

Skulls and Stripes

1776, Virginia

The foreign spy schemed from the tavern's back table, its rough, heavy wood hung with the veil of many years' shadow and smoke. Two men, pirates by dress and manner, sat across from him. "In essence, *messieurs*," he spoke in the muted words of such places, "You shall continue to hunt *l'Atlantique* and any spoils found within are respectfully yours to keep, less five percent."

"Then, *in essence*, mate," One of the two smiled, his words somewhat slurred with the ale. "You offer what we already got, less five percent."

The spy, who called himself Beaumarchais, waived away the barb as if chasing away the bad smell from the room, then pulled documents from inside his dark, cerulean coat and slid them across the table. "My good man, if you are captured now, you will be charged with piracy and swiftly executed. *Fini*. Conversely..."

The second pirate reluctantly took the paper and read slowly. "Is hereby granted the authority to subdue, seize, and take any armed or unarmed enemy vessel, public or private, which shall be found within these Atlantic waters, or elsewhere on the high seas, and such captured vessel, with her apparel, guns, and so on and such forth..." He glanced up. "You *want* us to be pirates?"

"Your 'Letter of Marque,' *mon ami*." Beaumarchais casually smoothed the dark scarf around his neck. "Your unique livelihood legalized with the stroke of this quill. You attack only my colleagues' enemy, and there will be no interference from the native law. In fact, safe harbor and supplies will now be made available to your crew in a dozen different ports up the coast. A greater chance of freedom to better challenge your particular talents. I need merely write your names atop."

"What about them guns?" the first pirate asked, his voice lowered even more beneath the crowd. "You said something about smuggling guns for extra."

Beaumarchais smiled. "Perhaps," he nodded. "In time."

"And what do we do with the ships when we catch 'em."

"You're pirates, *monsieur*. I'm sure you will think of something." Beaumarchais waved his hand again. "Burn them if you wish or keep them for yourselves. It matters not to the men I speak for." He leaned back in his chair into the darkness, and folded his hands to wait as the two men studied the paper for some time, and argued between themselves, their speech half filled with curses. "*Oui?*" he asked at last.

"Why not." The pirate tapped his colleague in the chest.

Beaumarchais bowed respectfully, dipped the quill, and proceeded to fill in the information at the top while the two men downed their ales and sneered at the rest of the room.

“There,” he said, putting aside the quill. “You have joined an extraordinary moment in history, *messieurs*.”

“How grand.” The first pirate wiped his mouth with the cuff of his sleeve and grabbed the paper from the table. “We’re done here, then? We’ve got huntin’ to get to, mate.” He elbowed his partner again and the two men staggered through the tavern and out the back door.

“*Morbleu*,” Beaumarchais swore and rubbed the back of his neck. If this were the best he could find, his cause was lost. The enemy would surely win.

He leaned sidewise, addressed the shadowed man who sat at the table adjacent to his own. The man who’d been eavesdropping throughout the conversation, the one he’d really been speaking to the whole time. “And what of you, *monsieur*?”

This man was olive skinned with sharp features and dark hair pulled into a short ponytail. Of Spanish descent, perhaps. There was a tattoo of a dragon or sea serpent on his right forearm, the sun-faded ink trailing up into his black cotton shirt. He sat alone, observing the room like an angry hawk, and turned his critical gaze on Beaumarchais. “And the guns?” the man asked quietly.

“Up from the Caribbean, *monsieur*. You would be paid for each shipment above and beyond the spoils you and your men harvest between.”

“And we are free to steal and kill as we see fit.”

“*Oui*.”

“I’ll have to talk to my crew first,” he said. “But if the money’s right, they may be amendable to the idea.” He stood up from the table, lean and angular, a cutlass hung at his side, a pistol at his waist. He fixed Beaumarchais with a final appraisal. “And who, exactly, are we pirating for, *monsieur*?”

Beaumarchais smiled. “These United States of America, of course.”



From the quarter deck of the *Klymene*, Captain Roarke watched their latest prize. The British merchant ship, a fifty foot sloop bound for the North with supplies for the redcoats, had been found and chosen thirty miles out. Fifteen men, perhaps. One swivel gun. Against his crew of a hundred and ten and twenty six working cannons. The *Klymene* had given chase for more than an hour as the guns were rolled out, the decks sanded, and the bulwarks taken down for the impending boarding. On opposite tacks, the two ships now closed along the lines of an enormous obtuse angle.

