let alone fire them.
Dorado had succeeded.

Somehow.

By rights, he should have been injured or killed any number of ways. His actions had been desperate and careless; they should not have worked.

But they had.

His one consolation was that Corvus hadn't been present to witness his lunacy.

"That was magnificent, my friend."

Dorado turned.

And there, of course, was Turo Corvus.

Astride a horse.

They had hoped to ride out the front gate, but the light from the street had shown them that it was locked, and guarded by six men, muskets pointed inward, so Calavera and de Torre directed their horses off the pebbled path and toward an area of the grounds where they would be concealed by shadows.

There they encountered other men, with swords and muskets, who'd clearly had the same idea. Each group noticed the other at the same time, but the Guardsmen, being mounted, had a distinct advantage.

And the strangers had one critical failing.

"Alejandro - these men are not Spaniards!"

So the horsemen rode straight toward and through their adversaries, scattering half of them and trampling the rest.

A few moments later, with the survivors far behind them, Calavera noticed the look on his companion's face.

"Alejandro, are you troubled by something?"

"If those men weren't Gendarmes, weren't French..."

"Do you remember what I told you about the Twelfth of Valencia?"

"Of course."

It was the night twelve men, including the scholar cum explorer Guillaume Henri, had been killed. Spanish soldiers had clashed with unidentified brigands.

But de Torre knew the truth: Those brigands had been Gendarmes in disguise, who'd entered the country of their Catholic allies without their knowledge or permission.

"Of course!"
The Cardinal's men had done this before.

Which led de Torre to a startling conjecture.

"Do you believe those Gendarmes had been serving under Coléreaux?"

"It's possible. The witnesses agreed that all of the brigands had been killed, but there could have been nine Frenchmen instead of eight. Perhaps Coléreaux was not in command, but was nevertheless present, and survived to report back to the Cardinal. If so, he would have proven his ability to secretly penetrate a sovereign nation, and demonstrated craftiness - "

"Devilishness."

" - and an ability to make the best of a crisis without any assistance. Further, he would understand the importance of Henri's journal, and would have already earned the Cardinal's trust with that information prior to being sent to - "

"Look!"

de Torre was pointing at an open window on the third floor of the palace.

John Starling was climbing out of it, framed by the light within.

Even at this distance the Guardsmen could hear men shouting after him.

Starling sat on the window sill for an instant, pushed away from the wall with his legs, and leapt into the air.

A full story below him, protruding from the wall, was a pole bearing the Lobato family standard. Starling’s fall carried him into the flag, enveloping him in the soft fabric. When it opened again a moment later, it revealed Starling with a dagger in his hand, that dagger having been plunged into the flag with its edge facing downward.

Starling fell, and as he did his dagger cut the flag, the fabric providing just enough resistance to slow his fall, so that when the blade had nothing more to cut, Starling dropped ten feet into a tree below without hurting himself in the slightest.

Two guards' heads popped out of the window where Starling had been.

de Torre was certain their incredulous expressions matched his own.

"Alejandro, if you're finished admiring our rival... "

The young man turned in his saddle and faced Calavera.

"It's important to obtain a proper evaluation of... "

He realised their horses had stopped.

At some point while he'd been observing Starling's bravado, the Guardsmen had arrived at a hedgerow, as tall as two men and impenetrably thick.

Except for the spot before them, into which some groundsman had cut a smooth rectangular opening.

de Torre's mouth fell open.
"Do you know what this is?"

"I do."

All of the Guardsmen had noticed it, outside the windows of their rooms. They'd arrived at the hedge labyrinth. And at the opposite end of this labyrinth was another exit off the palace grounds.

Calavera smiled at him.

de Torre smiled back.

"Shall we?"

"It appears we must."

And into the labyrinth they rode.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the kitchen. It's where I came in."

Dorado was now behind Corvus on the horse, one arm around his waist while the other held his pistol.

"Where are the others?"

"When we parted company, they were also going toward the stables."

"Not with you?"

"I took a more direct route."

He could imagine.

"You came back for me?"

"To warn you about the Gendarmes."

"Thank you."

"You would have done the same."

