

The Barbary Coast

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

- **Captain Richard Blake** - Privateer, terror of Spanish shipping, Captain of the Kestrel.
- **Daniel 'Brown'** - (nee 'Israel') last minute hire onto Kestrel by Captain Blake
- **Hakeem Nazef** - an almost-shipwrecked Persian Alchemist
- **Valtos Cesar** - Market overseer for local 'merchant' '*Marshib*' (or 'Morcheeba' in Queen's English.) in *Al-Araish*
- **Parry Baldwin** - enslaved English seaman off '*The Rose*'; originally a Bristol man.
- **Mary Bolter** - enslaved London tart from the Dutch merchant ship '*Dageraad Trader*'
- **Francis Pemberton-Bramfield** - Of the Norfolk Pemberton-Bramfield's, don't you know.
- **The Brave Crew of the Kestrel**, Captained by Richard Blake.
- **Rogues and Rascals** - In the pay of Valtos Cesar.

October 1579

Act 1 Scene 1 - Storm and Rescue.

It had been weeks of successful plunder of Spanish ships along the Northern Spanish and Portuguese coast for Captain Richard Blake, Daniel Brown, and the crew of the Kestrel before their activities became annoying enough to somebody in Spain for the word to go out and pursuit to arrive upon their stern.

Blake took the opportunity that rising weather offered and fled with the wind, for while Kestrel was no slouch upon the waves, with a storm wind behind her she raced ahead, carved a path through the growing swell that distanced pursuit at every opportunity.

If that had been all then their escape would have been assured, but the storm grew and drove the Kestrel far to the south for days. While they outdistanced all pursuit it was only as the storm eased that Blake identified the southern most coast of Spain not far from Gibraltar, gateway to the Spanish pond known as the Mediterranean. This was considerably outside Blake and the Kestrel's usual hunting territory.

In the remnants of the storm Blake considered his options - supplies of fresh water were essential, but he dared not put in to a Spanish port or cove, and even Portuguese was risky so close to Spain, for all was not well in Portugal, and Spanish sympathies had grown in recent years, let alone the Spanish this that treated Portuguese waters as their own.

As he pored over charts there was a call from the mast - a boat spotted, but small, a picard at best - flat bottomed and useful in coastal waters and good weather, not a storm or out in the ocean swell - and clearly in trouble as the Kestrel slid nearer. The picard's sails were in tatters, rigging flew loose, and it rolled and listed with the swell. On the deck there was but a single soul who waved frantically as s/he clung to the rail and ropes. The bow patchily proclaimed it '*Ascidia*', and even a landsman could see it was unmaintained and likely rotten from bow to stern.

Blake's masterful sailing skills brought the Kestrel within ropes reach and Brown flung accurately for the lone crew member to snatch the rope from the air and tie themselves. It was fortunate that the person aboard was adept at knots for it was but a moment before the roll and swell pulled apart the *Ascidia* and the Kestrel, and the survivor was yanked violently from the deck. Brown and the Kestrel's crew dragged the survivor aboard through the boiling seas.

Once aboard it was clear he was a man of Turkish or Persian origin from both his clothes and face. He introduced himself most politely and formally as *Hakeem Nazef*, indeed an Ottoman traveller and trader in spices and exotica. He explained that the crew of the *Ascidia* abandoned the vessel in the ship's boat and left him when it was clear she was floundering. Their parting gift was a pistol shot intended for his head, but lodged in his shoulder. Either way it ensured he didn't swim for shore. He was en-route from *Faro* in southern Spain to *Al-Araish* (aka '*Larache*') for spices, he said, and to observe the markets there, for pirate markets are often revealing and *Al-Araish* is on the Atlantic coast of the Moorish lands of Africa belonging to the Barbary Pirate Kings. Most importantly to Blake, Brown and the crew he fished out a bag from his pack that chinked coldly: he would pay for rescue....