Roarke leaned against the deck’s rail with his arms crossed beneath the late afternoon sun. Only a matter of minutes, now. “Port your helm, Mr. Jones. Keep her as near the wind as she’ll lie.”

“Aye, Captain,” the steersman replied.

“Take in two reefs at the tops’ls!” Roarke called out, squinting at the men above. “Won’t be long, men!”

As he spoke, Hotchpotch, the ship's quartermaster, pounded up the steps towards him with his customary heavy stride. A large man, with long jowls and a short rust-tinted beard, he had several weathered pistols jammed into his belt. Roarke smiled, doubted the guns were even loaded. Even his men knew it would be another simple capture. Hotchpotch tossed something at him.

"What's this?" said Roarke.

"For when we 'oist our colors, Captain."

"We've already got a flag, mate." He nodded above to where the *Klymene's* notorious flag whipped behind the ocean's winds. It was black, per the custom of the vocation, and adorned with the side view of a flexed arm holding a cutlass. Small alternating suns and moons ran along the top of the flag, and matching skulls lined the bottom. "She's flown over this ship for two years now." He shook the flag open, holding it out. It was the same flag the colonies had lived under for his entire life, the red British ensign flag with the Union Jack in the left corner. Only someone had sewn white stripes across the red, six white stripes.

"It's the new colors, captain. General Washington designed it himself and 'is troops 'ave been marching under it all year."

"Washington, eh?" Roarke still watched the closing merchant ship, rechecked its line. "Starboard a point, Mr. Sullender."

"Aye, Captain."

"There's thirteen stripes now, see," Hotchpotch said, taking the flag back. "One for each colony."

"So, I gathered." He noticed several of the other crew members were listening and glanced at their own black flag again. "You seem fairly certain the Colonials will win this scuffle, old friend. Yet, your celebrated flag maker and his men were thrashed at Long Island and have since been completely chased out of New York. Do you really want their flag flying from our mast when the Redcoats finish the job?" He'd lifted his telescope to better see the other ship.

"One battle don't matter none. It's bound to 'appen, Captain. The King's a right tyrant, 'e is. And there ain't no way a little island can rule a whole continent. Just don't make no sense."

"Yes." Roarke smirked, "Mr. Paine suggested you'd think so."

"That the new cook's mate, Captain?"

"Never mind," he lowered his telescope and moved towards the gangway. "Stow that cursed flag and rouse the boarding teams. Mr. Reed!"

"Aye, Captain?"

"If you would be so kind, put a shot across her bow. The King's a tyrant, evidently, and it seems only fair we take his property."



Beaumarchais did not look well. The French spy's usual fuss and pallid color were particularly noticeable as he pushed past the other men and clambered at last aboard the *Klymene*. Below the ship's chains, several launch boats, just loaded with French muskets and powder the *Klymene* had carried up from the Caribbean, started again for the Virginian shore. Another successful run for the crew. Roarke'd been surprised at how well the men took to such work. Hotchpotch wasn't the only man on the crew stirred by the colonial effort, and it had been a surprisingly fruitful Fall in the cold northern Atlantic. Twenty boats captured in just three months. Three deliveries of armaments for the colonials. "*Monsieur* Beaumarchais," Roarke greeted the Frenchman amid the bustling crew.

"Forget the rest of the supplies," Beaumarchais gasped, straightening himself at the aft. "We must depart at once."

Roarke looked quickly about the harbor. Saw no suggestion of trouble. "Why?" he asked. The men had already begun loading another boat.

"We must speak privately." He moved to pull Roarke aside.

Roarke stayed his ground. "The money."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Beaumarchais shoved the bag into his hands. "Now, there is no time." The Frenchmen took off his black tricorne hat, caught his breath. "My personal delivery today is not by chance, *Monsieur*. I was to meet someone here. A colleague shortly destined for France, who has been captured. A principal American patriot."

"And we're to..."

"Pursue the Britons, naturally and liberate him. The *Klymene* is the fastest ship for a hundred miles, and the providence of the Great Maker has surely brought you here today for this reason."

Roarke shook his head. "That's not what we do, *Monsieur*." He tossed the bag of gold coins to Hotchpotch, who would allot it among the others later.

"But you must! This is an influential man in your war for independence. If he is taken to England, it will be humiliating, disastrous for the colonies' international reputation. Also, he will likely be hanged as a traitor!"

