

Ill Met by Moon Light

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Sir Alistair Uttinfrer & Captain Richard Blake.

Dark , the moon was rather fuller than either man might have liked and the tide perhaps aggressive because of it. Huddled in the jolly boat's belly the ship's passenger was looking glum.

“You look like a vagabond,” said Captain Blake.

It was true. But if Sir Alistair was a fool for casting aside his disguise to reveal himself at often the slightly wrong moment then he had to be hidden away first. Such drab clothes (these the brown of Breton) would serve well enough. His destination was a Nunnery where a message waited not two miles inland and close to the Saint-Malo road, so Sir Alistair’s opposite would doubtless be searching for him even now and in that town. The jolly boat ground up the beach. Crewmen already in the water ran it up higher. Only then did the now disreputable figure of Sir Alistair Uttinfrer rise and jump to the shore. He did so hate France. Which was a perfectly acceptable attitude round here as so did the Bretons.

Once more he was without a sword as the handy thing was too noticeable and restricted his passing to mercenary gallowglass or ruffian, neither of which was likely to be welcome and both remembered. Sir Alistair rather liked swords, and he certainly liked the forms that were becoming so fashionable at Court. They just did not have any place in his hand when it came to killing.

A rag for a head scarf and a floppy hat, again brown, and he was a commoner – and one that would only be seen from afar. He said, “I will return by morning, Captain.”

Blake ran a hand about his jaw. He said, “You want us to leave if you do not appear?”

"No Captain, I want you to come and get me..." said Sir Alistair who now climbing the dunes concealed there a lantern to signal his return.

It was a bitterly cold night and Blake had therefore dressed for warmth, or, as he had earlier suggested, for skullduggery. It amused him to slip into France by rowing boat while the moon shone its pale light on the beach and the rising cliff tops that flanked the soft landing spot, home to nesting gulls and cormorants. His sailing ship, the Kestrel, was anchored a mile or so out to sea, flying innocent looking flags that could perhaps be mistaken for a Dutch trading vessel that had business in Breton in the morning, but did not wish to chance the treacherous coastal reefs by night. The beach was mostly shingle and crunched under the tread of his thick sea boots as he marched alongside the disguised form of Sir Alistair Uttinfrer. Disguises amused Richard Blake too. They were all so... dramatic.

"So, a nunnery?" He couldn't help but raised a curious and faintly suggestive eyebrow at his Lord Patron. "A more ribald man than myself might make much of that. A French nunnery too." Blake couldn't help but grin. "You know, I've never heard a French nun speak." He kept his thick woollen cloak wrapped securely about his body as they paced up through the shingle, not so much for warmth but because it was dark in colour and would make it harder for a passing peasant to spot him. Unlike Sir Alistair, Richard wore a sword harness containing his trusted Toledo steel, and a cross brace of pistols, kept hopefully dry under the wool. Richard had little time for Spain overall, but he trusted in the steel they forged. It was after all the best in the world.

They reached the sparse beach grass of the dunes where Alistair paused for a moment. Richard watched as he unloaded some items, including a lantern wrapped in oil skins.

"Breton is a big place, Sir Alistair. If you don't return in the morning you could, I suppose, be anywhere. Can I assume then that if the worst happens, you're most likely to be stuck in the nunnery. With..." he offered his patron a charming and whimsical smile once again, "all those nuns? That would be..." he paused for dramatic effect, "terrible. That's the last thing you'd want... to be stuck... in a nunnery... with lots of young French nuns."

It took a man of the city to think the night dark, when here and with the moon so bright Sir Alistair could see clear across the heath and to the field and road beyond. Trees made for an inkier gloom, blowing and noisily so but

like the sea they had crossed in waves. He was here to meet with a factor for the crown, one unlike he not disguised but as he seemed a priest. But a Breton and like every third village along this coast one that if he did not quite consider himself English here in 'little Britain' then certainly not French. It was risky this meeting, with Sir Alistair only so recently departed and doubtless then walking now across the very palm of that nasty little man they called La Fleur. Risky indeed or else he would not be here at all.

He walked quite openly and would have done so even at this hour for any that he spied likewise in their singles or wavering groups but the on the wind blew news of horses and so Sir Alistair ducked into those darker trees to stand and still and to watch as clattering by and with their eyes towards the coast came a band of ruffians, too well armed for innocence, too well mounted to be brigands and it all far too late for coincidence. Sir Alistair grinned, his heart beating, still and as unlikely as a ghost he watched as they departed.

It was a fine night and he had not far to go. To meet with a man that hated France and the Cardinal worse than he hated England.

"What do we do now, Cap'n?" asked Bos'n Matthews as he gazed up at the silhouette profile of the Breton cliffs.

"Ah, what do we do now... the eternal question of philosophers and wise men throughout the ages." Captain Richard Blake strolled back towards the water line where the small boat was safely beached against the incoming tide. If his timings were right, and his knowledge of the tides hereabouts was more than adequate, then the boat would be in position to receive the encroaching waves of the sea when Sir Alistair was due back. He clapped his hand on the Bos'n's shoulder. "Not much to do, lad. You'll find as the years go by that skullduggery is one part thrilling sword play and eight parts sitting around on a cold beach waiting for something to happen."