It was fortunate that Daniel Brown was aboard, this his first voyage with Captain Blake, for it was then that the seriousness of the wound in Hakeem Nazef's shoulder became apparent. Brown rolled up his sleeves, spat on his palms and called for his roll of surgical instruments. With an eye for patient care he wiped each one before use in the rag he kept for just such purposes. Hakeem Nazef waved away the offer of Brandy to help with the pain to come, but accepted a strap to bite upon before Brown probed the wound to find the ball. Fortunate again he found both ball unshattered and the wad of clothing it had driven before it into Nazef's shoulder. However, before he could stitch the hole Nazef spat out the strap and waved at his pack, full tightly bound and oiled leather of unfamiliar source. Under his direction a small bottle of grey powder was found from within, and a pinch or two sprinkled into the wound in his shoulder before he allowed Brown to stitch and bind, albeit with his direction and instruction. At first perturbed, Brown quickly realised Nazef must be a surgeon too, and so politely took direction from a fellow about his own body.

With the weather becoming more favourable but still a southerly drive Blake hurriedly consulted his charts to try and plot a viable route back towards England. However, Nazef was quickly up and about after the surgery, and seemed little affected by what must be a painful wound even with his arm in a sling of sailcloth. Hakeem proposed that if Blake and his crew were willing he would pay passage to complete his business in the Barbary ports upon the Atlantic. Nazef was clear that he knew the manners and needs to the Barbary coast and the pirates there, and would guide Blake safely through. Gold chinked and Blake agreed a fine sum of mixed gold coinage with one condition - a port to water and provision was severely needed before much further travel, for exhaustion hovered over his crew from the days spent fleeing the storm, fresh water barrels were almost empty aside from rainwater, and supplies were down to weevily biscuits. Hakeem smiled as if the request was expected, and suggested he would assuredly be able to assist with *that* to give them enough time to make port where he intended anyway - *Al-Araish*.

Nazef gathers a small brazier, some pots and pans from the crew and the galley. With this he brewed a robust draught for all. Something that steamed and bubbled, that wafted a dark, rich and bitter aroma downwind, into which he sprinkled unidentified herbs and seeds, dried leaves pounded almost to dust. Blake peered at the bubbling mix, not wholly unfamiliar with such goops after long association with the experiments of his friend Kerr Avon. But Nazef waved him away.

"Do not look upon the *Obsidian Draught* overly, Captain Blake, lest it look back, for then I know not what may come to pass..."

At this Blake gave a wry smile. *So* like Kerr Avon's words at just such moments.

Nazef bid all, including himself to let it cool slightly and then down it in one if they were disturbed at all by the taste and smell. This, he promised, would banish the tiredness of limb, growling of thirst and hunger and refresh them for a while as nothing else. Hakeem was first to drink, sipped the cooling brew, smiled and nodded as he approved of his own concoction, before he downed it all in several mighty gulps.

Blake and Brown led the crew similarly, and all partook emptying the pot of '*Obsidian Draught*'.

It was a short while after drinking that Blake and Brown noticed their fatigue was indeed banished. The wind was keener, the spray sharper, and the smell of the sea richer. Blake was even sure he could smell the direction of land, despite it being downwind! Of the crew, they took to their duties with renewed vigour and practice. The sails had ne'er been reefed so quickly, nor so neatly!

As Blake, Brown and Nazef stood upon the deck Nazef looked upon Blake strangely for a moment, and confessed after a few minutes that Blake seemed oddly familiar, as if perhaps they had met once before. Blake thought a moment, but suggested he could not recall, nor any circumstance where they might have been unknowingly in each other's presence. Nazef agreed after some moments, but a troubled frown remained upon his face for some while and he glanced repeatedly at Blake, as if seeking an angle or light of his face that he could identify.

While Nazef's concerns were of interest, more worrying to Brown and Blake's minds were the auras about each of them, including Nazef. Aura was the best word Blake could come up with, but it was rather a flow of origin, an awareness of from whence each of them had come, trailing away from the individual back to their direction of 'home'. Of Nazef, Blake and Brown could see his past self firmly eastwards and far away, as expected from what little they knew of him. Brown's view of Blake was equally distant, stretching far away to the North to England. Blake's feel of Brown was that to the North, to England, but then further past to the east. His darker olive complexion was perhaps a hint at birth, but Blake shrugged it off - the sea did not differentiate by skin or homeland. Of the crew they were all of English stock, their origins stretched North to a man, and Blake calmed their mutterings after the strangeness of the strong draft, as for then all fatigue fell from them and they saw to the Kestrel with a will.