With his right arm around Corvus and holding the pistol, Dorado used his left to retrieve his pouch of balls and his powder. Then, holding onto Corvus with his elbows, he proceeded to reload his weapon.

He couldn't see his hands from this position, but they knew what to do.

The Guardsmen rode into the dining hall.

On the opposite end, in front of the door to the kitchen, were five Gendarmes carrying muskets.
They brought their weapons to bear.

The horse turned around without Corvus having to prompt her.

Five shots fired behind them as they fled back through the corridor through which they'd entered.

"Such a shame, to damage the walls of that beautiful dining hall."

"It is."

They were nearing the room where Dorado had jumped from the balcony. Corvus turned the horse down a new corridor.

"Do you know where you're going?" Dorado asked him.

"Not any longer."

He urged the horse to go faster; she complied.

"Your horse doesn't seem to mind the doorways."

"She's gotten used to them."

They were nearing the room where Dorado had jumped from the balcony. Corvus turned the horse down a new corridor.

"Do you know where you're going?" Dorado asked him.

"Not any longer."

He urged the horse to go faster; she complied.

"Your horse doesn't seem to mind the doorways."

"She's gotten used to them."

They rounded another corner, and found themselves about to enter the Long Gallery of the palace.

No less than a dozen Gendarmes were hurrying through it.

It was too late to change course; the horse carried them into the room.

And came to an abrupt stop.

Corvus turned to Dorado, and shrugged.

"Soldiers, it appears, are another matter entirely."

Dorado grunted.

Having gotten over their surprise at seeing a horse ride into the room, the Gendarmes formed into two lines of six, the men in front dropping to one knee.

Corvus wasn't going to have time to turn around, and the Guardsmen were too far away to charge their enemies.

The twelve Gendarmes raised their muskets.

Corvus whispered something to the horse, and shifted his heels.

She slammed her front hoof to the ground, and drew her leg back sharply.

That's when Dorado noticed that the floor of the Long Gallery was covered by an ornate rug.

Which the Gendarmes were standing on.

And the horse was pulling toward herself.
Twelve men lost their footing and fell backward, twelve firearms discharged, and twelve musket balls flew at various angles into the ceiling of the Long Gallery.

Corvus urged the horse forward, and she launched into a gallop.

Three of the struggling Gendarmes managed to liberate their swords.

Corvus clicked his tongue, and the horse vaulted over the dozen men on the floor. She landed without breaking pace and ran through the far doorway.

Once they'd rounded a corner and were safely away, Corvus rubbed the horse's neck and she slowed down.

"Good girl."

Lanza Dorado, a man seldom swayed by his emotions, felt the need to express his admiration.

"Turo, that was quite the trick."

"Thank you. I learned it from my uncle."

"Your mother's brother?"

"Yes."

"Can... all her people do it?"

"Not many of us, no. I am somewhat exceptional."

Dorado let that comment lie.

Calavera and de Torre kept their pace slow, so they could see every detail of the labyrinth in the moonlight. Their path turned once, and after a few steps there was an opening on their right, which they chose to ignore. The path bent again, and there was an opening to their left, which again they chose not to take. Then two more turns.

And their path ended in a hedge wall.

"Perhaps we should have chosen a different route."

"Guardsman, I hope you aren't taking our situation too lightly."

"No, Lieutenant."

"Good."

But Calavera's tone wasn't entirely without mirth.

They turned their horses around, and retraced their steps.

All around them was silence. Any sounds that might exist, whether inside the palace, somewhere on the grounds, or elsewhere in the city, were perfectly muffled by the dense foliage. The only things they could hear were the breathing of the horses and their hooves on the hard
Calavera and de Torre arrived at the second opening they'd passed.

Looked at each other.

Shrugged simultaneously.

And continued on to the first opening.

de Torre sighed into the night.

"Sean would have loved this."

Halfway down Corvus and Dorado's new corridor was a room which three Gendarmes were exiting. Dorado shot the man in front to discourage the other two, and the Guardsmen rode past without further incident.

Dorado started reloading.

"Those men had muskets. The first Gendarmes we encountered did not, but recently all of them have."

"Perhaps the plan was for Gendarmes armed only with swords to enter the palace first, so they could do it more quietly."