"Nine parts in total then, Cap'n?"

"No, ten actually." Blake rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The tenth part always seems to involve a woman of dubious integrity... but maybe that's just me."

"So, who's the passenger, Cap'n? The way you talked to him, he seemed important."

"Everyone's important in the eyes of the Lord, Matthews. Even you." It amused Richard to say things like that. "All you need to know is he'll be back early in the morning, if things work out right, and then we'll be on our way back to the Kestrel."

"And if things don't work out right, Cap'n?"

"Why, then that'll be the one part thrilling sword play I mentioned earlier." Blake turned round and waved his men over towards the boat. "Well, well, what do we have here." He reached down into the nets heaped in the stern. "A bottle of rather fine brandy if I'm not mistaken. And cups for all." He stacked the cups on the edge of the boat. "I'll have words with any man who gets drunk tonight, but otherwise, enjoy yourselves. But no noise. There's always at least one nosey fisherman who decides to take an early morning stroll well before dawn. Jackson..." Blake pointed to one of the men at random. "You take first watch up past the dunes."

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The door he pressed shut with his fingertips, the latch he lowered pressed to the door with his thumb. There was always a back entrance, and this a nunnery and the local Seigneur so generous to the little wives of Christ only the more so. In the dark of the passing night Sir Alistair negotiated the kitchens carefully to where ajar a further door and there without a fellow in a priest's cloak and hat. Sir Alistair tapped him upon one shoulder.

"Utti?" said the priest.

It was the name he habitually used with minions, the diminutive used by his late father and the servants during those long childhood visits to Mortlake. Sir Alistair whispered back and the priest turned. The factor not his was a bigger man than Sir Alistair had expected. He also wore a sword and though admirably restrained still had a little surprise about the eyes. They looked at one another for a moment. The priest twitched a look up the nearby stairs.

Both went for the sword.

Sir Alistair's hand closed over the miscreants but did not fight to keep it in the scabbard so much as jerked it harder free so that the man unbalanced and all of his thoughts to his sword, stumbled. Sir Alistair turned the wrist and down to run the fellow through with his own blade. The man squealing like a spoilt sister was pushed over to half free the sword with a bang before the

scream coughed to a gurgle as a dagger slipped about his throat. Alistair crept away taking the sword with him, but held down and away. This was closer work.

It was a trap and perhaps by now his entrance would have been secured. The horsemen that had passed were doubtless now scouring the shores. More closely and the noise could hardly have failed to be noticed. It was by all good tradition the time for a daring escape. Sir Alistair wondered if the enemy would have the good wit to take their chance to make one?

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An hour had gone by. Richard sat with his back to one of the dunes, watching the waves rise and swell, a cup of brandy cradled in one hand. His sword harness lay on a blanket close to his right hand. His pistols were loaded and primed and rested on the same blanket, wrapped neatly in seal skins to protect against the early morning sea mist. Close by, a couple of his men slept, while two others lingered over their cups, whispering to one another about brothels in Amsterdam and stories they had heard of the Americas.

“And every single man woman and child just vanished, or so they say. The entire colony at Roanoke just abandoned when John White returned. Gone, like ghosts in the night. And all that White found was the word ‘Croatoan’ carved into a tree as if by magic. The people... it was like the Devil himself had scooped them all up in the night and dragged them down to hell.” Arkwright shivered at the thought of the tale.

“Aye, I heard the news too.” Pilcher crossed himself quickly to ward off any evil that might be lingering close to the beach. “’tis a haunted and cursed place, no doubt. I’m a brave man, but I would not live there now. Not even if the Queen herself personally ordered me to.”

A scatter of pebbles and shingle prompted the men to silence, and Blake to touch the hilt of his sword.

“Cap’n.” it was Jackson, speaking softly but urgently as he returned from his watch near the cliff paths. “Horses. I can hear horses. Men riding along the cliffs.”

“One or two? Or many?”

“Half a dozen at least, Cap’n, as God’s my witness.” He crossed himself as he said that.

“Half a dozen men do not ride along the cliff paths at this time of night for no reason at all.” Blake raised himself up from the sand and brushed himself clean. “Rouse the men quietly and tell them to prepare arms but to lie low. The boat has tarpaulin over it, so unless the riders approach this inlet, they won’t see us. But if they’re specifically looking for an anchorage close to the nunnery...” he left the implication clear.

“God will protect us, won’t he, Cap’n?”

“Hmm? Oh, no doubt he will. As will Toledo steel and the surety of good English black powder.”

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Three of them and all soldiers, one with what looked to be a snaplock gun and probably from Norway, fickle but a stealthy enough weapon despite its weight for it had no match and therefore no glow. This one was protected by his peers, a swordsman and a more dangerous looking fellow with a boarding axe and poinard. Where their garments were shabby their boots, gloves and accoutrements were not and these men with scarves about their faces and moving like burglars were killers. Any soldier could be a murderer for a few coins and these for probably a few more, far from home as they were and speaking (whilst they rarely did) in good English.

