



Chapter 3

Early next morning Alex was roughly awakened by Keg.

“Galley, now!” he spat. Alex didn’t argue, and hastily dressed, not even pausing to rub the sleep from his eyes. Keg waited until he had his boots on before he turned to leave. Alex followed.

The Narwhale was rocking quite heavily this morning. Alex could hear heavy rain splattering against the deck, whilst the sea buffeted it from bow to stern. It was a little difficult moving down the corridors, but he managed to report for duty in the galley without bumping into anyone or thing.

“Bout time” the halfling stated. “Stir this, and try not to burn it.”

It was porridge, but the little chef had added some extras. Alex could see raisins and there was a hint of something else that he couldn’t put a name to. As Alex stirred, the chef continued to work, checking

the contents of a second pot after examining something in the oven.

Pierre shook his head sadly when he saw that the porridge had begun to dry up, and had indeed burnt. "This won't do," he griped. "I'll have to get myself a new apprentice. Start dishing it out in the meantime."

The first shift of pirates made their way to the mess, drenched and eager for a hot meal. They weren't fussed about the singed bits, dropping spoonfuls of honey into the concoction and shovelling it into their mouths. Sure enough, by the time they had scooped it all down, Pierre had found himself another helper and was busily preparing another batch. Unwanted, Alex picked up a bowl and helped himself to a ladle or two, looked at it dubiously and decided honey would have to improve it so added that as well.

"So, what's at Sea Wolf Cove?" Alex asked, hesitatingly.

A few of the pirates looked at him. At the far end of the table, the man who had been handing out clothes yesterday answered. "A chance to hole up for a while at the best wet season safe haven ye can find. Drink, sell off some plunder..."

“Go wenching!” interrupted another. There were a few hearty chuckles.

“And play some Sand Brawl,” said a third. That got a quite a few grunts of approval.

“What's Sand Brawl?” Alex asked innocently.

Everybody at the table stopped eating. “You've never heard of Sand Brawl?”

Alex shook his head. The Pirate started again, speaking slowly as though he was stupid.

“Well, it's a game, like Feudball. You've heard of that, haven't you?” All the pirates looked at him really intently.

“What? The game that was invented to end a feud between rival clans, that's played on a large oval with eleven players a side, thirty minutes a half and you have to be a psychopathic madman to play it?”

Every person at the table just stared at him. “Hmph. Well, professor, Sand Brawl is a smaller version of the game. Only nine players a side and twenty minute halves, on the beach,” said the scar-faced pirate.

Alex nodded. “You still use a ball I take it?”

The pirates laughed uproariously. Some of them spurted lumps of porridge across the table. "Of course we do!" one of them managed.

"Although it tends to get forgotten sometimes," said another. This caused more laughter.

"What was your favourite team?" the large pirate with the metal arm asked. Alex hadn't even notice him enter the mess.

"The Brython Cavaliers," Alex replied.

It was an unfortunate response.

"Bunch of bleedin' do-gooders," grumbled one of the others. "I bet you'd like to test that arm of yours on 'em, eh Arnders?"

The metal-armed pirate nodded, flexing his claw. "What about a favourite player then?"

Alex had to reconsider his first answer for a moment. "Um, Gordon Tanner," he responded, with a great deal of uncertainty. He was surprised that the name drew a few nods of approval.

"A tough bastard," one of the crewmen said. "Remember that game we saw on the picture box at that tavern, where he broke that fielder's arm getting the ball off him, then ran in for the score?"

“Yeah,” agreed another. “He was brutal that day. Mind you, he was just as brutal off the pitch as well. Fifteen people wasn't it died in that fire he started?”

“Must've been a good toss with the old fire bomb that night!” Scarface added.

The pirates started laughing loudly again.

“You won't see him on the pitch again. I heard he was locked up for good!”

Alex scooped up the lukewarm remnants of his meal as the crewmen continued to laugh. Arnders tapped him on the shoulder just as he swallowed. “Come on, you're on the deck.” Alex dropped the spoon in the bowl and followed.

It was very windy indeed, and quite miserable. The rain seemed to be falling in three different directions at once, and the swell constantly crashed onto the deck. “Grab a line, start haulin'.” Alex obeyed and started pulling in time with the other crewmen, a fair few of whom, like Alex, were prisoners barely twenty-four hours ago. The sails had been fully reefed. A huge swell was running, the boat was riding it well, and everything was firmly secured on the deck. He also noticed that the crows nest was empty. It was no surprise in this weather.

“Okay, take over the watch,” Arnders ordered.