"That's my feeling also. But now that everyone has been awoken, and the attack discovered, they can afford to be bolder."

A Gendarme entered the corridor in front of them. Dorado shot him.

"A second group of men would also explain why there suddenly seem to be so many of them."

He reloaded again.

Corvus quickened the horse's pace, and they rode into another large room.

On their left side, Simargl (now fully clothed) was being forced into a corner by several Gendarmes. They had no muskets, indicating they were part of the first group, but their swords were out, and the Russian was holding them at bay armed only with a staff.

The Guardsmen were already through the room and into the corridor beyond when they registered what they'd seen.

"We should go back and help him," Corvus said.

"We should," said Dorado halfheartedly.

Corvus slowed the horse and turned her around.

From the room they'd just left came several horrific screams.

Dorado was no longer certain it was Simargl who needed assistance.
Indeed, when they re-entered the room, the Russian was nowhere to be seen. But the Gendarmes were still present.

All five of them lay on the floor, their eyes wide but unseeing, their lips smiling but blue, their bodies bent but rigid.

Corvus whistled softly.

"Vidua viperae. He must have thrown the venom directly into their eyes, for it to have taken effect so quickly."

Dorado was not entirely comforted that Corvus knew this.

They exited the room once more. Even the horse seemed relieved to leave the carnage behind.

But what the horse did not know, and Dorado could not push from his mind, was that there would likely be more such deaths in the future.

Simargl and his comrades, like the Gendarmes, were seeking the temple of Yaxax'tun.

Thus Simargl, this man who could kill five soldiers and disappear in an instant, was the Guardsmen's enemy.

Chapter End Notes

Hah.

This week's Author's Notes was going to talk about my decisions regarding chapter length, but since the one you've just read went over the maximum by about 40% or so, I'll have to revise both the Notes I'd written and my thinking.

Here's what happened: I resolved, a few years ago, that everything I write is going to have a kitchen sink in it somewhere. This seemed the perfect chapter to do it, because of the exciting stunts I had planned for this chapter. But, once I threw in the kitchen sink, I felt obligated to throw in everything else, all the classic stuff I'd earmarked for the palace. Even if it meant going over my chapter length maximum. By a lot. Sigh.

As a result, I may - I haven't decided yet - take next week off. You'll know I did if Tuesday goes by without an update.

Also, the original title for this chapter was going to be The Unwelcome Visitors, which I liked for the self-effacing understatement - but I think you'll agree, this chapter's tone does not lend itself to understatement.
"RIGHT or left, Alejandro?"

Calavera had chosen their direction the last three times. And led them directly to a wall of foliage on all three occasions.

As a result, the two Guardsmen had become much more skilled at turning horses around in narrow confines than they'd ever anticipated. Or desired.

de Torre had been quietly dreading that his Lieutenant would ask him to decide their next path. Not because he was afraid of choosing the wrong direction, but quite the opposite: He didn't want to embarrass Calavera by guessing correctly.

"Left."

He needn't have worried. They moved through the opening on their left, turned immediately right, rode their horses eight or nine paces forward, turned left again, and then, despite the dim light, they saw the wall at once.

They'd become quite adept at perceiving blind alleys in the darkness.

Their horses snorted.

They'd also learned a few things about labyrinths.

This time, when the Guardsmen tried to turn their horses around, Calavera's resisted. It took one step back, planted its hooves solidly into the ground, and threw its snout into the air, expelling a scornfully moist blast of air from its nose.

de Torre's horse, on the other hand, barely gave him time to shift his heels before it spun quickly around as though on a pivot.

The Guardsmen didn't honestly believe that horses were capable of expressing sarcasm, but these two nags were beginning to make them doubt that conviction.

de Torre twisted himself around to see what progress his comrade was making.

There was none.

Calavera kicked his horse harder.

It grunted, and shook its head as though shaking off a fly.
This prompted Calavera to wonder, since his heels were clearly not providing adequate incentive to obey, whether the tip of his dagger might.

de Torre couldn't see his Lieutenant's face, but he recognised the stiffness of his comrade's posture. He cleared his throat loudly, but politely.

Calavera took a deep breath, and as he let it out de Torre saw him release the tension from his back.

