



Chapter 4

The following morning saw all the crew cleaning up the ship. Their other flag was raised; a single red rose with large thorns on a dark blue background. The pirates polished their boots and wore their livery, and Marnix even managed to find Alex a linen shirt with a leather lace-up v-neck, buckskin pants and shin-high black boots. For once he didn't have to swab the deck, which pleased him no end, but he did have to assist Marnix as one of the casualties had died during the night. The body was wrapped in an old canvas sail and Alex sewed it up. Rather than dump him over the side Mauritz decided that he could be buried ashore, seeing they weren't that far away from their destination. "Gives us another reason to drink tonight!" he had said, the crew responded with a hearty cheer.

The winds had been kind, and the *Narwhale* was cruising close along the coast. Large cliffs, peppered with small caves, rose up on their left. The water was obviously still very deep before rising up suddenly to smash the waves upon the rocks at the foot of the precipice. From so close up, Alex could see sea birds perched on the cliff faces.

As they rounded a point, a narrow gap appeared between the high escarpments. Alex realised that it would probably not have been visible from offshore or from other directions. As they sailed through, with seabirds wheeling around them and the wind howling at the sheer walls of stone, Alex looked in amazement.

Inside the cliffs was a small bay, with a large, flat sandy beach, and a dense forest in a steep gully behind it. There were cliffs all around, with palms wherever they could find purchase. High on the escarpment on either side was a single, well camouflaged gun emplacement, manned, with cannons trained towards the gap. Once they recognised the flag the gunners let off a loud cheer, and Mauritz's crew responded in kind.

At one point in the cliff there was an enormous cave. Vines draped the entrance and nearby several other large sea-going vessels were at anchor.

"Welcome to Sea Wolf Cove," Marnix said.

"I can see why you would want to sail here. It's a brilliant hideaway."

"The cave branches off into several smaller areas," Marnix explained. "A few people live here permanently, but mostly we just use it as a supply base."

"Has any military vessel ever found this place?"

"Once, quite by accident. The guns came from that very vessel. It was a Brython troop ship, carrying men, arms and supplies for one of their garrisons. There were four crews ashore here that day, and, well, you can guess the rest. Since then we have had to stay alert, so there's always one crew here just in case."

The ship dropped anchor. The crew jumped to launch the longboats, drop the sails and prepare for going ashore

"No sign of the Vanguard," Marnix noted. "My brother will be most displeased". Sure enough, Mauritz bustled about behind them, huffing and appearing even more red in the face than normal . "We'd better help,"

Marnix advised, "or they won't give us room aboard." Alex nodded, and started helping to load one of the longboats. Soon it was over the side, and gently lowered into the water, and a handful of crewmen climbed down the rigging to get in. Alex found himself sitting beside the captain at the prow. Six of the pirates began to row. The odour of unwashed flesh washed over him from the closely packed crewmen. It had been a while since he had bathed he thought, and he wondered if at some point he could duck off for a quick dip.

The boat passed right inside the cavern and up beside a crude rocky wharf. Mauritz and Marnix climbed carefully out onto the rocks, with the medic taking a rope and securing it to a convenient stalagmite. Alex looked around as his eyes adjusted to the dimly lit surroundings. He saw that there were lots of small alcoves off the main cavern, many with torches flickering despite the daylight. Access to the higher ones were by were timber and rope ladders and the splattered guano indicated bats dwelled. The crew quickly unloaded the boat into an empty alcove and then headed further back into the cave where distant laughter beckoned from a wide tunnel.

It opened up into a large well-lit cavern. They were met by two of the widest humans Alex had ever seen. They stood only to Alex's shoulder, but were almost as wide as they were tall. They were clean shaven, hairless, and powerfully built. Each wore baggy pants and an unfastened waistcoat, through which their belly protruded. To Alex, they had the appearance of a pair of genie guards. Mauritz bowed slightly to each of them in turn before entering and they both nodded back. However, they ignored the remainder of the crew.