Alex nodded and changed positions with the crewman who generously handed over the sou'wester he was wearing, and a small telescope before hurrying down the hatch.

“You do that from up here!” yelled the man behind the wheel. He was dark-haired with a face that bore more than a resemblance to the captain's. It was scar free, something that was quite unusual aboard this ship.

Alex grabbed hold of a rope that the wheelman had tossed at him single handed. “Tie it round your waist. Don't want you flying overboard!”

“Who are you?” Alex asked, as he tied the rope and carefully made his way up the stairs

“The name's Marnix,” he shouted over the storm. “Half brother of the captain.”

“Alex,” the former prisoner replied. “I'm one of the new recruits.”

“What were you in for?”

“Fraud and theft,” Alex shouted back. “What are you doing aboard this ship?”

“I'm the ship's surgeon. I'm not really the piratical sort. The crew don't like me much.”

"So why are you still on board then?" Alex asked

"Mauritz was rebuilding his crew and asked me to join him. He had a great ship, the *Sea Stallion*. It was not only heavily armed with thirty cannons, but was also very sleek and fast. The problem was that it was not very manoeuvrable. To cut a long story short, it was cornered by a flotilla of Brython frigates about two years ago. Mauritz had to abandon the ship with what little crew were left, escaping through the jungle across the peninsula to a friendly port on the other side. Arnders was with him at the time. Lost his arm to gangrene, so it was either him, or the limb."

"Who created the arm?"

"Some mad doctor in the port. He had been booted out of his country for his unusual practices, but Mauritz and Arnders were mad enough to listen to him. Now, he's back in business, and reminding the Brythons and everybody else every chance he gets that he is still around, although the most wanted pirate round here now's 'Yellowbeard'. He's a Dwarf."

"I've heard of him," Alex said. "He caught a merchantman half-a-day out from Puerto Bella a few months ago."

“Had you heard of the dread pirate Mauritz before?”

“Before yesterday, can't say that I had.”

“Mauritz's argument exactly. He wants more people to be talking about him than some Dwarven renegade.”

“So what nationality are you? Marnix and Mauritz are unusual names.”

“Not to us Guildans. The mainland calls it the Nether Lands, or more politely Guilder. We're between Bourbon and the Imperial States on the Turquoise Sea. They call it 'Nether' mostly because most of our borders are marshland. We have a more attractive name for our country, but Guilder will do.

Most of the original crew are from there, renegades who travelled to the colonies for some excitement and adventure. Many of them have now become fish food, or rot in unmarked graves. Ours is a small country with big ambitions and has been at war with Brython on and off now for the last thirty years.

By the way, have a quick look behind you with the telescope. See anything?”

Alex slowly scanned the horizon behind him.

“Not a thing,” he announced.

“That won't make Mauritz too happy. José, that rather dashing Iberian he left in charge of the Vanguard, is his starting slinger. And a third of the Sand Brawl team is aboard that ship with him.”

“What's so important about Sand Brawl at Sea Wolf Cove?”

“It's a tournament that's been running for years. The cove's a little hide-away with a large beach where the lads will get out the pigskins and have a bit of fun. There's a large purse at stake, plus whatever the captains wager on the side. Mauritz takes it very seriously; he even keeps track of the player's stats in matches.”

“That is serious.”

“So, we have time, tell me what exactly did you do to get this far?”

Alex gave him an abbreviated version of events, which was interrupted by the occasional wave crashing into the stern.

“So you might say you've been a pirate for a while. You have been pillaging from the king,”

Marnix commented.

“You could say that,” Alex said. “Just that I chose a rather bloodless way of going about it.”

“And look where that got you?”

Alex reluctantly nodded in agreement.

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After two days, the storm had blown itself out.

Alex woke late, arriving in the mess just in time to get some dregs from the porridge pot then hastily seated himself next to Marnix. Mauritz rose. "Hopefully the storm hasn't blown us too far off course. With any luck we'll make it to Sea Wolf Cove in time for the tournament, but we'll need to work at it."

With that, people were allocated jobs and Alex was back to swabbing the deck. The captain went off with Pierre.

"Well," Alex mused as he cleaned off the salt dumped by the storm, "I'll be getting good at it sometime soon."

The lashings had been removed and the burgundy sails were all lifted overhead. With a stiff breeze behind them, the *Narwhale* raced along, chasing the white clouds in the calm blue sky and leaving a long white wake.

The ship was revelling in the conditions, propelled forward as if some ancient nautical god was carrying her. It was all new to Alex, and he paused for a time to enjoy the sensation.