The nunnery cleared they had each been stood by door or the only window wide enough even shuttered to admit a man. They worked for M. Frog because M. Frog paid in silver. Further they had left their last employer (a Flemish linen trader) after too much sour wine and bravado and a matter of a wife and a lesson being taught. They were English though spoke passable Breton and they did indeed consider themselves soldiers. If also thieves, murderers, looters, rapists and crimpers then as they had said, soldiers. So any soldier could be a murderer and for only a few coins, and though their coin had been silver they were already there and would have been for coins of wood.

They did not have a bad feeling about anything. They did not part to more quickly cover the house. They were soldiers and so any feelings they had were a nervous and alert anticipation. They were soldiers and so they had

come together on finding Harry dead. Harry had made it his business to overhear what M. Frog had planned, and Harry had told George Longton, Daniel Gill and Thomas Claybrook. Because they shared and because they had done for five years, and now some giddy molly had killed Harry. Which had not been M.Frog's plan at all. There had been a contract between one who wished 'Utti' to go away and one that wished that also, and away in his hands. But then M. Frog's plan had been for the four of them to take this Utti, alive if allowably battered and now that Harry had been killed that was no longer likely either. M. Frog was in for a night of disappointments.

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There were seven men, dressed in dark tunics and even darker cloaks to suit their dark purpose that night. They reined in their horses on the approach to the beach inlet, for they knew the lay of the land hereabouts and having already searched two of the four possible access points, it was now even odds that they would find a boat of some kind grounded on the shingle nearby.

Ballard commanded the men. He was a veteran of some brutal fighting in one of France's many internal squabbles against the forces of Protestant heresy. He had earned silver and several scars assaulting a couple of walled towns that had refused to kiss the hand of Papal supremacy. Now he worked for less obvious masters, but ones who were in their own way far more generous to an experienced soldier.

The dunes were an obstacle obscuring the lower ground of the shingle beach. Ballard motioned for two of his men to secure the horses, then, dismounted, he led his remaining mercenaries forward, sword drawn, while his men primed muskets ready for action. They were all hard men, battle tested, and would happily engage an enemy if he gave the command. By now the Englishman would find the jaws of the trap closing around him. All that was left was to cut off any means of escape from the coast.

Lying flat below the crest of the sand dunes, Captain Richard Blake watched the men approach. They appeared well armed and confident. They also knew precisely where they were going, and in just a couple of minutes they would overtake the dunes and from that raised point spot the tarpaulin shrouded shape of the beached boat.

"Well, Sir Alistair, your cloak and dagger work lacks the degree of secrecy you had hoped for," mused Richard as he quietly cocked first one pistol and

then the next. The flint wheels were well oiled and as quiet as he could possibly hope for under the circumstances. To the left and right, Richard's men lay low with boat hooks and cutlasses. They knew that they were only to attack once Richard made the initial move.

The approaching men were spread line abreast and walking cautiously, crouched low, with eight or so paces between each man. Richard estimated that he would be more or less in the middle between two of the men when they reached the dunes. Four paces apart from each man. Well, if he couldn't hit a body at that range with a pistol, there really was no point in carrying the bloody things.

The assailants grew more cautious still as they neared the crest of the ridge. Then, to Richard's amusement, the leader signaled for them to drop prone a couple of yards from the crest of the dunes, little suspecting that Richard and his men were already prone on the other side. They intended perhaps to crawl the remaining distance on their bellies and peer over the line of heaped sand to observe the beach below. From there they could rain shot down on their enemies. For the few seconds it took the Frenchmen to drop prone and arrange themselves, they were of course completely off guard. Richard sprang to his feet just as the men lowered themselves to the sand. With a grin he discharged the first pistol into a cloaked back to his right and then, turning quickly did the same with his second pistol to the left. He discarded both weapons as soon as he fired and ran forward, drawing his sword from its leather sheath. With a yell, his men came over the ridge as soon as they saw Richard clear the sand. They quickly closed on the startled soldiers with their edged weapons.

The Frenchmen were in no position to accurately aim their muskets in the face of the sudden attack. Richard kicked at the face of the nearest man as he made to rise again. The boot crunched hard against a nose, breaking it. What remained to be done now was little more than butchery at close quarters against men lying on their bellies in the sand.

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Her name she would not give and accursed of being Le Fleur's whore she reached for the sword she no longer had, disarmed by Thomas Claybrook who with his one good eye marking Sir Alistair waited like a good dog to be told what to fetch. Sir Alistair said, "You wait to take me bound and beaten,

you do this on his orders, and you dress Mme,” he pointed with Harry’s sword, “like a whore.”

“I dress? A ‘ore? I dress as a man, for in this world only it is the man that prosper. Is this how a ‘ore would dress, in your London?”