"Regardless, it is still not what we do. It's not *our* war for independence. And your request is absurd. How would we even find them? The Atlantic is wide, *monsieur*. Even you must be aware of that."

"They left only hours ago on an easterly wind. A frigate. A large and slow ship, for sure."

Roarke frowned. "A bloody man-o-war," he murmured.

"*Oui*," Beaumarchais admitted. "The *Temperance*."

"I know her. She's a two decker with fifty guns. It's a fool's errand, man. How much will you pay? No, never mind, it matters not."

"I have none to give you now. I am sure reward money would be collected --"

"I said it matters not."

The Frenchman's eyes had narrowed angrily. "He is also my friend, *Monsieur* Roarke."

“Then I offer my sincerest sympathy to you, sir,” said Roarke. “But that is all I will offer. I can not risk this crew for an ill-fated mission of mercy.”

“Isn’t that for your men to decide themselves? Is that not your code?”

Roarke’s first impulse was to throttle the raging Frenchman with the hilt of his cutlass, and his own anger surely showed, for the spy had taken a step back.

“Am I to presume, sir,” Beaumarchais said, straightening. “That you are no patriot, no admirer of the Maker’s cry for true democracy.”

Roarke sneered. “The same democracy that murdered Socrates and Christ? The democracy that Plato feared and your own Rousseau even now proclaims impossible? ‘So perfect a government is not for men.’ All men may be *created* equal, *Monsieur*, but they do not finish so. Democracy demands conditions too numerous and virtues too difficult for the whole. I shall never trust a mob.”

“Yet, sir, you trust your own men.”

Roarke spun away from the conversation, slammed his fist against the railing. “I presume you would continue to speak even after I cut out your tongue.” He turned back, touched the dagger at his hip. “I wonder...”

Beaumarchais had crossed his arms, and now rolled his eyes to the sky. “*Abruti.*”

“Hotchpotch!” Roarke gritted out.

“Captain?”

“Gather the men at the main deck, straight away. We have matters to discuss.”

In the space of mere minutes, it was decided. The first few hands rose immediately. The rest came more slowly, but spread gradually across the deck until Roarke could no longer see over them. One of the men, Skelly Brown for sure, had raised his gleaming hook into the air. Then, per the ship’s custom, they were all counted.



The pirate cannons fired as one, spitting fifteen globs of golden flame between the converging ships. Each gun had been loaded with chain shot, three cast iron balls linked by a length of chain, and the lethal rounds, aimed high, flung through the night and ripped through the *Temperance*’s rigging and sails. Spars and line snapped away as the broadside’s smoke lifted away on the low wind. One of the shots had crashed into the upper hull, the connected balls whipping through the bulwarks and smashing into the dark human shapes aligned topside. Screams of agony and shouted orders now filled the shadowed British warship. Musket fire leapt back across the sea between them.

Swivel guns, newly positioned along the *Klymene*’s rails and at her aft deck, exploded with a barrage of noise, pistol balls and scrap iron sputtering into those marines who’d rushed to the railing to fend off the expected boarding. Dubbed

'murderers' by most seaman, the swivel guns made short work of the marines, their forms dancing oddly before spilling across the gangplanks. Stinkpots of sulphur were lobbed between the two ships and detonated at the British ship's center decks. Their smoke rolled across the boat, spreading on the wind and the marines moved within the haze, shouting in confusion.

One of the *Temperance's* cannons suddenly exploded, then another. The thunderous boom shook the *Klymene's* timbers, a thirty-two pounder for sure. The first ball shredded into the back top of the pirate ship's hull, gutting away wood, splinters spraying in all directions.

Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the *Klymene* swung away again into the cover of night. More cannon fire now erupted from the British man-o-war, its men well trained and quickly organized at the gundecks. The blast caught the retreating vessel's aft and the poop deck burst apart, chunks of its railing and floorboard flinging over the quarterdeck like a hundred cannonballs. One of the mizzenmast spars plunged towards the deck, snapping lesser spars and cables as it fell. In the darkness, screams quickly filled the back of the ship and shouts of command roared over them as the black-flagged vessel continued its escape back into the darkness from which it had just sprung.

