



## Chapter 5

The captain was in a foul mood and it was spreading through the crew like the plague.

Without any fanfare or ceremony, Mauritz handed over the *Vanguard* to the ecstatic Nausicans. He told Barabbas that he wasn't staying to play the final match, since there was no way his side could win the group, and the crew was put to work readying the ship.

Alex was recruited by Marnix to load the supplies and he was quite relieved to be kept busy and away from most of the angry crew.

The last of the supplies were hauled aboard a longboat while another game was still in progress on the beach. Marnix said goodbye to the island's unofficial master, and the crew started rowing back to the *Narwhale*. Alex found himself with an oar, and drew

a few scowls when he bumped oars a few times before finding rhythm. The short trip to the vessel dragged on insufferably, and Alex was quite relieved when the longboat finally drew alongside. Alex scaled the rope ladder with far more ease than his previous attempts, and once he hit the deck he grabbed a barrel of something and rolled it over to the hold's trapdoor. He was bumped and pushed around by some of the surly crew but managed to get it down to the hold, despite his lack of efficiency compared to the practiced actions of the regular pirate crew.

With all of the provisions on board, Mauritz ordered the crew to assemble on deck. "We've been beaten by an inferior team. Rum rations'll be suspended until further notice for this humiliation. Rather than suffer the gloatin' of the fools who beat us, we'll head out for some plunder to recoup our losses. Any tardiness'll be dealt with severely. Haul anchor!"

A longboat of pirates towed the *Narwhale* towards the open sea, seeing there was no breeze to be had, and the ship slowly inched her way forward. When they passed through the gap, a breeze picked up, and the longboat hauled in the tow rope and headed back towards the beach. The long oars were

pulled in, and the *Narwhale* slipped out into the open seas.

Mauritz, Arnders and José disappeared into the captain's cabin. Alex, determined to stay out of the way, stood at the rail looking back towards Sea Wolf Cove. It was morose thinking, but he couldn't help wondering about the ladies and whether they would be helped.

"The cap'n wants to see you," Arnders grunted, breaking into his thoughts.

Alex found Mauritz leaning over the map in his quarters. There was a rather large and wide ledger book on the table.

"You wanted to see me?" Alex asked.

The captain turned around and nodded. "I've lost twenty thousand gold crowns and a boat in a Sand Brawl tournament where we came last. It cost us quite a few men to get that plunder," he grumbled. "Check the books. I want every figure cross checked and I don't want to see you loafin' off anywhere 'til it's done. Understand?"

Alex nodded. Mauritz then grabbed his hat and stomped out of the cabin.

He found some parchment in one of the desk's drawers, sharpened a few worn pencils with a small knife and set to work.

The ledger was more than just sets of numbers; there were notes as to which settlements had been raided, ships that had been plundered, and when the deeds were carried out. There were sections for cargo acquired and sold, another for ransoms demanded and when they were delivered, and monies for ships that had been sold after capture. There were even small sections for what Alex assumed were bribes that had been paid to the *Narwhale* to dissuade them from attacking, as well as for caches of treasure that had been unearthed.

He found it interesting to see how much each member of the crew was entitled to. Marnix had indeed been right, that the *Narwhale* was more like a small company than a pirate crew. At the top of the list were the names of three businessmen who were Mauritz's backers. Then came the captain. Arnders and Marnix were next, then José, followed by the other senior crewmen and then the rest. He found his name towards the bottom of the list, along with the date of his "incorporation" into the crew.

It was about as interesting as Alex's line of work could get. He soon saw a clear picture emerging. They had been careful to note all the things taken and how much was paid for the items of value when they were sold but it appeared that the income, the outgoing expenses and profit were not adding up, but were superficially appearing to be. The numbers pointed to the losses happening every time the ship was at a friendly port.

The door suddenly flew open. "You're still here!" the captain bellowed, red faced and breathing hard.

"You, you asked me to work on this until it was done," Alex replied hesitatingly.

"I don't care what I said! Get out!"

Alex didn't want to argue. He left as quickly as he could, taking his working parchments with him. Night had fallen, and the *Narwhale* was making good time with a strong breeze. The armoured prow was surging through the light swell, with the wake foaming behind. Arnders was steering so Alex gave him a wide berth and headed below to the mess.

Pierre was busy in the galley with his latest assistant. Alex ignored the grumbling in his stomach and sat at the table, taking the chance to examine his

figures further. There was money leaking out of the system, and it had been doing so for some time, but he couldn't figure out where it was. There was some kind of curtain at work here with the numbers, masking where the loss was.

Before he knew it, Alex was disturbed by some of the crew arriving for the evening meal. They were noisily discussing something else when they saw Alex's parchment spread on the table.

"Well lookie what we have here," said a pirate Alex knew as Lug. "Our new chum's turnin' the mess into a library." The remark drew a few sniggers.

"Mauritz's orders. I'm looking over the ledgers to check the sums."