They did at the Poltroons. One indeed like Fat Henry. He shook his head at the irrelevancy of it all. He looked about but could see no further soldiers. He admired her confidence and noted the way even a ruffian like Claybrook had taken her sword with deference. Claybrook was clever. Left alone and rather of a sudden as he had picked at the Nunnery for signs of ‘Utti’ he had begged for quarter after only a scratch.

“Mme, if you will not tell me what I wish to know then I am very much afeared that I will need deliver you to one that will be more dedicated to its pursuit than I. The priest, where is he?”

She seemed to see no harm in that, “The ‘ouse of Pere Blache. He is dead, sadly. Le Fluer was...”

“Persuasive.”

“Oui,” she said. He admired her manner. Also the beauty although very French with her broad features, heavy eyes and lips. Her teeth were strangely white, a slight gap between the foremost.

Sir Alistair still holding the bridle indicated with only a slightly mocking apology that she should dismount, “Claybrook will I am afraid will ensure you do not run, nor stumble too greatly. We have a mile or two remaining to the shore and it would trouble me if he were forced to set hands upon you.”

“‘im? He works for Le Fleur!”

“Does I beetroot,” said the ruffian who knuckled his forehead to Sir Alistair before with a bow asking if the lady would be so kind as to move, and sharpish?

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There was little Richard could do about the two men guarding the horses. From a distance the appalled Frenchmen observed the short and bloody struggle. They saw their comrades being hacked at by boat hooks and cutlasses and, deciding that anything they did would be too little and too late

to turn the tide of battle, the men swiftly mounted the nearest horses and rode away.

It was over quickly, which was always for the best. There was no great pleasure to be gained from chopping and hacking at men on the ground. If there had been any cries of surrender, the Englishmen had barely noticed. Surprise was everything, and there had been no time to offer quarter.

“’tis dirty work we do today,” mused Richard as he knelt to wipe the blood from the blade of his sword. From the corner of his eye he could see his men already setting about the bodies in search of coins, trinkets or other valuables. Such was the way of the world, and if Richard wanted to retain the loyalty of men for whom life at times could be both cruel and dangerous, he had to permit them such rewards as was their right under the articles of war.

Nevertheless, he turned his face as Pilcher began to forcibly extract a golden tooth. “What a creature is man, for we take to the Devil’s work with such joyful abandon it seems.” He rose and watched as the two horses and their riders slipped cleanly away.

“Clear the beach. Drag the bodies into the sea and weight them down with stones.” Richard paced up past the dunes, and out towards the rough track that led a few miles inland towards the nunnery. It was too dark to see very far, even with the moon light. The presence of the horsemen suggested Sir Alistair might be in trouble, and yet it would be a while yet before he could safely be considered late. Perhaps the men did not know where Sir Alistair was. Perhaps they had simply intended to find his boat and wait for him to return. Perhaps. Richard scratched at the stubble on his chin and pondered the matter. It would do no good to act preemptively. If Sir Alistair was safe, he would expect the boat to be ready on his return. Without oarsmen waiting, Sir Alistair would be trapped on the beach. And yet if he was in trouble now, then no rendezvous would ever take place. And then there was the matter of the horsemen. They would be back with more men. The question was, would they be back before Sir Alistair returned?

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She stopped and when taken by the arm might have twisted free had not Claybrook raised a hand to slap her. Sir Alistair waved the blow if not the grip away. The sea was on the air, to nose and ear and a little higher the eye

too so that perhaps the reality of her plight now more clearly upon her she wished to speak.

"Well, Mme?"

"I wish not to go to your England."

Sir Alistair thought he spied movement on the further crest of the coastal track but watching there seemed nothing further. What might have been horsemen if they were there at all had come no closer. He said, "You understand of course that my life was threatened? I rather prize that, or at least prize it – and this night has not enriched me sufficient to meet such an amount. I was asked to come here..."

"...Then the villain is known to you! He that conspired with Le Fleur."

"Perhaps and deeper goes the stain than that, for I see here opportunity and even in this place of mirrors do not trust such a simple picture. It is hardly beyond all good sense to suppose that I was expected to escape and may then my vengeance not have been the purpose?"

"You think..."

"I suspect nothing of the sort. You wished to speak to me then, Mme..?"

"Rosier, Mademoiselle," she said. She flashed a sudden smile, her mouth a little big and the expression more savage because of it. "I will trade. You seek... the knowing of things?"

"I can learn all that, or another – at home."

"Bon, yes. But maybe what I have to say is also of more... the value is of, the now? Yes? Le Fleur is in," she began to translate but at Sir Alistair's impatient sword point simple said the French, "le Château Sacré de Mères." A sea fort, new on the old, a garrison but small as these things were. Two guns, it stood off the shore reached only by a causeway twice daily to deep water. And therein Le Fleur. But also the taxes, a treasure collected for three months and brought here from across half Breton. But two days before collection by harder hands. And all but three, four leagues away about the coast and to the north and east.

Sir Alistair said, "If true and if successful then indeed, that would see you escape and to whatever story you might concoct."

"I can believe that?"