"If the horses are so dissatisfied with our leadership," de Torre said, "perhaps the next time we come to a divergence, we should let them decide which path to take."

Calavera turned his head swiftly around.

"The idea has merit."

de Torre had meant it as a joke, but he found himself agreeing.

And then Calavera's horse, for no reason either man could discern, suddenly decided on its own to turn around and point itself back in the direction they'd come.

de Torre tried not to smile, but found it impossible.

Calavera emitted a noise of displeasure.

"I'm sorry, Diego."

"No, you're quite right. And somewhere above us, I'm sure, the walls of Heaven are ringing with Sean Benton's laughter as well."

It was a very comforting thought.

"Let us proceed."

They returned to the junction where de Torre had suggested they turn left, and this time continued right. Shortly thereafter an opening in the hedge wall appeared on their right, and the Guardsmen loosened their control of the horses, allowing the animals to drift to that side if they so chose.

The horses continued straight.

Twenty or so paces later, that path also turned right.

And did not lead to a wall.

Which was both a relief and an annoyance.

They, which is to say the horses with the men astride them, continued on their way, rounding two more corners before they came to a T that gave them the option of turning left or right.

The horses drifted right.

And at a choice between left and straight, left.

To another T, where they turned right again.
And brought the Guardsmen to a blind alley.

"Hah!" Calavera exulted.

And then he realised he was competing with a horse.

With his liberty at stake.

de Torre made no comment, and gently urged his horse to turn around.

Which both horses did without complaint.

They returned to the T, and the horses continued straight, along the path they had earlier rejected, without even glancing toward the corridor from which they'd initially come.

"Smart animals," said de Torre.

Calavera grunted, ambiguously.

An opening soon appeared on their right, and the horses chose it.

They rounded several corners, encountering no further obstructions.

"Four successes out of five," said de Torre. "Although not by any means conclusive, it certainly does suggest that some anim-"

"Stop."

It was a warning.

de Torre sighed.

"I only meant to lighten the mood, my dear Diego, but if you felt I was-"

"No. Stop your horse."

Calavera spoke more quietly, but this time de Torre recognised the nature of the warning. He stopped his horse, as abruptly and softly as he could.

Calavera dismounted, went down on one knee, and smelled the ground.

"Lamp oil."

He touched the earth beneath him. It was perfectly dry.

He moved into the centre of the path. The ground was dry there as well. He selected several other locations, all of them dry, and tried to discern in which direction the scent was strongest, but had no success with that either. Finally he stood back up.

"I smell it as well," de Torre told him.

"I'm finding no traces of oil on the ground."

"Can the smell conceivably be the result of someone having recently come through here with a lamp?"

"I wouldn't have thought that would account for how strong the scent is, but I suppose it's
possible. Although it would have to have been very recently."

de Torre quietly dismounted. He didn't need to be told they'd be walking from this point forward, and leaving the horses behind.

They walked as quickly as they could down the hedge corridor, putting silence above all else. The smell of lamp oil became stronger.

When they came to another T, and had to choose between right and left, each man checked the scents on his respective side.

They discovered the smell of lamp oil was equally strong in both directions.

Which they couldn't explain.

Calavera motioned for de Torre to come as closely as he could, so they could whisper to each other.

"Each of us will scout his respective corridor down to the first turn. Then we'll meet back here, compare our findings, and decide on a direction together."

de Torre nodded, and each man went his separate way.

As he moved his way cautiously forward through the hedge maze, Calavera reflected that the events of the last few days and this very long evening had made him tired, impatient, and short-tempered, and further that all this inhaling through his nose had given him an ache in his temples. He wondered how de Torre was faring, with the recent injury to his head.

Calavera reached the end of his path, where it turned left.

Other than the persistent smell of lamp oil, he'd not found anything unusual.

Which didn't mean there wasn't anything there.

He returned to the spot where he'd left de Torre, and discovered the young man waving at him in a grotesque fashion intended to convey urgency while remaining perfectly silent.

It was so exaggerated Calavera was tempted to laugh.

This came as a relief; he was faring less poorly than he'd thought.

"What is it?" Calavera whispered as soon as he was close enough.