The hours passed, night fell, and they made South under Nazef's direction, keeping the coast a smudge to port, but none felt a need to rest. The crew broke out drum, fiddle and whistle, and in the darkness as the Kestrel sailed smoothly on a hornpipe played, and old songs of the sea were sung, but none retired thereafter. Blake himself felt the Kestrel beneath him, her every move, twitch and shiver, every breath of wind within her sails and wave upon her prow. He knew they were making good time, and with every tiny shift of the wind and change of the sea he adjusted course, sail and trim, and she leapt ahead leading a knot or two more at times he was sure faster than he'd had her ever before. It was exhilarating.

Daniel Brown stood upon the prow with Nazef, who was almost unmoving, occasionally glancing to port and the darker smudge of night was land, but more often up at the stars as the clouds of the storm of the last week cleared. Occasionally Nazef would point and name stars and groups and associations in the heavens in languages and terms that Brown clutched familiarly from his own learnings. A dialect of Arabic, relating to Persian he suspected, but seemingly archaic sometimes, odd words his grandfather had used. But his own astrological learnings picked out the points of light and the shapes they made, and it was a joy to hear some of the Old Names he'd read about and heard from his own Elders to be used and expanded by Nazef. And Brown marvelled at the

sharp brightness of them, as he'd never seen before. Not just pin pricks through haze as was so often such in England, but more as he'd heard Elders speak of their elders and elders before had spoken and stories down the years, where the heavens blazed with light of gods and angels shapes written as points of brilliance far to the east. He shivered, not from cold, but from some feeling he could not identify or hold, something far to the east and back more generation than he could name or know. But *oh the beauty of the skies engulfed him*, and he was lost in it until the glow to port began and announced dawn in short hours.

By the next day as it dawned Nazef directed Blake towards land, a closer look to gather landmarks, but he seemed satisfied almost immediately, and Blake soon approached the inlet to a large river, and saw hills rising to one side, and the haze and jagged angles of buildings.

"*Al-Araish*" announced Nazef firmly "Or sometimes '*Larache*' as the languages of England and other Northern lands see fit."

Blake nodded, and wondered if he might manage to find a decent chart in "*Larache*", for his were vague by Gibraltar and accused the Atlantic coast of the Barbary lands to be a squiggle. He had never expected to be this far south, and charts of such in England were rarer and more expensive.

They eased into port, and found a quay easily, for while busy it was not crowded. It was Nazef who met with those on the quay who needed meeting, and the exchange was not in a language Blake knew. It was brief, to the point, and moneys simply changed hands. Nazef explained that fees were expected, and he had paid for the next few days. The crew could rest, as should they all after the last few days and matters for which he was here would be attended to tomorrow. With some relief (for dark tendrils of fatigue were now about him) Blake set a watch, relaxed, and allowed his men to rest too. Daniel Brown set himself comfortably in the bow propped on soft rigging, back to the open water and with a view to the dock. And he too dozed.

Act 1 Scene 2 - The Slave Market of Al-Araish.

Recovered from the exhaustion of the last week Blake headed off to the markets and businesses about the docks to resupply the Kestrel. Nazef's translation skills and adept bargaining made potentially tedious pigeon English/Spanish/pointing at things struggle quick and simple for Blake, and they were done within a few hours, even as first supplies arrived at the Kestrel. She wasn't a large ship, and her proportionally small crew meant the loading and storing was quick.