In its wake, within the shadows between the two rolling ships, the small launch was finally secured to the side of the *Temperance*. Several men moved within the small boat as it tossed on the waves, the first already out and climbing the British hull. Just moments before, they'd shoved off as the two sterns had met, drifting dangerously between their colliding hulls, to be passed by their speed as the two vessels moved forward, falling back quickly along the *Temperance's* hull. Just forward of the rudder, several boarding axes were now hacked into that thick lumber, the boat tied off and secure until the task was done.

Roarke drove another axe into the hull, and continued his slow climb up the side of the ship. The entire craft was shaking, its cannons unloading into the night after the retreating *Klymene*. His ears hummed with their deafening bellow and the wail of the winds. He felt dizzy. The ocean winds ripped at his fingers and his arms burned and trembled as he pulled himself up to the next brace. The cold Atlantic waves splashed over his legs again, threatened to drag him into the dark water below. He was quickly passed another axe and chopped it again into the wood above his head, the uneven improvised ladder working slowly towards the dim light glowing faintly above. The ship sat heavy in the water, the gallery's cabin window already within his sight. Soon, within his reach.

In the distance, the *Klymene* had pulled ahead of the British warship as planned, leading her blindly into the night, slowing just enough so that the British would continue their fruitless chase. Very few of the man-o-war's cannons could now target her and irregular cannon fire echoed in the night.

Roarke felt the other men approaching just behind and struggled ahead. Then his hands were upon the stern-gallery and he pulled himself over the ornate balustrade to the balcony. The cabin's window was flushed with lantern light within. That was

encouraging. Roarke waited for the other men to complete their own climb to join him, one by one, on the gallery's small deck. Beneath them, the large ship's rudder groaned and sputtered and the black ocean rolled in caps of grey spray, where their launch and one pilot bobbed in wait.

They were five men. Five against almost two hundred. If the prisoner was not being held just within, as the light promised, he'd likely be found in the captain's quarters, and they'd have to get past those two hundred. Cannon fire rumbled again just above them and the whole platform shook.

No words were spoken as the cutlasses and dirks were drawn from their belts. No pistols. Any killing would be quiet killing. One of the men had positioned himself to kick in the door, but Roarke delayed him with his hand. Reached for the handle himself and turned it. It was unlocked, and with a nod to his men, Roarke threw the door wide open.

The pirates rushed the room as they had boardings before. Expecting the worst, prepared to die in the next moment, blades lifted for their own killing blows, they flooded through the doorway and spread quickly across the room.

Roarke moved forward, hunched low, eyes skimming the cluttered quarters for any sign of movement. There was none. Except for the man resting comfortably in the only chair, the room proved quite empty.

The aged man appeared asleep, chin resting on his vested chest with a weather-worn copy of a book split across his broad stomach and held in place by his peacefully cupped hands. He breathed heavily, the round glasses perched at the very end of his nose quivering some with each exhale of a half-opened mouth. His hair hung loose down his neck, his large forehead glistening in the wobbling lantern light. Roarke peeked curiously at the book, *Three Comedies of Ben Johnson*, then tapped the man at his shoulder. "Mornin', sir," he tapped him again.

The man woke, eyed the room over his glasses. "Am I to gather, sir, you're the cause of all this commotion?" he said. His voice was rough and bottomless.

"Dr. Franklin?"

"That answer, young man, depends on what you plan on doing with the good doctor."

Roarke smiled. "Our intention is take him off this ship and, assuming our own is not yet at the bottom of the Atlantic, to escort him back to his United States at quickest haste with *Monsieur* Beaumarchais's warmest regards."

The older man leaned forward in the chair, caught the book in his hands. His eyes moved over the room, then looked over Roarke again. "Pirates, are you?"

"God willin'," Roarke replied.

Franklin nodded, chuckled. "Well, then, we may as well steal this book while we're at it." He handed the hardback to Roarke. "Captain Hopkins was kind enough to lend it to me but I only got to act four before the hullabaloo started above," he winked. "I'm just curious, and a bit anxious, to see how act five unfurls, forgive the pun."

"Understood." Roarke tucked the book into the back of his belt and stepped back while Franklin fought to his feet as the ship tilted again.

Then, the British marines burst into the room.

The first two were cut down before they even realized their prisoner was no longer alone. The cutlass was a grisly weapon and its trade splashed across the doorframe, the two guards crashing to the floor amid piercing shrieks.

Red jackets flooded into the room, five more men and calls went up the steps for more. Roarke pushed Franklin back into his chair and lunged at the closest target.