"Sounds of metal scraping upon metal."

"Then let's hurry, and hope those noises cover the sounds of our feet."

They hastened down de Torre's path, pressing their hands to their bodies so the items at their belts wouldn't give them away. The corridor turned right, then quickly right again, and Calavera was trying to listen for the sound de Torre'd heard when ahead of them and to the left they both heard a new sound, entirely unexpected, welcome yet ominous:

The squeal of a heavy gate opening upon metal hinges.

Both men now ran as quickly as they could; the gate was so loud that nobody standing near it would hear them coming, even if the Guardsmen were on horseback.
They arrived at another divergence, where the path continued straight ahead but an opening in the wall could be taken left, directly toward the source of the noise.

They approached the opening slowly, and cautiously rounded the corner.

"You're too late!"

They'd finally arrived at the end of the hedge maze.

In front of them was a simple, straight path.

At the end of that path was the wall surrounding the palace grounds, its gate fully open to reveal the street beyond.

Between that street and the Guardsmen, facing them, stood François Carandini.

In one hand the Gendarme held a large clay jug.

In the other he held an oil lamp.

Immediately Calavera understood why he'd been unable to feel any dampness in the earthen floor of the labyrinth. The oil hadn't dripped along the path.

It had been poured onto the hedges.

Carandini swung the jug widely over his head and threw it to the ground in front of him. The clay vessel shattered, spraying the last of its volatile liquid in every direction.

Then the Gendarme tossed his lamp onto the same spot.

Flames erupted in the middle of the path, and quickly spread sideways to the hedges, which caught fire as though eager to be consumed.

Calavera remembered how dry the ground of the labyrinth had been, and reflected that it hadn't rained in Isla Oestelago for quite some time.

Carandini turned and ran through the open gate, into the street where he promptly disappeared.

Even from this distance, the Guardsmen could feel the warmth of the burning hedges. The blaze was already far too hot to survive should they try to run through it.

Calavera turned to de Torre.

"Can you remember our way back through the maze?"

"No. I hadn't thought it might be important."

Feeding hungrily on the oil-soaked hedges, the fire crawled rapidly down the path toward them.

Off in the distance, over the sound of the flames, the Guardsmen heard their horses running away.
Okay, I skipped two weeks there instead of the one I'd predicted. Blame the second cold to attack me in September; I sure do. And I'm pleased to report that despite the extra delay, I suffered zero loss of momentum in the writing! This is a big improvement over the last time I missed two weeks in a row.

So what's changed since then? Well, mostly my outlook. I certainly don't have more time to write than I did back then; in fact I probably have less. But, unwilling to return to an internal state where concern about not writing makes me less able to write (egad), I've resolved to be easier on myself.

When I started this serial up again, the target words per chapter was between a minimum of 2300 and a maximum of 2500. That worked for all of two weeks, until Chapter Fifty-One came in over 2800, and I didn't want to damage it by excising 11% just for the sake of a guesstimate. And you know what happened with Chapter Fifty-Two.

(Hands up: Any writers here absolutely terrible at guessing how long one of their works is going to be? To the extent that they try to overestimate, because they know they usually guess low - but they still wind up overshooting the estimate? Me! Me!)

Thus confronted with A Plan That Was Clearly Not Working, I scrapped it. I've had a lot of time - and incentive - to think up a new one, so here it is:

Minimum 1600 words per chapter. No maximum. Still aiming to publish one chapter per week (the shorter word count will help).

That's it. Nice n' simple.

So here it is, the shortest installment of this serial since Chapter Six. I'm confident that 1600 words is long enough to accomplish at least one awesome thing per chapter, and I hope you agree.
MAZES are, for the most part, designed to be experienced in one direction, which is to say that one of the two openings is generally considered the entrance, while the other is the exit. The hedge maze on the grounds of the palace of the Duke of Isla Oestelago was created in precisely that fashion, and thus, no thought having been given to the difficulty of the return path, finding the correct route from the end of the maze to the beginning was far easier than going in the opposite direction.

This did not, by any means, make it impossible for the fleeing Guardsmen to choose the wrong way.