"Mlle Rosier if you thought otherwise then we should not be speaking at all. I confess it seems doubtful for this also to be a trap. Why seek to see me escape only to capture me elsewhere? Unless..." he laughed. One could peel the carrot too much and still find carrot until and if one was not careful – no carrot at all. "A possibility, come – there is a pirate you will need to convince also. It is his ship, his crew and more pertinently - to his expertise."

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"Hmmm." Captain Richard Blake scratched his chin and gazed down at the body of a Frenchman floating freely in the rising tide, despite a pile of large pebbles heaped on his back. "You've never actually weighted a dead body down with stones before, have you, Pilcher?"

"No, Cap'n." He poured another handful of large pieces of shingle on to the body. Most of the stones slid into the water and sank.

"What do you normally do with dead bodies, Pilcher?"

"Nothing much, Cap'n. There's usually an alleyway or cut through somewhere close. Or if I'm near Bayswater there's a man I know with a pig farm who'll..."

"I get the picture." He shook his head. "Just drag the bodies in front of those rocks for now." Blake pointed to an area of the beach where the sand ran out. "Then get a shovel and cover them with sand. It'll do from a distance. Do you think you can you manage that, Pilcher?"

"Of course, Cap'n."

"Good man." Blake clapped the man on the shoulder and walked on. He had lost track of time. The rush of adrenaline from the fight and the subsequent and necessary search of the surrounding area had messed with his body clock. It would be light soon. Maybe an hour from now the first rays of dawn would appear over the horizon. But it was hard to tell.

He had two of his men covering the inland approach to the beach with loaded muskets taken from the dead Frenchmen. The sentries had two muskets a piece. The fire power was mostly symbolic as Richard's men were not trained shots at long range, preferring close hand to hand brawling on a wooden deck to anything else. To Richard's irritation, he had misplaced one

of his pistols. Searching around in the sand after the fight was concluded, he had located one of the weapons, but in the dim light the other one was nowhere to be seen. In daylight it might be obvious, or perhaps it was now covered in a thin layer of sand. Whatever, it meant he now only had the advantage of a single pistol shot if a second fight proved necessary.

The rising tide now lapped at the hull of the beached boat. Very soon, in ten minutes or so, it would float. Sir Alistair was indeed cutting it fine.

Sir Alistair wasn't alone when he returned. That the man was accompanied by a bravo who, if looks were anything to go by, was no stranger to rough work, didn't surprise Richard. He was though a bit taken aback by the woman who walked reluctantly in front of the bravo. Dressed in a rather masculine fashion, she was at pains to keep a step or two ahead of the bravo's ever present threat of a coercive push against the small of her back.

"Sir Alistair," said Richard once he was sure his men were out of earshot, prepping the small boat and pushing it into deeper water beyond the surf.

"Good to see you're safe. We had some company a couple of hours ago. I was therefore beginning to fear the worst for you." He met the group halfway and made a small but formal bow of greeting. To the woman he reached out gallantly and, taking her left hand, planted a small kiss upon the back of it.

"Captain Richard Blake, Mademoiselle. A pleasure." He smiled, looking every bit the dashing adventurer with his long dark ringlets of hair, flamboyant gold earrings and sea blue eyes, and then quickly turned back to face his patron. "I have two men on look out at the moment. The other three are preparing the boat. We can leave as soon as you like." Suddenly his boot struck something. With a genuinely happy smile Blake reached down and located his lost pistol. "Well now, that's a good omen, if I do say so myself. I thought I'd lost it."

The first rays of dawn broke over the horizon as Blake summoned his sentries back towards the beach. Already the hungry cormorants and gulls had stirred from their cliff top nests and were now circling high above the sea, intent on catching an early breakfast. Richard Blake's thoughts were also turning to food. A hot meal would be waiting for them on the Kestrel.

"You are Sir Alistair's pirate?" The woman regarded him with a challenging and somewhat haughty expression.

"I am Sir Alistair's man in this night's work, but pirate?" Blake shook his head. "I have a piece of paper signed by my Queen that states otherwise. May I offer you passage from the beach, Mademoiselle? It would not do for you to be standing here when the horsemen return, as I suspect they will very soon. I fear they are likely to be of an unsavoury and less than forgiving nature."

"They are, how you say, my countrymen. They will not harm me."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not..." Blake took a few steps towards a recently made pile of sand close to a bare rock outcrop. He kicked some of the sand away until a hand flopped out from where it had been hastily concealed. Marks on the fingers indicated where rings had been worn, but no longer. "You may find your involvement in this kind of thing hard to explain."

"Merde."

"Quite. Shall we..." Blake indicated the boat that bobbed with the flow of the tide. As they walked down to the shore line, Blake couldn't help but say to Bos'n Matthews, "what did I tell you, lad? One part thrilling swordplay, eight parts sitting around on a beach doing nothing, and one part always involves a woman of dubious integrity..." he winked while the French woman's attention was elsewhere. "As regular as clockwork."