Musket fire rang out in the small room. Flame scorched his left arm, smoke now burning his eyes. A sword's blade lunged from the smoke, and he knocked it aside with his own cutlass. He felt movement behind him, saw a flash of red, and stabbed out with his dagger hand. The shape screamed, fell back into the blurred commotion.

The soldier in front of him, a man of about nineteen he suspected, squared off and brought his sword up to parry the pirate's first feint. The boy's eyes were wide, his arm trembling. Still, he swung his blade.

Roarke caught the swing with his parrying dagger, sliding the distinctive knife down the marine's blade into the handle. The hilt broke away as expected, shattered. Roarke intentionally opened himself up to a strike, dared the marine to use the spoiled blade. The man took the bait and when their swords crashed together, the marine's hand slid up the now-exposed shaft. He screamed, several fingers sliced off at the base of his hand. The sword fell from his hand and Roarke's cutlass sank deep before the lost blade had clanged to the floor. He pulled his sword back, the body spilling to his feet and turned to help the others.

Two of his men were down. The first lay shot and spilled over an overturned bench, one leg twisted awkwardly over its corner. The other wriggled against the far wall at the end of a marine's sword as the soldier struggled to free the blade. Roarke screamed, charged the scene, slashed the man down. Both bodies tumbled to the floor.

He kneeled, held his hand over the spurting wound. "Merkerson, I'm sorry. We never should have –"

The pirate pushed away his captain's hand, grinned at him with teeth clenched in pain. "The mates voted, Roarke. Liberty or death, ain't that so?"

"Merkerson..." Roarke felt a hand on his shoulder, turned. Two other men were already escorting Franklin out the door.

"Captain, we've already been here too long. They'll return soon enough and in force."

"You're right." He stood and left the now-dead Merkerson on the floor. Followed the others out the gallery door to the platform, where several grappling hooks and lines waited. Over the railing, the others already had Franklin halfway down the hull. Roarke rappelled the lines easily behind them, dropped with the others down onto the waiting dingy.

The lines were cut and tossed along the tossing waves, the dinghy quickly fell away from the *Temperance*. The oars dug into the heaving waves.

"I am solemnly saddened for your men," Franklin said from the stern sheets, arms bundled, his round face scrunched against the ocean's spray.

Roarke pulled the book from his back, handed it to the man. "I saw his *Bartholomew Fair* once," the pirate said.

Franklin nodded.

The *Temperance* had already vanished into the night, chasing after a ship that was no longer just ahead.

Against the dark horizon, the *Klymene* now appeared beside them. Its crew crowded along the railing, many bloodied, and already bandaged from the battle. They stood defiantly, together, and above them flew the ship's updated flag.

Red with white stripes. The colonial army's colors.

"You might say I'm just curious, and a bit anxious, to see how it all turns out," Roarke muttered.

"So we shall discover together, sir. So we shall together." Franklin had leaned forward to pat Roarke's knee.

"God willin'," the pirate said.

NOTES: When the colonies declared independence in 1776, the Continental Navy had only thirty ships to contest a British armada of just under three hundred warships. By issuing "Letters of Marque" to armed merchant ships, and known pirates, the colonial navy instantly added 1,500 ships and 15,000 guns to its fleet. By 1777, when Washington's army totaled about 11,000 men, another 11,000 were privateers at sea intercepting British shipping in the Atlantic and Caribbean. These men alone cost the King some 2,000 British ships, £18 million, and the capture of 12,000 men.

Pierre Beaumarchais was a French inventor, musician, politician, publisher and spy, but is best known for his dramatic works "The Barber of Séville" and "The Marriage of Figaro." During the early years of the American revolution, Beaumarchais worked with Franklin and others as a French agent charged with recruiting privateers and smuggling arms and supplies to the colonials prior to France's official alliance. His deliveries particularly helped win the battle of Saratoga, a key victory which made it easier for France to enter an alliance with the United States, which Franklin successfully gained in 1778. Though Franklin's ship to France was pursued by English cruisers several times during the long voyage, there is no official record that he was ever captured.

Long before the American or French revolutions, pirate crews were indeed remarkably democratic. The captain of each ship was typically determined by vote and he could be replaced by another vote at any time if the crew so wished. Even the choice of which ships to attack or which ports to head for, were regularly put to a general vote. The captain assumed absolute rule only when the ship was in battle.