The tavern was very sparsely furnished indeed. Barrels were propped up on the wide bar, although there wasn't much choice on offer. Several barmaids tiredly served the tables, wearing tattered scant clothing and chains not dissimilar to what Alex had been wearing a few days ago. The patrons were a mixture of races. Some were clearly Iberian, some Tuscans, and even a few Brythons. There were dark skinned pirates, and rather hairy pirates with pointed teeth which Alex learnt that were from Nausica. They walked and talked like men, but had hair or fur all over their bodies. They didn't wear quite as much clothing, but made up for it with braided, dread-locked or decorated hair. Around their face was usually a thick mane. None of them wore

footwear of any kind, with both their hands and feet having thick pads like paws, and claws instead of nails. Their eyes were always a bright yellow, and uncannily staring no matter what the situation. Alex had met several before at Fort Saxon, but as a Pirate crew they were even more intimidating.

As Alex stared, Marnix commented "They're all half-castes. If they were true Nausican's there'd be war." The Tuscans and Iberians wore bright silk colours, polished leather boots and gaudy jewellery that made the crew of the Narwhale's seem dull in comparison.

Alex followed Marnix and some of the crew through the throng to a table which was two large barrels with a few wide planks nailed to the top of them. The seats were smaller barrels. Mauritz was talking to the bartender, a bald man in his sixties who sported a large white apron. Alex saw the glint of gold as it exchanged hands. A few moments later tankards of beer and a large tray of roasted chicken were brought to them by a pair of the captive waitresses. One, despite her make-up, looked every day of forty, was rather plain, and had a blank, expression on her face. The other woman was much younger, her blonde hair

badly unkempt and her left eye swollen. She looked sadly at Alex as she put down the tray, then turned and walked away, wincing as one of the crew smacked her hard on the backside.

After the meal, Alex leaned back against the rocky wall and listened to the conversation. Most of it seemed to centre around the tournament that was to take place the next day. He noticed that practically every pirate was armed, either with daggers, swords or, in the case of the Nausicans, axes. Mauritz was talking to a tall man with a blue felt hat and a long beard, who Alex presumed to be the captain of some other vessel. Without any provocation, Mauritz and the other captain snarled at each other. Both stood up, preparing to draw weapons, but were interrupted by the barman ringing a large bell.

“Welcome to Sea Wolf Cove gentlemen. To those who 'ave never been here before, I'm Barabbas, the publican of this hole. There are a few simple rules to abide by whilst ya here. There's to be no brawlin' inside the cavern, or ya answer to m'boys. If ya 'ave to brawl, save it for the game. Whilst ya 'ere all rivalries 'ave to be left outside. I don't care if ya blow each other to bits once ya leave the cove, but whilst ya 'ere, we're

all friends, 'cept when it comes time to play. And finally, if anyone reveals the location of this hideaway to any authorities, you'll be tracked down to the ends o' the earth, and suffer all kinds of torment before ye die. Now, tomorrow is the start of the Sand Brawl tourney. I'm takin' registration."

With that, he pulled a small chest from below the bar. It was gilded and ornate, and he opened it with a small key from his apron pocket. The tall captain with the felt hat walked up to the chest and upturned a small black pouch into it. Gold pieces tumbled out to clatter in the bottom of the chest, to a hearty cheer from his crew. Marnix was next. He said something to the publican before tipping in his gold. Barabbas nodded. Six more captains then took their turn add their contribution to the chest. Once the Nausican captain, the last of the bunch, had added his gold, Barabbas promptly shut and locked it. He then placed it in a small hole in the wall. A pair of hands from the other side grabbed it and took it out of sight.

"Right, the winner gets all that. Two groups of four, ya play each other once. The top of each group plays the final. Any problems, ya come see me, and ole Betsy here," he pulled out an old blunderbuss, which he

cocked for effect. "Right, there's plenty more ta eat, and plenty more ta drink. Freddy, a tune!"

An old accordion player in the far corner of the room started up a lively jig that half the room started singing. Two more servant girls brought more ale to the table, and Alex reluctantly took the tankard that was thrust towards him.

He could barely concentrate on any one conversation. Most of it was about previous games played here, women that they had, and fights that they had survived. Some of the revellers had started dicing, had lit up a smoky pipe or were playing cards. From time to time the serving girls were whisked away after coins had been handed to Barabbas. The young blonde seemed to be the most popular of the lot. He didn't want to think about what they would be doing out the back.

After three tankards of the rather strong yet bitter ale, Alex decided to call it a night. Marnix followed him out of the tavern. "Where do we sleep this off?" he asked as he stumbled back down the tunnel.