"We aren't interested in sums. What kind of man are you to be interested in that?"

"A sensible one. Maybe you would be interested if you knew someone was stealing from you right under your noses."

There was a clatter of cooking utensils from the kitchen. The pirates gasped, drawing in air noisily as they suddenly took a more serious interest in Alex's work.

"Who?" Lug asked, giving him the eye.

"I don't know. But they're skimming the proceeds that you lot... acquired. That means less for the rest of you."

"Someone's nickin' our gold?" one of the other crewmen asked.

"We can find out who!" said another.

"And they will wake up with a long red smile, on their neck." With that, Lug emphasised his point by making a throat slitting motion. "It could be someone close to the cap'n, someone he wouldn't suspect." Lug went on, stirring up murmurs of support amongst the others. "Maybe his right hand man."

There was a loud creak of floorboards, and Lug and his cronies turned to see Arnders enter the mess. "What?" he hissed, still barely able to control his temper.

"Our gold!" Lug replied. "What are you doin' with it?" and with that, he took a swing toward the first mate.

"Hold on!" Keg yelled, intercepting the punch.

"You too?" Another of Lug's offsideers muttered, lunging for Keg. His punch connected, but it only succeeded in angering the big man, and he retaliated with a vicious head butt, which dropped the assailant. Lug tackled Arnders and the pair were soon on the

floor, with furniture being knocked aside. Keg surged towards the rest of the group as Alex hastily scooped up his work, and made for the sick bay.

"What's happening?" Marnix asked.

"A fight in the mess," Alex replied, as he stashed his paperwork in one of the drawers of Marnix's desk. The doctor grabbed a medical bag and hastily left the room. The pair arrived to see the situation under control, and Mauritz in full roar.

"What in the blazes do you think you're doing? I'll have no such behaviour on my ship!"

Lug managed "But he's nickin' our gold!" pointing at Arnders.

"Who was the devil who put that stupid idea in your thick skull?"

"He did!" Lug said, pointing at Alex, who winced.

"I think someone is skimming the money from your account," Alex explained.

"And that person is my first mate?" The captain looked incredulous.

"I don't think so sir," Alex sheepishly replied.

"So what's all this about?"

"Well, someone is taking money. I was checking my work from today in the mess and Lug asked me



what I was doing." As he explained, Pierre and his apprentice began to clear up the mess.

"Didn't it occur to you that this was a private matter?" the captain roared. "Why didn't you choose somewhere away from the crew?" Mauritz's face was changing to a brighter shade of red as he bellowed. Alex tried to answer that question, and realised that he couldn't.

"So you started this brawl then?" Mauritz continued when he didn't respond.

"No sir," he meekly answered.

"That's it! Rum rations cancelled! You can all have water with your dinner! You, on deck, now!"

With that, he turned on his heel and climbed up the ladder. Alex followed in trepidation. On deck, the wind had picked up and Alex could just see José at the helm through the gloom. The captain began yelling, but not primarily to shout over the noise of the sea and the wind.

"I have me crew brawlin' all because ye couldn't keep your trap shut. If there's important things for the crew to know, I'll be the one to tell 'em. I have a right mind to have you finishing the trip in the crow's nest!" Marnix threatened.

Alex said nothing.

"So now I've my men on a headhunt until someone is blamed for it. You better find me the culprit by tomorrow, or you'll be over the side." And with that, he stormed off to his quarters.

Alex found dinner in full swing. There was no spare bowl, so he made his way into the galley. Pierre was furious over something and turned on him so Alex grabbed a bowl and retreated to the mess where Marnix seemed to be copping a few filthy stares.

"Quite a hornets nest you've stirred," he noted casually, when Alex sat beside him.

"Mmm hmm," Alex managed through a mouthful of stew.

"It would appear I'm next in line on the suspect list. I might sleep in the infirmary tonight," Marnix murmured. "Perhaps it'd be wise if you did too."

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Breakfast the next morning was a solemn affair. Most of the diners, Pierre included, were still giving Alex dark looks. After a hasty meal, he returned to the infirmary to recover his notes. He was disappointed but

not surprised to find them gone. Rather than waste time searching, he decided to head straight back to the captain's cabin.

Mauritz let him in without a word. The missing notes were annoying but he still knew where the discrepancies in the numbers were and it didn't take long to recreate the list.

Time passed. He hadn't even noticed the captain departing.

The ship was rolling heavily and the rain beat against the porthole. He lit the lantern as the gloom in the cabin deepened. With increased interest, he poured over the figures. With the swinging lantern shadows, the numbers appeared to be dancing.

Then finally it became clearer.

The only area that appeared to dodge the numbers were the food and alcohol expenses. While some outlay for the ship's provisioning was to be expected, he found several streams of account money that wound up covering the same charge. The food, the rum and 'special items' were double charged, and sometimes were even accounted for three times in differing sections. It had been well hidden behind a swirl of authentic looking book keeping. Alex had more than

a hunch about who it was who was behind the rubbery figures. Someone with good cooking skills, given that he had cooked the books as well.