At first, Calavera and de Torre's choices were perfect, because they required remembering choices made very recently, but soon thereafter, they found their powers of recollection challenged not only by events from the more distant past, but also by the fact that the decisions had been made by neither one of them.

"I think the horses chose this path..."

"Yes, I believe you're right..."

And not long after that they were confronted by their first blind alley.

"Oh."

"Let's go back."

And, before long, another.

"I could have sworn that was correct."

"Well, one hedge wall looks very much like any other."

And the third instance came immediately after the second.

"Hellfire and damnation!"

"Back the way we came - hurry!"

The flames consuming the hedges were getting closer. The roar of their unquenchable hunger became louder in their ears, as the heat of the fire became hotter, and more taxing upon them. Sweat poured from their brows, into their eyes and along their cheeks, dripping off their chins. Every time they exhaled heavily, which was often, a fine spray of mist flew from their
noses, the liquid reflecting the orange light of their relentless pursuer, reminding them that they could ill afford to slow down, despite their tiredness, and that they could even less afford to select many more incorrect directions.

The fourth time they were confronted by a wall and had to go back along their path, they found themselves running toward a hedge which had already caught fire on the other side. The smoke intruded into their dry and aching throats, causing them to cough violently. Nevertheless, they continued to run as fast as they could.

The torture in their gorges, the aches in their heads, and the weariness in their bodies were nevertheless inconsequential compared to their shared concern that their next mistake might very well be their last.

And then they came to another T.

"This way."

"No, this way!"

"It's this way; I'm certain of it."

"Forgive me, but you were certain the last time, and - "

"I was deferring to you!"

"Are you suggesting that every time we've run into a blind alley, that it was my fault exclu-

"Guardsmen!"

The two men turned toward the voice.

"Guardsmen, is that you?"

Calavera recognised it.

"Silvestros?"

"Yes!" He was just on the opposite side of the wall from them. "You are Calavera and de Torre, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Remain where you are; I am coming to you!"

Calavera was about to ask him how he knew the way, but over the roar of the fire he heard Silvestros already running away.

The two Guardsmen turned toward each other.

Having little better option than to trust and wait, that's what they did.

The flames were bright enough that each man could make out every nuance of his comrade's countenance, enabling them without words to exchange regrets and apologies for recent behaviour.
"There you are!"

Silvestros had appeared around the corner. He waved for them to join him.

As the two men ran down the path which Calavera had been proposing, the Lieutenant noted the shame on the younger man's face.

"We are neither of us at our best, Alejandro. Further, I'm certain the injury to your head is making matters more difficult for you than they are for me."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Is there something else troubling you?"

"Yes. Honesty compels me to admit that despite myself I am beset by a considerable eagerness to return to that which we were better to leave."

Calavera nodded. He understood, very well.

Before they reached him, Silvestros turned and started running on ahead.

"Follow me!"

The Guardsmen shrugged at each other, and increased their speed.

When they rounded the corner and could see the Star's back once more, Calavera called out to him.

"How certain are you of the way?"

Silvestros held up his left hand, which was holding something round.

"Perfectly!"

The Guardsmen squinted, and saw the object was a ball of yarn.

Silvestros looked over his shoulder at them, and could tell they understood.

"A little lesson from Princess Ariadne! When I realised we would have to be making haste to leave the palace and its grounds, I reasoned this marvelous labyrinth would be the best avenue to take, being the least likely, and therefore least guarded, of our options. So I hastened to the servants' quarters, and found a girl of such lovely disposition - ah! But no matter. Here we are, and we shall soon find ourselves elsewhere!"

He was right. Following the example of the mythical tale, Silvestros was pursuing the trail of yarn back to where he'd tied its opposite end to the outside of the labyrinth. The ease and speed with which they were currently moving prompted Calavera to ask Silvestros a question.

"If you can leave the maze so easily, how is it you're still inside?"

"I am not still inside; I'm back inside! I exited as quickly as you would expect, but very soon after I was nearly trampled by two horses who were in the same hurry I had been! I suspected that the horses might belong to a pair of fellow fugitives, and so I came back for you."

"We deeply appreciate the risks you took on our behalf."
"Not at all."

"But there was an error in your reasoning," Calavera said.