Reluctantly he got back to work, and by late afternoon was just finishing up outside the captain's quarters when that grizzled buccaneer put his head out the door.

"Ah yes, my last minute recruit. The storm has made a right mess. Get in here and clean up."

Alex nodded and entered. The galley Halfling and the captain were busy talking over a large map spread out on a big old oak table. He heard the captain asking Pierre from time to time what was written on the map. That the captain apparently couldn't read came as a surprise to him, but he said nothing as he picked things up and put them back where he thought they should go. There were a lot of maps and quite a few books, which was strange for someone who couldn't read.

The captain's quarters were fitted out more ornately than the rest of the ship, with carvings in the well-polished timber work. His bed had sheets of what looked like silk. A couple of large chests were against

the rear bulkhead, but they were closed. Trinkets of silver and gold were obviously spoils from previous exploits.

"We're on the right course to make Deadman's Heads mid-tomorrow if the winds stay blowing sou' easterly. Thank you Pierre for your eyes once again."

"Don't mention it, Captain. I am more than willing to assist." With that, Pierre waddled out of the quarters. The captain continued to stare at the maps as Alex cleaned.

"Did you want me to mop in here, sir?" Alex enquired

"What? No, just continue what you are doing."

He nodded and started folding up the discarded clothes, neatly placing them on a chair. The captain grumbled something that Alex couldn't quite make out, peering intently at a map pushed up towards his nose. Alex stopped and said. "Is there something I can read for you?"

"You can read?" the captain asked.

"Yes. I'm also good with numbers. I was an accountant."

Mauritz's eyes lit up. "Well, I might have a use for you yet with our ledgers. Tell me, what's this figure here?"

Alex looked where he was pointing on the map. It was indicating the depth between some shoals and a small isle. The course was plotted through the middle. "Twenty-five," he replied.

"You finished on deck?"

"Yes," Alex replied. "Is there anything else?"

"You can either help Pierre in the kitchen, or Marnix in the infirmary."

Alex nodded and decided the infirmary was a safer place to be. He emptied the bucket over the side then stowed it away with the mop before heading down. The surgery wasn't hard to find, he simply followed the moans and found Marnix bent over a pirate, busily stitching a wound.

"Alex. Glad you could join us. Could you pass me the scissors?"

"Umm – sure." He stepped up to find the tools neatly arranged on a piece of cloth draped over the top of small wooden tray. He handed them over, handle first.

The patient groaned. Alex could see that Marnix was re-stitching a gash in the man's abdomen. "I tell them to ease off on the workload and take it easy. But they go and pop stitches all the time," Marnix explained. This pirate certainly looked like he wouldn't go anywhere quickly again. There was a pool of vomit on the floorboards and some colourless fluid was oozing out of the wound. Alex wondered whether Marnix had deliberately not used very much anaesthetic to get his point across. He picked up a rag and reluctantly cleaned up the mess, then assisted the medic with two other wounded men, one of whom barely looked alive.

"That was good timing. Y'know, I could use an assistant down here permanently."

"Certainly. If it's okay with the Cap'n. I think he wants me to check the books sometime."

"Well, that would put you in his good books. Pardon the pun."

Alex smiled. "It surprised me. I didn't realise pirates kept ledgers."

"Then you don't know much about pirates. Greed means keeping track of expenses. Particularly when the crew aren't to be completely trusted. Besides, a pirate crew is run much like a small company."

Everybody has a stake and everybody gets their share when the voyage is done."

"But he trusts you, doesn't he? Why don't you do them?"

Marnix laughed. "I'm a makeshift doctor, not an accountant, and I am quite poor at maths. There was a time when he did them himself, but he was partially blinded when a cannon misfired during that battle I mentioned before. He can see fine over long distances, but reading is quite hard for him now, and that frustrates him a lot."

"Why doesn't he wear glasses?"

Marnix smiled. "He doesn't want to appear weak in front of the crew. He has an image to maintain. That, and finding a glassmaker with the expertise needed who was prepared to create them for a known outlaw..."

"So, why would he ask me to check the books?"

Marnix quickly looked around the room to see the three casualties very much out of it. "Well, to be perfectly honest, I don't think he trusts our current book keeper."

"Is it Pierre?"

Marnix nodded. "He trusts him with the cooking, but he's not too certain about the books. When he asks, give them a good going over. It might even give him a little piece of mind. Ah, sounds like the dinner bell."

Alex listened. Sure enough, he could just make out the muffled ringing. "Well, I wonder what's on the menu tonight?"

Marnix laughed. "Probably fish. It's the only thing fresh around here."