"Anywhere you want to. Most end up waking up in the pub tomorrow morning. Find yourself a nook and sleep in that."

Alex noticed that he wasn't the only one who had had enough for the night. A few of the lower nooks had been taken, their occupants snoring softly behind the wicker blinds. He could hear the bats flutter around above him, heading to the entrance now that it was dark. He decided to have a quick bathe. At the mouth of the main cave, he hastily undressed, and dived into the bay. The water was cool, and refreshing, and he felt better for it. He noticed in the dim torchlight that there was an unoccupied nook nearby, so he climbed out, shaking his hair like a dog, then put his clothes back on before climbing up the ladder to get to the bed. In it was an old feather mattress, a coarse grey blanket, and an earthenware jug of fresh water. Sipping from it, Alex took off his belt and lay down, facing the entrance. Within minutes, he was asleep.

★

★

★

Alex felt something prodding him.

He didn't want to wake up, as he was having a strange, but enjoyable dream where he was the member of a royal court, and was dining on fine foods with many dignitaries and their eligible daughters. He

turned to speak to one of them, a petite brunette with a tiny mole just above the upper lip on her left hand side.

“Wake up sleepy head!” she responded in a gruff voice.

Alex did, and found Marnix thrusting a steaming coffee at him. He rubbed his eyes, sat up and accepted the mug. “Did the *Vanguard* arrive?”

Marnix shook his head. “There's no sign of it, so I'd be staying clear of Mauritz for the time being.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Alex said, and gulped down some more coffee. “So, what happens if it doesn't arrive in time for the match?”

“Something that no team owner ever wants to do – forfeit. Mauritz should never have put José in charge of it, considering his importance to the side.”

“Any idea what's happened?”

“The lookouts reported that there was a big storm out to sea last night, perhaps that delayed them. Anyway, you can help Pierre with breakfast, then we'll go check the playing gear.”

Alex decided that the Halfling could wait a little longer while he enjoyed the rest of this coffee.

★

★

★

The Iberian team talked amongst themselves as Barabbas and the referee repeatedly looked at time pieces and the distant gap in the cliffs. Alex had just finished pumping air into the last of the half-deflated pigskins. Most of them had 'Property of the Narwhale' branded on them, whilst a few clearly belonged to other teams. The last one he popped into the sack was worn, with some of the stitching fraying a little. There were a couple of noticeable stains on it as well. Alex didn't need to think too hard as to what they were.

He was sitting in the shade of a gun pit which had four pieces trained on the gap. It had been reinforced with stone, sandbags, and timber, and was well hidden by the palm trees. Any enemy ship that sailed into the bay would no doubt be a permanent addition to the sea floor.

Marnix appeared with a clipboard and a couple of thick pencils. "You've done well this morning to stay clear of my brother," he said. "He's not in a good mood."

"So I can see," Alex said. "He could bore holes through masts with that stare. What do you want me to do?"

“Here’s the team sheet. Make note of tackles, passes, who scores, etc. and any observations you have on the opponents. Be sure to note injuries.”

“Do you get many in games?”

Marnix laughed. “Remind me to show you the crew files. There isn’t a player on the team who hasn’t been injured playing this game. Even a fatality here and there.”

Alex grimaced. “Just like Feudball eh?”

“Just like Feudball. With the balls, when one goes flying into the trees, or the water, just lob another one back on so that the game can keep going. Think you can handle all that?”

Alex nodded. He was curious to see a game in action, and for the first time since he was drafted into the crew he actually felt that he was being useful. Obviously they trusted him enough with the stats sheet – that had to stand for something.

Barrabas was examining his timepiece for what could have been the hundredth time this morning. The Iberian team looked rather professional in their billowing red and yellow shirts and pantaloons. They had obviously experienced combat, with a few pinkish recent scars, a broken nose or two, even one with a

patch across his left eye. The captain sported a gold tooth which gleamed every time he opened his mouth. He had a very fine goatee as well.

“Any sign?” bellowed Barrabas to a pirate halfway down the beach. He semaphored the inquiry to one perched in the crows nest of the nearest vessel, who then relayed it to a distant pair of lookouts perched high on the cliff top. Their message came back in the same fashion.

“None,” the pirate on the beach eventually responded.

