



Chapter 6

Alex woke up with a start.

He had been dreaming again. His mind had replayed the incident in the cargo hold, and he sat bolt upright when his head hit the floor. He felt his head to find that his jaw had been thoroughly bandaged, the right side of his face was still numb, and there still was a faint throbbing in the back of his head. At least he had managed to sleep. The last thing he remembered before he blissfully lapsed into unconsciousness was Marnix sticking some pins in his cheek and neck to numb the pain and informing him that “this will hurt a bit”.

The boat was heaving even more than it had been yesterday, making his efforts to get up and out of the sickbay even more hazardous. Eventually he made his way to the galley completely deserted, and quite

messy with plates of half-eaten food scattered across the table. Some of it had even landed on the floor. Thankfully, the morning's porridge was still on the stove and warm, so he helped himself to a bowl. It wasn't brilliant, but it stopped the throbbing in his head for the time being. Once he had finished the rapid breakfast he decided that the best thing he could do would be to tidy up the mess and wash the dishes.

After an hour in the kitchen he ventured up on deck, where he found Mauritz barking out orders and his men scurrying about like ants. Hans gave Alex a filthy look and motioned for him to grab the rope and start pulling. The sails were full, and the ship plowing through the water at great speed with waves repeatedly crashing onto the deck.

"What's happening?" he managed in between pulls and crashing waves.

"Enemy astern," one of the crewmen grunted, "prob'ly Iberian."

Alex's mind started ticking over. The one thing he did know about the Iberians is that they didn't like pirates. In Puerto Bella the newspapers had been full of the latest exploits of the Iberian navy and their efforts to hunt down those who were attacking their shipping and

ports. Many of these hunters believed they were charged by some divine mandate to rid the seas of pirates. He very much hoped that the pursuing ship wasn't one of them.

So he pulled as hard as he could until the job was done. Through the spray he could see a set of isles either with tall, lush mountain tops that were crowned with clouds, or craggy rocky outposts with little foliage. They were bearing toward them at a quick pace, and would no doubt be amongst them within an hour.

Then he noticed Pierre.

He was securely tied with his back to the railing, taking on the form of a living figurehead above the long bow spike. He was bedraggled and often submerged by the waves and at first, Alex thought he was either asleep or unconscious.

Then his head turned. "You're vermin!" he shouted at Alex over the sea. "When I get out from 'ere I'm goin' to spit roast ya and eat ya myself!" Just then, another wave came over the bow and drowned out anything else he was planning to say.

"Well then, perhaps you shouldn't have gotten so greedy!" Alex retorted, as Pierre emerged once

more, gasping. He ignored the halfling's continued taunts.

Mauritz sent him below to fetch a silver hipflask. On his return, the lookout in the crow's nest was pointing astern and shouting.

"More of 'em!" the man yelled.

The captain brought his own telescope to his right eye.

"I see 'em," he said. "Two of 'em. One looks Brython. We'll have our work cut out for us." Mauritz said, grabbing the flask from Alex and pouring its contents down his throat. "Do ya at least know 'ow to make coffee?"

"Yes," he responded confidently.

"Then start brewin'," the captain said, pocketing the flask.

Alex obeyed, pleased to be away from Pierre. When he finally returned with a big pot of coffee and a bucket of mugs, the rocky outcrops he had seen earlier were considerably closer, but so were the pursuing ships. The reefed sail had been billowed out despite the wind. The main mast was audibly cracking under the strain.

Mauritz was heading straight for the gap between two of the larger isles. Marnix took a mug as it was filled and took a sip. “Not bad,” he commented, before passing it to his brother, who slurped the brew appreciatively. With this accolade, the crew started in on the coffee as well.

Alex went back downstairs and cleaned up while he started another pot. By the time he was back on deck with the refills, the ship had turned between the isles, churning through choppy blue green water. Rising one wave, it coasted across the wind and raced into the shallow, calmer water. They had entered a narrow run between a large mountainous isle and a small islet covered with rocks. The boat's momentum carried it across this, and the wind calmed. As it did, the command came to unhitch the reefs in the sail and to hoist them to full. The crew hurried and Alex helped where he didn't get underfoot, the crew realizing that if they were too slow about it the boats behind them, out of sight for now, would catch them. There was still enough wind to sail under, thanks to gusts racing around the mountains to fill the sails. *The Narwhale* seemingly heaved a sigh of relief to be out of the storm.

Under the captain's eye, the boat made good time across the run and headed around a point in one of the larger isles. Looking back, Alex could see the first of the Iberian boats entering the run as they rounded the point.

“Port bow! Brythons!” the lookout yelled.

Sure enough, there were two ships; a rather large one which Alex assumed was a man of war, and a smaller one which looked like a sloop. Their anchors were down and their sails furled.

“Man the guns! We'll give 'em some spite as we fly by!” Mauritz hollered. The crew dropped their mugs and ran to obey.

“The Iberians!” Marnix yelled. “They're coming through the gap!”