They ate breakfast on the quarterdeck as the morning was pleasantly warm with the promise of clear skies and sunshine later in the day. Blake's cook had served up some fresh porridge, cheese, bread, and ale. Simple fare, but welcome after the night's cold work.

"Mademoiselle Rosier seeks to trade information for her freedom, Blake," said Sir Alistair as he drank his ale. "You may be interested in what she has to say."

"Oh?" Blake turned to regard the woman.

"I wish not to go to your England. It is filthy, and your food, it is vile. What you do to your vegetables, it is a sin."

Blake smiled as he toyed with the rim of his cup. "An Englishman's relationship with a humble turnip is his own affair, Mademoiselle, but do go on."

"Sir Alistair seeks a man: his name, Le Fleur. I have given him where he can be found. Le Château Sacré de Mères. In return, I want freedom. And..." she

turned now to make an extra demand of Sir Alistair, "pay me too. This is valuable information, non? Pay me." She held out a hand.

"I know the place, by name at least. A sea fort, linked to the mainland by a causeway, similar to Mont St- Michel in Normandy." Richard drew on his experience of the coast line in Breton.

"Ah, oui. That is the one."

"I have reason to find this man, Le Fleur," added Sir Alistair. "The information Mademoiselle Rosier has provided may be out of date in a few days time. Le Fleur rarely stays in one place too long."

"The fort is... well, a fort." Blake tapped his right temple with the fingers of his right hand. "It has two guns, I believe, facing out to the sea. Men guard the causeway approach."

"Hah! You are scared of the might of France, pirate."

"Mademoiselle, please. I'm thinking."

"The fort contains a treasure chest, Blake." Sir Alistair added this fact as an after thought. "Taxes collected over a period of three months and brought here from across half Breton. And all but three, four leagues away about the coast and to the north and east."

"Treasure?" Blake's face broke into a broad and welcoming smile. "Well now, why didn't you say so to begin with?"

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"It was fair interesting Captain," Sir Alistair had described the events of the night to the dashing Blake. Later and in the cabin put up for his use Sir Alistair had scrubbed away the worst of the night (a foible of his and all the worst after a bloodletting). Inspecting one hand he frowned at the stains under the nails. Dressed now in good hose and shirt, boots and tunic he felt only the loss of a truly interesting ruff to complete his repairs, so composed himself instead with an inspection of his blades. A gentleman had to carry a sword and (he frowned to the peg by the door) it did not do to go about with one's head uncovered.

If only the oaf that stood there would stop fidgeting.

"What disturbs you, Claybrook?"

"I don't have the price that the lady does, m'Lord."

Sir Alistair satisfied fixed his sword to its baldric. He left the plumes of his hat in their leather sheaths, the salt air was not good for the dash of things. He said, "You are a soldier, Claybrook?"

"Flanders, France of course. That pigsty out back of the Earl of Gloucester's. Not much there."

"Wales?"

"Like as not, m'Lord."

More recently though, "You worked for Le Fleur?"

He had and admitted it, the coin had been good and there had been the matter of a merchant's wife, "But he's a Frenchy, so..."

"I've no use for a soldier without his arms, Claybrook. I'll see what our Captain Blake can spare us from the lockers." Then, "I killed your friends, Claybrook."

He winced, "Aye."

"I do not like bad blood," said Sir Alistair.

"None here, m'Lord," it was true enough. They had come to kill or do worse to Sir Alistair. Claybrook was a soldier and therefore pragmatic in the shadow of the noose. He looked up with a little hope.

"There is a chance you can help us enter a certain fort. Let us then take this as a chance to prove our worth and," said Sir Alistair, "earn our share. Now from the chest, you will need the small jute sack and the box with the handle. The smaller of the pans, the spirit lamp and the larger of the bowls," the commoner jumped to it. Sir Alistair said, "Cuban beans and this outlawed by the puffy Ottomans! I will show you once how to toast and grind and apply, thereafter and I will expect none but the very best coffee."

Claybrook pathetically eager to please listened hard and worried at his big, lamb chop fingers.

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They drank dark, bitter coffee in the Master cabin of the Kestrel that afternoon. Blake had given some thought to the matter at hand of infiltrating

Le Château Sacré de Mères and, after consulting various charts and almanacs, had called for Sir Alistair, his newly employed oaf, and the Mademoiselle Rosier to join him below deck.

“A man could develop a taste for this, Sir Alistair,” said Richard as he sipped the coffee again. “What an ambitious age we live in that boasts such glorious innovations in the field of hot consumable beverages.” He had changed into a red linen shirt, fresh breeches of grey/black wool spun cloth and a dark leather waist coat tunic, left unbuttoned to the waist. “Now then, if we are going to venture into this French fort, we shall have to do so with a degree of subterfuge. It is primarily a military position, but attracts regular traffic from traders keen to sell their wares to the garrison. Our best option would be to enter the fort across the causeway in broad daylight, posing as honest market traders. While such a ruse will not give us access to the compound buildings, it would gain us access through the main gate and into the courtyard where we would be permitted to set up shop.”