Barrabas stepped towards Mauritz. “You know the rules as well as anyone. What will it be?”

Mauritz hawked and spat onto the sand. “We forfeit,” he muttered.

“So be it,” the tavern owner strode over to the Iberian team. There was an unenthusiastic cheer.

“I’m off to the tavern,” announced Mauritz. “Fetch me if that blasted vessel ever reaches the cove.”

★

★

★

Much to everyone's relief, the *Vanguard* arrived after the first game was completed. The reason for its delay was painfully obvious. The aft mast had been

shattered about halfway up. The jagged point was horribly blackened. Three of the prize crew had suffered injuries, the worst being the flamboyant José Garcia, who had a large splinter speared into the fleshy part between the middle two fingers on his right hand. Mauritz was not impressed. The injury wasn't too serious, but it would force him to miss the game. Alex assisted Marnix in treating and bandaging the wounds, then gave Pierre a hand making an early lunch for the newly arrived pirates.

After the meal, the *Vanguard's* team assembled and went over the game plan whilst the second match of the day was reaching it's conclusion. Then the team warmed up, with the reserve thrower tossing balls to the crew a dozen paces away. Down the far end of the beach the Nausican team was going through a similar process. Mauritz wandered off to the opposing captain. Words were exchanged, hands shaken and the dread captain returned to his crew.

“Well, because of the forfeit, our chances of takin' the prize has taken a tumble. So, I have made an extra wager,” Mauritz started.

“Just how big of a side bet?” Arnders enquired.

Mauritz cast a glance at the slightly damaged *Vanguard*. Arnders was not impressed.

“We shed quite a bit of blood to capture her, and you're offering her up as a bet?”

“Well, don't lose then,” the captain responded coldly, casting a withering stare at the lot of them. Alex grabbed the bag of footballs and the clipboard, and headed straight for the gun pit roof. He was glad that Marnix had spent some time pointing out which crewman was which. Arnders and Keg stood out like sore thumbs, but he had trouble putting names to some of the others. The Nausican players mostly had long, braided hair, and were covered with tufts of thick body hair, even on their faces. Most of them wore horned helmets, but few had shirts. They were all barefoot and quite stocky. The tallest player was as big as Arnders and had no body hair. Instead he bore a rather unusual tattoo which covered half his chest.

As the third game finished, a few men raked the sand of the pitch, covering the splashes of blood that had appeared here and there, and touched up the marks that indicated the sidelines, halfway and goal line. Barabbas gave it the once over, then signalled to the referee, a rather tall black man from one of the

other crews. The teams then walked onto the sandy oval, lining up opposite each other. The referee flipped a coin, Arnders won the toss and was given the ball. Alex noted it in the space provided on the sheet.

The start of the game was a little different from every Feudball match Alex'd ever watched. Players lined up against each other as normal, with a couple of players on the flanks, and one or two dropping back.

But when the whistle blew Arnders yelled out "Hit!" three times and the ball was pitched backwards from the line of scrimmage. The Nausican crew started chanting as the Narwhale front line, with the exception of Arnders, was floored in the first rush. However, the reserve slinger had caught the ball and sought protection behind a hulking brute called Hans, whom Marnix had said was Mauritz's personal bodyguard.

From then on, the game became more like a typical Feudball match. Players were felled on both sides, cheap shots were thrown, and some players were sneaking a quick kick into a prone body when the referee wasn't watching. Keg appeared to be enjoying himself, stiff-arming one of the Nausican players and knocking him out cold. Arnders was drawing a lot of attention, and had been floored on a couple of

occasions, but was getting straight back up to return the compliment to his attackers. His metal arm was swinging accurately and frequently, but the Nausicans kept on coming.

One of the Narwhale crewmen sneaked into the clear. The slinger hurled the ball towards him, but the pigskin was well off target and flew into the water.

“New ball!” the referee hollered, and Alex tossed one in before noting the miss beside the thrower's name. Players scrambled for the new ball. A Narwhale crewman that Alex only knew as Jeb collided head-on with a dread-locked Nausican player. Both hit the sand hard and did not get up. Marnix braved the ensuing skirmish to drag the unconscious crewmember off.

The Nausican team gained possession, and with a quick pass began to work it downfield. The small crowd was making quite a lot of noise, yelling out encouragement to both sides. The yells got louder when one of the smaller Nausicans managed to outflank the Narwhale defence and was practically in the clear.