Alex had been so busy with rechecking his work that he'd forgotten lunch. He rose tiredly, heading for the door when it nearly struck him as it flew open.

Mauritz bellowed. "Well, who is it?"

"The figures point to whoever has been purchasing rations, sir," he replied.

"You're sayin' that Pierre' is incriminating himself by his own book-keeping? Are you certain?"

Alex nodded. "Also, during half time in the Sand Brawl match, I saw him enter your cabin. He left with something bright and shiny."

"Do you have the eyes of a hawk then?"

"No, but I did have the use of a telescope."

Mauritz was turning red in the face again. "And you're prepared to stake your life on it?"

"Absolutely. If I'm wrong, I'll be cast over the side. But I'm not..."

The captain nodded. "Well then, let's get this unpleasant business over and done with right now!"

Alex followed him out of the cabin as he grabbed Arnders, then Hans, then Marnix. They headed straight

to the galley, where Pierre was preparing for the evening meal.

"Search the galley, and Pierre's cabin. If there's anything stashed anywhere I want it found. Either way we'll have someone's guts for garters tonight,"

"Can't you see I've got dinner on?" Pierre exclaimed.

"I've want a word with you," the captain spat. "Now!"

"I think I've got something else to do," Pierre's kitchen hand replied, and ducked out.

Arnders didn't waste any time. He went straight for the cupboards and started pulling things out onto the floor. Marnix was tapping the sides of the fixtures. At first, Alex wasn't sure why, until Marnix asked Arnders to rip one off the wall.

He obliged. There was a cavity behind it, but there was nothing in it.

Arnders had finished with the cupboard and moved into the store. The galley looked like a typhoon had run its course through it. Marnix looked over to Alex and shrugged, then ducked out into the back room. Alex started to pick up the mess, putting items back

where they came from. Although some he couldn't because they were in pieces.

Arnders came storming out after about ten minutes of charging through the stores.

"You!" He pointed at Alex, who was kneeling over to pick up a rolling pin off the floor. "There is nothing in here! You have accused the wrong man!" Arnders was furious. He stood taller than Alex by almost a foot, and that wasn't when Alex was squatting on the floor.

"Tell me Arnders - where does Pierre put the empty barrels and crates?" Marnix spoke up from the pantry.

"The hold," Hans said.

"I think I'll have a look. Are you coming?"

Arnders nodded. "You're coming with me." He picked Alex up by the shoulder using his prosthetic limb, with no apparent effort at all, and hauled him out.

The four of them went to the hatch, and several pirates' eyebrows were raised at the bizarre procession. The grip on his shoulder was painful, he could only imagine what the crew was thinking. Hans lit a lantern and descended into the hold, with Marnix close behind him. Arnders waited until they had reached the bottom,

then roughly shoved him down the ladder. Alex bounced off the wall, and nearly cried out as the wood refused to yield, then fell ungraciously onto the floor, face first. He gingerly got up, touching his face, and winced when he realized that his nose had been broken. His jaw throbbed as well, but he tried not to show that the pain was excruciating.

"He tripped," Arnders said when Marnix turned to see what was happening.

The surgeon looked first at Arnders, then at Alex, then shook his head.

"Well, here's some empty rum barrels," Marnix noted, returning to the matter at hand.

Arnders struck one with his metal arm, shattering it. It was empty.

"Don't do that! What'll we refill when we get to port? These get reused you know!" Marnix exclaimed.

Arnders huffed in response. "Then how are we gonna know which ones are empty?"

"By weight. Pick them up."

Arnders groaned. "Hans!"

Hans obeyed. He effortlessly picked up the first four, shaking his head as they obviously containing nothing.

The fifth one resisted. "This one's not empty," he muttered.

Arnders came over, and barely got it off the ground. Then he flexed his metal arm and pried open the lid.

"Well I'll be damned," Arnders exclaimed. "Fetch Mauritz." Hans hurried up to the deck.

"You're lucky, you weak fool," Arnders growled, and started checking the other barrels. Marnix carefully dabbed up the blood off Alex's face while he winced.

"It's could be broken," Marnix muttered. "I'll strap it once we're out of here."

By the time Hans returned with the captain, the rest of the hold had been searched.

The captain could see the glow from the hatch. He rushed over to look at the plunder. "That thieving little runt! That candlestick's from my cabin! So is that! That's the necklace from my side drawer from when we raided St. Mariah's!"

"There must be about thirty thousand in crowns in this barrel alone," Marnix added.

"I'm going to string this lying half-a-man up! Hans, Arnders - follow me!" He stormed up out of the hold without a word of thanks.



Marnix looked over to Alex, who was still drooling a mix of saliva and blood. "Let's get you to the infirmary."

Alex wholeheartedly agreed.