Having serviced the Kestrel's needs, and leaving a couple of the crew to manage the incoming supplies and fresh water Nazef turned to his own business. He explained to Blake and Brown that he was after one particular man, a slave. This he did for his Pasha, Aile Sarissa, to repay a debt to him. The slave concerned was a young man, European, called by the name of Ivan Ivanovich, and spoke a strange language that few knew - Russian. To complicate matters Nazef was expecting some opposition to this simple transaction, both from persons unknown attempting to outbid for their own interests, and from others (or the same) who might attempt to use force to take that slave anyway. The slave market was in the centre of Larache, and Nazef would be grateful of Blake and Brown's support. Blake agreed, and a couple of the crew also accompany them. All are heavily if unobtrusively armed.

In the market there were queues of slaves for sale, male on one side, female the other. They were sold through one auctioneer, a man who handled the transaction and moneys to pay, and a number of heavily armed men clearly there to ensure there was no business other than theirs. About the

slave sales there were a wide variety of market stalls filling the rest of the square - it bustled with food, utensils, grains and fruit, cloth, clothes and animals for sale, the chatter of friends and patter of sellers, the shouts of attention and the banter of barter and negotiation. From the market stalls in and around the market rich smells of food wafted, roasting goat, baking flat bread, rich sweetness of harissa and the tumbling intense scents of powdered spices heaped high in baskets.

The slaves, queued and shackled for the most part, were from many parts and many countries, some European others with darker skins, some even to the point of absolute black. Blake kept a careful eye on his men. They were good sailors and had been with him long enough to be trusted, and had seen more than many, but he didn't want them getting distracted.

Of the Europeans it was quickly clear some were English. To Blake's surprise, one man beckoned him over. About to ignore him the man hissed

"Blake! Captain Blake, Sir!"

Blake was slightly shocked anyone would recognise him here. He strolled over and spoke with the man. His name was **Parry Baldwin**, a seaman captured from *The Rose* when it tried to run laden with a cargo of Spanish and Italian wine bound for Antwerp some two years past. Baldwin was a Bristol lad by birth and upbringing, and he knew Blake by reputation, sight from the Taverns about Bristol, and most assuredly *The Silver Eel*.

One woman across from where Blake and Parry Baldwin conversed spotted them as they spoke in English. She called out to Blake, although did not know him. She was a Londoner, so her accent suggested. The woman beside her called out too when she realised. Blake spoke to them.

First was **Mary Bolter**, she was a tart from the Dutch ship '*Dageraad Trader*' - trading clothes and spices to the Levant. She was whore to the Captain, Sebastian Van Will.

The other was rather more refined: one **Francis Pemberton-Bramfield**, of the Norfolk Pemberton-Bramfields, Blake understood, and she the wife of Squire Jeremy, oh yes. Sailing at his insistence on some contrived excuse, for trade upon the same Dutch ship as the *whore* next to her from the Dutch trader, when he abruptly told her he no longer loved her, was taking the estates, and locked her in the cabin until they made port in some *God Forsaken Land* even farther from here and he, Jeremy, sold her to one of these *animals*.... She **would** have passage back to England, thank you, and there would settle up with monies when she took her *revenge* on Jeremy and the little blond *tart she knew he was pounding against her bed's headboard in her rooms, this very*
MOMENT!

Blake backed away, on the pretence of his men and the two women shouted after him for a yard or two, before slumping back down in the shackles, exhausted, beaten by despair. Blake considered options.

"I cannot buy *everyone* of English decent here." He muttered to Brown, who agreed. "And while a couple of of them would be useful, well," he shrugged, "I don't really care - if that Bramfield woman was as rich and decent as she claimed, she probably wouldn't be here..."

Brown, often a taciturn fellow when it came to moral dilemmas lest he offend his own religious beliefs shrugged back, and made generally non-committal noises.

The bidding began. After some hesitation Blake bid and won for Parry Baldwin. He could use another man on the crew, and if he was no good he could pay him off somewhere. If he was any good then he would be cheap recruit.

On a whim, for the entertainment and as cover for Nazef's bidding to come for his target slave, Blake also bid and won Mary Bolter. He wasn't sure what he would do with her, other than the obvious if she scrubbed up well enough, but he'd think of something.