Hans made a desperate lunge at the small, hairy man. It was a superb hit which had him staggering backwards and crashing heavily into the sand, the ball

rolling loose amongst the spectators. Someone obliged by kicking it back into play. After a frantic scuffle, a panting Keg won the ball and managed to break free of the ruckus. He handed it off to the slinger, who spied a team mate free down field. This time he got an arrow-like pass to the receiver, which was well caught and despite a late charge from a defender, he managed to stay upright and amble in for the opening score, spiking the ball into the soft sand in celebration.

“Now that's the way you play Sand Brawl!” a grizzled old pirate cheered, slapping a fellow spectator on the back so hard he nearly fell over.

In response to the score, the heavens drenched the players and spectators in a sudden downpour. Alex hastily emptied the sack and used it to cover his head, making sure that the stats sheet didn't get too wet. Below him the ball took on the qualities of a fish, slippery and elusive. A hairier, long bearded Nausican player finally managed to secure the ball under his arm and carefully made his way towards the Narwhale goal, with the tattooed player leading him. The pair were stoutly resisting any attempts to stop them, with one unfortunate member of the Narwhale team having his

nose flattened with a well-timed punch. Alex winced as the crewman hit the sand like a sack of potatoes.

The Nausicans, realising that the half was running out, made a mad dash across the sandy pitch to the line. With practically every other player either on the ground or trying to get to his feet, the runner only had to stay on his feet to score. His efforts were scuttled by a buried rock, and he fell heavily on the arm carrying the ball. There was an audible crack of a breaking bone, but the player didn't make a sound, seeing he had knocked himself out at the same time. The ball rolled clear, coming to stop across the hard sand in the *Narwhale* in goal area, and the referee then blew his whistle to signal the end of the half.

★

★

★

The downpour ceased during the break. Alex was relieved that not only had he been able to maintain the stats sheet, but he had been able to keep it relatively dry as well.

He became aware of the distant smell of roasting meat. As if in answer to his silent prayers, Marnix appeared carrying a rather large sandwich and a bottle.

“You read my mind,” Alex said, climbing down to grab the offering.

“I figured you might be needing a little food, seeing you've been stuck up here awhile.”

“Thanks,” Alex responded, taking a bite of the roast beef sandwich with had rather uneven slices of bread. “How bad are the injuries?”

“Well, that Nausican that took a tumble before half-time broke his arm, and there's another with cracked rib and a third who's been heavily concussed. We have two with cracked skulls that won't be returning for the second half. Not much I can do about those.”

“It could have been worse I suppose.”

“True, with the way these boys were playing, I'm surprised there hasn't been a fatality. Best be getting back to them.”

Alex took another bite out of the sandwich. The meat was a little tough, and salty, but he wasn't complaining. He was pleased that at least one of the crew was considerate enough to remember him. He finished it off, burped, then washed it all down with half a bottle of water. Then he realised he had some other need to take care of.

As he stood behind the gun emplacement, he noticed a rather weather-beaten telescope resting on a bench. Having pulled up his pants he picked it up and surveyed the surroundings with it.

He eventually settled his gaze on the *Narwhale*. It was indeed an impressive looking ship, and the large metal spike did give it a rather predatory presence. He slowly passed over it from stern to bow, stopping when he noticed Pierre emerging from a hatch near the main mast. He was carrying a large pot which looked like it was half-filled with water. The Halfling looked as if he hadn't a care in the world as he approached Mauritz's cabin, and with a quick look around entered it, shutting the door behind him.

“What could he be up to?” Alex pondered. A minute later the Halfling exited the captain's quarters, still carrying the pot. He stumbled briefly, tipping something shiny onto the deck, along with some water. He placed the pot on the deck and popped whatever it was back into the pot. Before he picked it back up, he opened up the next door, which Alex knew led to the cargo hold. Then he and the pot disappeared from view.

“Why would he go to the captain's quarters carrying a pot?” he wondered out loud. As the two teams and the supporters returned from the half time break, the Halfling re-emerged, strode to the railing and casually tossed the pot's contents over the side before descending back down to the cargo hold.

“Watch'ya looking at?” one of the pirate spectators asked him.