“I have in mind a business venture selling fish. The Kestrel has a supply of deep sea fishing nets which my men are using at the moment to procure for us a reasonable stock. Cod, mackerel, gurney, herring and plaice shall be the order of the day. Fresh fish for hard working French bellies! Buy two, get one free! We’ll need a cart and horse of course, but that should be easy enough to obtain on the mainland. Our weapons will be hidden on the floor of the cart, covered by wet fish.”

“The cart is likely to be searched, Blake. A layer of fish will be poor concealment,” Sir Alistair pointed out reasonably.

“True, which is why we will nail a false floor made from planks a few inches above the actual floor of the cart, with our weapons and sundry equipment packed in straw to prevent them moving around. The layer of fish will cover the false floor. When we need our weapons, we will simply prise a couple of loose planks up. The biggest risk as I see it will be our accents. I speak reasonable French, but certainly not well enough to pass myself off as French at the gate. I suspect the same applies to you, Sir Alistair. Therefore...”

Richard turned to face the dark haired woman who sat on the only chair in the room with a semi-annoyed expression on her face. She had been stuck on the ship all day, and still Sir Alistair had not offered her a purse of coins for her trouble. “Mademoiselle Rosier... how would you like to own a thriving fish market business?”

“How you say in English, Nique ta mere.” She made a rude sign with a finger and proceeded to gaze out of the rear cabin window with a sultry pout.

“Charming. I have no idea how you ever gained entrance to a nunnery.”

Blake took a small purse and threw it in the air. Mademoiselle Rosier caught it in mid flight with practiced ease. She quickly prised the mouth of the purse open and checked its contents. “What do you say now? asked Blake.

“I say, I own fish business and take you to fort gates. And then I scream, Aide! These are English espions et pirates – arrest them quick! And then keep purse and be loyal to glorious France as you all suffer horrible on rack, may God have mercy on your souls.” Mademoiselle Rosier crossed her arms and stared at Blake. “But for second purse on return, twice as big as first, I maybe not deliver you to glorious French soldiers with white hot pokers when opportunity it present itself.”

“I admire your honesty.” Blake turned to his patron. “Sir Alistair?”

Sir Alistair Uttinfrer stood in the prow of the dragon as it slipped towards the weak and milk-fat prey. An oiled blade that opened the silk of a belly, the steam of a new wound in morning. They were wolves and they were sea ravens come with the gods to fall upon the womanly weaklings. He chewed the gristle of the battle hunger, he tasted the...

“...Sir Alistair?”

“Yes,” he blinked. He had bitten his lip. They were looking at him. He nodded but slowly and said nothing more, for wisdom was never wrong where it was silent. He loved the clean smells of the sea but there was something more about those of the shore. That salty rot, that ripeness in the air that in London and Bristol was swallowed by the rank shit and the bloating dead.

“Then Mlle, we are in accord,” said Captain Drake and to celebrate took another cup of the Cuban. Sir Alistair rather liked the privateer, appreciating his flair and seeing in him something of the stories his father and friends had told when in their cups. The old tales told as if they themselves were the heroes of their own sweeping sagas. His mother had despaired he remembered, always acting so proper – so regal, when Sir Alistair knew she had been young and favoured in the end-days of Old Harry’s court.

Sir Alistair smiled his sideways smile, the expression made cruel by the scar mostly hidden by the beard and moustaches he so carefully cultivated. They were talking about the price of fish now he heard, doubtless important and certainly he had noticed the crew setting about the ship with nets.

Soon then and they would like the wolves of the sea swoop down upon...

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“Je ne comprends pas, Monsieur. Je ne comprends pas.” The Frenchman wore a look of confusion in addition to his striped tunic, beret and string of onions. He leaned against a simple farm cart pulled by a single horse.

“Really?” Captain Richard Blake was feeling more than a little frustrated as he tried to tell the Frenchman that they wanted to buy his wagon. “Je veux acheter la chariot.” Still no sign of comprehension on the man's face. It seemed Richard was speaking a totally foreign language to the Frenchman; one that he didn't understand.

“Je ne comprends pas, Monsieur,” was the obstinate reply again. Sir Alistair, and his oaf, stood close by, dressed as simple market traders. The Mademoiselle Rosier was dressed in the long skirts of a French towns woman who might perhaps own a thriving fish business.

“Quel est la prix du chariot?” Richard tried again, asking now what the price of the cart might be.

“Je ne comprends pas, Monsieur! Vous ne parlez pas français.”

“I don't speak French? Of course I speak French! It's you that can't seem to understand...”

“It's le chariot, not la,” explained Mademoiselle Rosier. “And le prix du chariot, not la prix du chariot.”

“Oh for fuck's sake, what possible difference does that make?” Richard threw his hands in the air.

“Well, he cannot understand you if you say la chariot instead of le chariot.”

“He can't understand the entire sentence, just because I said la instead of le?”

"Well, no." Mademoiselle Rosier exchanged an understanding glance with the French peasant as if to say, these ignorant English, they think they can speak French, but...