Nazef nudged him. On the male slaves chain it was his target next. Brown stepped back and gave word to the couple of Blake's crew to be ready for any trouble or double cross, but not to draw until given the word. There were a lot of *them*, and very few of *us*. Nazef's man looked wild haired, hugely bearded and staring eyed beneath the grime over rags that once may have been Court clothes from the odd piece of lace that hung. Of all this though only his eyes really remembered, clear and slated grey, they pierced the dirt and bruises on his face, and skewered every one he looked at.

Nazef didn't mess about bidding up, he allowed a couple of sensible bids for the slave to be raised, then he simply interrupted and bid high, hugely high. In gold. From the bag in his hand. Now.

There was consternation and a stunned falter in the bidding. No-one seemed to know what to do. A man in red, who had been making initial bids shouted. That this should not be allowed. To suspend the auction while he gained authority to bid further from his Master. The auctioneer shrugged and banged his mallet on wood.

"Watch him. He is Valtos Cesar, he works for '*Marshib*', he owns the market, and much else here. " Nazef said quietly to them both. To Blake the latter name twisted and sounded like 'Morcheeba'. He elected to use what came easily. To Brown, the name '*Marshib*' had a familiar feel, one from a youth listening to his own family chatter in a pigeon scattering of English and other languages from the east. Nazef nodded toward the shouting man, who appeared to have friends drifting into the crowd, and then walked up to pay the auctioneer.

A crowd of Cesar's 'associates' and sympathisers, mostly armed, had gathered about him as he protested and shouted. Brown noted a man was dispatched who hurried from the market square down one of the alleys - for reinforcements or permission to outbid perhaps.

Cesar demanded that the sale be halted so he might further bid, or that the clearly false bid from Nazef be thrown out. When that did not move Nazef or Blake he made threats, shouted, of the usual sort, about them never leaving the town alive, it would be the worse for them, that they would be sold as slaves when he, Valtos Cesar and his men saw to them. Blake waited patiently for Nazef to finish up and have Nazef's slave unchained. Cesar began to urge his followers and paid men to attack, while he held back. Blake, well used to such tactics calmly took out one of his pistols, cocked it and shot Cesar.

Valtos Cesar fell screaming like a cut pig, half of his shoulder a bloody pulped hole from Blake's ball. The crowd of armed lackeys about him hesitated and Blake shouted to them in Arabic that the next man to move would get a pistol ball in the face. He gestured for his two crewmen to get Parry Balter and Mary Baldwin away to the ship. Nazef walked his slave behind Blake and Brown as they faced off the confused crowd.

"Can the man run?" Blake asked Nazef.

They exchanged words unfamiliar to Blake and Brown. Nazef nodded

"For his life, yes." Agreed Nazef.

"Then do it *now*!" Snapped Blake as he and Brown backed through the stalls.


Nazef and his new slave ran down the alley that led to the wharfs some way off, while Blake and Brown backed towards the same alley mouth, trying to give the runners as much head start as they could. The crowd surged, and a bloody and groaning Cesar to his feet by his followers.

"Kill them!" Cesar croaked in Arabic "Kill them all!"

Blake pulled the trigger of his pistol pointed at the nearest man, turned and ran down the alley with Brown, pausing only to kick over a stall of loosely piled, generally spherical fruit to tumble treacherously behind them and before their pursuers....

As the market emptied of armed men running down alleys in pursuit of others, one woman stared incredulously after them, still chained.

Act 1 Scene 3 - Stand Off.

 anting after a long run through alleys to the docks Blake was last man to board the Kestrel. He ordered the swivel guns loaded and the Kestrel cast off and pushed away from the docks. There was barely a breeze, and nothing of an air in any direction they would wish to go. As the Kestrel settled some yards from the quay Blake looked about. There were ships of all shapes and sizes about the docks, many of unfamiliar build and few with any sort of flag for identification, although the Spanish galleon moored in the harbour was an easy spot.

"Well Captain? Swivels to clear the wharf?" Asked Brown.

Blake shook his head.

"They have ten yards of water to cross, wait and see what they do. First sign of trouble *then* the swivel guns clear the wharf..."

(To be continued....)