He enjoyed the look of incredulity that crossed Silvestros' face.

"What could that have been?"

"In my view, the most likely conclusion to derive from the horses was that two Guardsmen had escaped the labyrinth on horseback, and then released the horses to return to the palace."

"But what of the fire? You would never have wantonly destroyed any of your host's property in such a fashion, less so a work of such skill and beauty as this wonderful maze. No, the fire could only have been the work of a Gendarme."

Calavera grunted.

"Yes, that's fair."

Silvestros laughed. It was a pleasant, genuine laugh, not intended to mock Calavera in any way, but nevertheless it did sting his pride.

"Do not berate yourself, Lieutenant. I may not be skilled in the physical arts, but the reputation of the Five Stars is justly deserved, and every member of our elite group has a significant and unique contribution to make!"

This did not have the mollifying effect intended.

de Torre noticed this, and so, when they rounded the next corner, he shouted, "There - the exit!" rather more loudly than necessary.

Silvestros laughed again, and this time Calavera was happy to join him.

They allowed their legs no respite until they were completely out of the maze, and when their tired bodies at last came to a stop all three men breathed deeply, relieved to once again be tasting air untainted by smoke.

It took them a few moments to perceive the horse and rider emerging out of the darkness.

But once they did, they waited for the apparition to draw closer, until in the bright orange light of the hedge maze fire, they recognised him.

Sébastien Coléreaux.

Pistol drawn, and pointed at them.

"I see Carandini has been through already."

Calavera wanted very badly to reach for his own pistol, but he knew that the first to do so would die. And to no avail, for even if all three of them acted as one, in the time it would take a man to draw, aim, and fire, Coléreaux could shoot one of them, turn his horse, and ride safely away into impenetrable shadow.

The Gendarme sighed and shook his head, a smirking mockery of regret.

"Such a shame about the hedge maze. I had been hoping to perform the honours myself."
"There is still time," said de Torre, "if you wish to experience the maze for yourself. None of us will deter you from entering. In fact, we'd encourage it."

"Alejandro."

Inside, Calavera was cheering. But, more importantly, he did not want his friend to incite their enemy into firing his weapon.

Because he knew this for certain: One of them was going to die. Coléreaux had probably already decided which one, and was toying with them.

In Calavera's view, de Torre was the least likely choice.

But Coléreaux was prideful, and capricious. Not a man to provoke.

And even now the Gendarme was growing bored with his game, and impatient to be on his way off the palace grounds. His expression changed; he took a deep breath.

Pointed the gun at Calavera's chest.

And fired.

Into Silvestros.

de Torre fell heavily to the ground.

At the sound of the shot, he'd thrown his body in front of Calavera's.

Calavera wiped the sudden moisture from his eyes.

Meanwhile Coléreaux, as expected, had turned his horse and hastened out of sight.

Calavera knelt down to Silvestros, and carefully lifted the man's head.

He was still alive, but the red stain on his chest was spreading very rapidly.

"Why...?"

Calavera smiled gently at him.

"It was a compliment." He tried to chuckle, but the sound caught in his throat. "Coléreaux evaluated the three of us, and judged that you were the biggest threat to his plans."

Silvestros' eyes narrowed.

"But... I'm not."

He exhaled, and went limp in Calavera's arms.

The Guardsman had held enough dying men to recognise a final breath. He lowered Silvestros to the ground, and closed his unseeing eyes.

When de Torre spoke, his voice was thick.

"Helios Silvestros was a man worthy of his legend. Not only did he save our lives, but his last act in this world was to pay his rival a compliment at his own expense."
Calavera leapt to his feet.

In a sudden rush of understanding, he'd realised why Coléreaux had spared him and killed the Star.

He'd grasped the significance of Silvestros' last words.

And he'd arrived at a conclusion that made his blood run cold.

"Diego! What is it?"

"It appears you're going to get your wish after all, Alejandro. We need to return to the palace at once."

"What? Why?"

"I'll tell you on the way. But I fear we're already too late."

Chapter End Notes

SCHEDULE NOTICE:

I'm not writing TOTEM in November, because I'm doing NaNoWriMo again. And prior to that is prep, so I'll see you in December!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!