“Keep her steady José! Men, train your guns on the big bastard! Fire!”

The order was relayed. Seconds later the port side guns boomed out across the bay. Most splashed short into the water but one hit the frigate just above the waterline. Stung into action, the Brython vessels returned fire. Most of their shot was short as well, though one cannonball crashed into the railing not far from Pierre, whilst another whooshed across the deck,

miraculously missing everybody, before splashing into the sea beyond.

“Fetch some muskets!” Arnders yelled. “We’ll put up some sharpshooters!” Alex raced off to the armory as the cannons roared again.

The gunners were hard at work, their faces covered with soot and sweat and the bulkheads reverberated. As he slung two muskets over his shoulders a cannonball thudded into the side of ship inches away from an open port. Huge splinters sprayed out and there were screams from some of the crew. One splinter, its force practically spent, hit Alex on the shoulder as he hastily retreated.

“Oh to be back in that dark, dank cell in Puerto Bella!” he moaned, as he realized he had forgotten the shot and powder and had to return to the bloody mayhem once more.

On deck, Arnders grabbed the muskets and handed them to two crewmen who then grabbed a powder horn and small pouch of shot from Alex in order to load before madly scrambling up the rigging. Marnix was nowhere to be seen.

The Iberians were still in hot pursuit while the Brython Naval vessels were cutting the *Narwhale* off

from the large expanses of the bay. The sloop and the smaller of the Iberian ships eventually tacked wide, trying to cut off the *Narwhale*, picking up more wind out further away from the isles. The frigate was falling behind slowly, but the two other Iberian warships were keeping pace.

"Book-keeper, fetch the Pinnacle Isle map!" the captain roared.

Alex leapt to obey as the *Narwhale* was struck again, this time in the stern. When Alex returned with the map Mauritz ordered him to inspect the damage.

He found that the galley and the mess had taken the blow. The stove was still intact, but the shelves and their contents were in pieces across the floor. The larder was also now exposed to the elements and most of the supplies were on the floor mixed with splintered wood.

He returned quickly to report, but found Mauritz and his second-in-command in deep discussion.

"Those two bastards to port 'ave more wind in their sails than us, and if we try to engage them now, they'll slow us up enough for the other three to catch us," Arnders yelled.

"True, but up ahead's the Deadman's Fingers."

“If we’re out by a yard or two we’ll be shattered against that reef!”

“They’ll not cross it. We know the passage, they don’t. Anyway, the big ships have too deep a draft and maybe even that smaller Iberian craft as well. If the Brython sloop follows, we can take it one on one and we’ll have the advantage,” a smile crept onto his lips. “Providing we get there first.”

Arnders face was full of concern, but he started barking orders. Once again the pirate crew were scurrying everywhere at once. Arnders took over the wheel from José, who raced off to assist the men on deck.

Mauritz ignored them and turned to Alex.

“What’s the report?”

Alex gave him a brief summary of the damage. Mauritz grimaced.

“Take these charts back to my cabin, then go assist my brother.”

He obeyed. When he ducked back below deck he found Marnix busily bandaging up the legs of one of the crew.

“Just in time,” he said, “put a finger here.” Alex did, and the medic tied up the bandage that was

already starting to turn red. He noticed that one of the pirate crew was lying flat on the floor, with a rather large splinter embedded in his chest. It was the old man who had handed him his clothes on the first day aboard the ship. He was still breathing, but with a horrible bubbly sound.

“Water...” he moaned. Alex found a full bottle nearby and dripped some onto his dry lips. “Thanks,” he whispered. Then his eyes closed, and his breathing became more labored. Eventually it stopped altogether.

“I couldn't save him,” said Marnix. “The splinter had pierced a lung. Come on, there's more men to treat.”

There was muffled scraping noise as the pair moved to the next casualty. It continued as Marnix carefully removed the splinters from a forearm. He then doused the area with some lotion before bandaging it. As he completed the task, there was a muffled cheer.

“Find out what's happened.” Alex nodded, and hared up to the deck.

It didn't take long to see what the crew was cheering at. The *Narwhale* had made a broad reach to dash through two rocks standing out from the reef, and had safely cleared the passage. Mauritz was ordering

the pirates drop some of the sails from the aft mast, so that they could navigate carefully through. The captain carefully made measurements with his compass and they bore away. The pursuing sloop with a grinding moan shuddered and came to a halt, stuck fast, not far from the ancient wreck of a previous victim. One of the out-runners had to head upwind to avoid running aground, the other had veered north to try and sail around the reef. The *Narwhale* was now away.

“Well done men!” Mauritz roared. “There’ll be rum tonight!”

The crew cheered again.

“Set sail for Port Royale!”

★

★

★

Early next morning Alex awoke in the infirmary to hear the clank of the anchor chain dropping. He felt that his jaw had been bleeding again through the night. The celebratory rum had helped eased the pain, but not by much.

Marnix came in with a steaming mug of coffee. “We’re going ashore. Port Royale is the other side of the island, and considering what happened yesterday,

Mauritz has decided to approach the town from the jungle."