"Is there a problem, Blake? Asked Sir Alistair. They should have been on their way by now, loading fish into the wagon and then making their way to the coastal fort.

"Only the pig-ignorance of French peasants who pretend they can't understand a word of what you say just because you've used the wrong article in front of a single word..."

The French peasant stood there, chewing a long stem of grass, one hand resting on the mane of his cart horse. He was prepared to stand there all day if necessary, with a puzzled expression on his face. Stupid English men. Blake stood back and sulked while Mademoiselle Rosier concluded the transaction with a smug grin on her face.

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The Breton in the apparel expected nodded as he and the woman (being highly paid to save herself from the cold torture of England) argued. There was Sir Alistair noticed a great deal of arm waving. He supposed it was because neither had been by his measure within reach of a wine glass for some time. A nation composed of many nations and most of them thieves, without a bottle of wine to occupy their hands the French fell back on self-abuse. He expected any moment now that the argument would descend to such horror, so interceded. "Enough," said Sir Alistair.

"Vous parlez français?" said Mlle Rosier.

"Peu probable," said Sir Alistair. "Le système semble être vraiment avare encore." He shrugged. "À peine, aucun je suis sorte de trouver mes pieds et de se demander si je dois investir dans mon oaf?"

"In English then," she said mollified to know and (with evident smugness) that so speaking her words would escape her captors comprehension. Her stare for Sir Alistair was rather flat he thought but Claybrook already learning an oaf's duties leered at her when Captain Blake looked away. For that fellow her look was softer, yet more calculating. It was the look of a French woman that knew the British would never triumph over any people who knew the gender of a table. She nodded at the peasant, "He agrees."

Blake's gaze snapped back. There was about the privateer a piratical expression. An impossibility of course as he had letters of marque from Gay Gloriana herself that said otherwise. And Sir Alistair should know as it was he that had seen such acquired and all to swell the nation's treasury. Though now, their own.

He plucked at the smock, his second disguise in a day. He smoothed his Mephistopheles beard. He walked and with Claybrook now pushing their handcart. The smell of fish was not overpowering, for they were fresh still and the cunning rogues welcome to them for the crew if typical of English stouts wanted meat, and meat alone. Sir Alistair who was rather fond of fish looked forward to the meal, hopefully and being hereabouts with a little of the pink and peppercorn sauce he had enjoyed when last in Breton. A tankard of ale perhaps (they did it here much as they did it at home). Sir Alistair liked Breton as much as he disliked France. It occurred then the master stroke of Blake's plan. As fish sellers they would at least smell French.

The coastal trail was easy with its double track running along the cliff top. Grasses speckled with buttercup and dandelion, a little lost wheat and a disturbed bee ran between the two tracks where the wheels of the hand cart squeaked at the day. It was a day for poets, but not for playwrights. Playwrights were nocturnal beasts and served best when beaten through Cheapside to the Mermaid where about pots of good barley ale and gruit, gentlemen would jeer them better about their task.

Ahead and the bold Captain paused as the trail turned and peaked. There then and doubtless le Château Sacré de Mères.

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From the causeway, Le Château Sacré de Mères looked a formidable sight. Built upon a solid bedrock of granite resting within a bay more than two hundred yards out to sea, the French fort commanded the tactical approach to the nearby harbour. Low stone walls were built with thickness in mind rather than height. Five squat, round tower turrets projected out at various angles facing the ocean and, within two of the towers, facing the approach to the Channel, heavy artillery guns were set on platforms, sighted to fire at any ship that chose to approach the harbour walls. While the tide was out the stone causeway was passable with carts, horses and indeed on foot.

Richard and his companions had mingled with a small convoy of merchant wagons as they rolled across the causeway. Mademoiselle Rosier had proved herself excellent at distracting the guards at the gate and drawing their attention away from the men who accompanied her. As expected, the guards had prodded the pile of fresh fish with long poles, but the rudimentary search had failed to spot the false bottom of the wagon cart. The weapons, rope, tackle and other equipment remained safely hidden in a bed of straw.

Once past the double gateway, they entered the main courtyard surrounded by low stone buildings. Here, merchants were already in the process of setting up their stalls for the day. The permanent garrison seemed to be in the region of two hundred bodies, of which maybe 40% were soldiers. All needed to be fed, clothed and entertained, hence the market environment that was encouraged twice a week.

“Come along, mes hommes forts, there is no time to waste.” Mademoiselle Rosier was quite enjoying the opportunity to boss Sir Alistair and his pirate around. Raising her voice so that she could easily be heard by the soldiers of the garrison, she made much of her role as the owner of a thriving fish market business. “Claude!” She addressed Richard, “Assemble la stalle du marché over there.” She pointed to an available space that happened to be close to the doors leading to some of the compound buildings. “And you, Pierre, you lazy clod,” she turned to face Sir Alistair “the fish must be unloaded! Quick, quick! To work! To work!” She clapped her hands together.

“No need to overdo things...” whispered Richard, but the Mademoiselle pretended not to hear.

(To Be Continued...)