“Just thinking, that's an awfully big drop from the top of the cliffs,” he said, handing back the telescope.

“Yup, sure is,” the pirate concurred.

Alex climbed back up on the emplacement and started making notes for the second half.

The contest was just as fierce in the second half as it was in the first. Everyone was doing their level best to forcibly subdue the other side, and it wasn't long before both teams were reduced to below their starting strength. With fewer players on the field, gaps appeared in the defensive lines, and both teams tried to make use of them. But on every occasion, whoever was foolhardy enough to dash through the defensive line was met by a determined sweeper. Possession of the pigskin was traded often and usually at cost.

The Narwhale crew though were slowly getting on top, and had somehow managed to gain a numbers advantage on the pitch. Keg had broken free from the ruck and started rumbling towards the Nausican goal line. The reserve slinger had just wrestled the ball free from an opposing player that Hans had knocked into the sand, and had spotted his team-mate in the open.

But a Nausican spectator interrupted the play with a well aimed bottle, just as the slinger was about to toss the ball. It was a direct hit, striking the pirate right between the eyes, knocking him out cold. The ball flew backwards, well away from any of the Narwhale players. The Nausican player that Hans had knocked over earlier rose surprisingly fast, scampered over to the ball, grabbed it and ran as fast as his hairy legs could carry him into the goal area, where he stood, still covered in sand.

The Narwhale crew was furious. Fights quickly broke out between Mauritz's men and the Nausicans, with some of the neutral spectators randomly choosing a side and joining in. Mauritz was heavily involved, trading punches with the Nausican captain. Bottles and rocks flew about as well, with one striking the referee and knocking him out as he vainly tried to restore order.

Barabbas opened fire with his blunderbuss as his two burly sons smacked a few heads together. The sound of the heavy gun discharging caused a few to stop fighting. When he discharged it a second time the fighting stopped completely.

Mauritz had his fist raised to punch the Nausican captain, who in turn had pulled a dagger and was about to jam it into Mauritz's stomach. "Gentlemen! Please!" Barabbas yelled. The two captains lowered their arms and turned to face him, as did the rest of the crew and players.

"It was a dirty, low-down trick!" Mauritz cried.

"It wasn't any of my men," the opposing captain lied.

"I don't care what caused it," Barabbas started, carefully reloading his weapon, "but we have a game to finish."

"Now, what about him then?" Mauritz asked, pointing at the prone referee.

Barabbas looked at him as he was being dragged from the pitch. "I'll take his place. The score stands. When you're ready gentlemen."

The Nausicans were lifted by the fortunate turn of events. Their knocked-out players were returning to

the game, whereas the Narwhale crew were now down two of their own. The Nausicans made matters even worse by pre-empting the hike back and charging the Narwhale players. The extra players on the pitch skirted around the defence and charged at the unfortunate Narwhale player who had been tasked to take over the throwing duties. He was unceremoniously flattened, and the ball landed fortuitously into the arms of one of the Nausicans. With the defenders all held up, the Nausican ran it in for an easy score.

Mauritz was furious. He vigorously tried to rouse his unconscious players, and succeeded in getting two of them back onto their feet. This time the Narwhale players were ready and turned the tables on their opponents, allowing a player ample opportunity to re-gather the ball. They were trying hard to make up for the quick score, but time was running out for them. Arnders and Hans were working hard in a desperate attempt to get clear, but the Nausican team were keeping them occupied. Then Keg managed to break free from his marker and yelled for the ball.

The replacement Narwhale slinger saw him in the open, and let loose with a pass. It wasn't a particularly good one, but it was heading in the right

direction. However, the dread-locked Nausican suddenly picked off the pass and started running back down the other end with the ball. He was defying all attempts to stop him as well, stepping clear of tacklers and leaving hands grasping at thin air or sand. The slinger then charged at him and there was a clash of heads and both players went down.

But it was the shirtless dread-locked one who got back to his feet first. With the ball conveniently nearby, he picked it up and groggily strolled in for the final touchdown. Barabbas called time as the Nausican's celebrated their third score. Mauritz was furious and grumbled continuously. He kicked the sand in disgust, then wandered off in the direction of the ship.

Alex quietly recovered all the balls and put them back into the sack. Then he decided he was going to make himself as scarce as possible for the remainder of the day.