Alex accepted the mug and took a sip. It was a lousy brew, but he drank it anyway, as it washed the taste of rum out of his mouth. Marnix was busily filling a satchel with medical supplies. "Am I coming along?"

Marnix shook his head. "Mauritz is leaving the wounded aboard to guard the ship."

Alex nodded and continued to sip his coffee.

When Marnix was finished he said. "He still wants you up on deck though. He has special orders for you."

"Oh," Alex exclaimed, and rose slowly from his bunk. "Lead the way," he said.

Alex was greeted by the sight of the pirates hauling the longboats down to the water, and feverishly repairing some of the damage from yesterday's engagement. The boat was anchored in a small, narrow mouth of a river that disappeared amongst the trees, flanked by two high mountains. There was greenery all around, and the call of many tropical birds could be easily be heard. There was rest of the island was covered like a blanket with mist.

“Ah, there is my book keeper,” Mauritz exclaimed. “I have a special task for you while we’re away.”

“What is it, sir?”

He grinned. “I’m leaving you in charge.”

“What?”

“You heard him,” Arnders said. “She is to be guarded with your life. Besides, you are in no fit condition to be trav’lin’ with us.”

“No thanks to you,” Alex mumbled.

“What was that?” Arnders yelled, and motioned to strike him.

“Enough,” Mauritz ordered. His first mate lowered his metal arm. “If he’s injured any further he won’t be able to carry out his duties.”

Arnders nodded. “You’ll be dead if anything happens while we’re away,” he said.

“Yeah,” Keg sneered. “We’ll cut you up and use you for shark bait.”

Alex and the rest of the injured watched the pirates board the longboats. Those that were hammering away paused to watch them depart. With one final menacing glare, Arnders ordered the rowers to

put their back into it. One by one the boats disappeared into the jungle and the mist.

"Well, cap'n," one of the wounded pirates reluctantly said, "what do we do?"

"Umm, well, what else would you normally do on these occasions?"

"Fish."

"Well, do that then and finish what repairs you can." The crew nodded and went back to work, or to drop lines over the side.

A gentle rain began to fall. The shower only lasted a few moments, but it cleared the mist. The mist lifted when the rain stopped, and the sun beat down on the deck. A light wind whipped at the flag still unfurled. Alex thought he could just make out thin trails of smoke way off in the distance, and assumed that was the settlement the pirates intended to raid.

"So, what about it?" Pierre interrupted. "We can do a deal you know!" He spat into the water below him. His face looked clammy and cold and his clothes were thoroughly soaked. Salt had encrusted his lips and his eyes were bloodshot.

"What, and have Arnders break the other side of my face? You're staying right there!"

He suddenly came up with an idea of how to spend the time until the pirates returned. Those who had been hammering planks into place had decided fishing was a better idea, and joined the rest of the crew dropping lines over the side and to pass a bottle of rum around. Alex decided to have a swim. He hastily took off his clothing, then climbed over the side, dropping with a loud plop into the water. A couple of the crew looked to see what he was doing, but soon lost interest and went back to their angling.

The water was cool and refreshing. Here and there he could see the marine life float by and stopped to watch it. Then he was just content to paddle around, attempting various swimming styles. He had no idea of time, fully engrossed as he was in a rare moment of bliss since his sudden downfall.

Then Alex noticed a man wearing a red coat standing on the shore nearby. His long musket was pointed directly at him. A second figure appeared, and put his finger to his lips. A dozen more men similarly armed and clad approached. Then a longboat hove into view, and with the men on the shore covering them, it eased itself alongside the ship. Sailors clambered up

the side, with two men that appeared to be officers bringing up the rear.

"What the...?" started one of the crew. A musket cracked, cutting short the rest of the sentence. Alex could hear a mad scramble of feet amongst a brief exchange of gunfire, then there was silence. It was broken temporarily by a single shot, then it went quiet again.

"It looks like his Majesty has a new ship in her fleet, Mister Petty," one of the officers announced. "Search the ship. I want no bunk unturned. Bring the swimmer aboard Mister Jones."

"Yes sir!" responded one of the white-wigged men from the shore. "Okay, you heard him." Alex paddled back to the boat, and reluctantly climbed back up onto the deck where he was allowed to get dressed again.

"Captain Bligh sir. There appears to be someone tied to the bowsprit."

"Mister Coxwain, try to be more precise when giving report."

"Yes sir," he responded enthusiastically.

"Well...?" Captain Bligh prompted whilst scratching his white, powdered wig. "Is there someone there or isn't there?"

"Oh, sorry, there is, sir!"

"Well, cut him down and bring him back aboard."

"Yes sir!" As Alex stepped forward he could see that Pierre was asleep. Bligh strode up to him and gave him the once over.

"Sir? Can you hear me?" There was no response from the halfling except a snore-ish grunt. "Excuse me sir!" he shouted.

The halfling jerked awake. "What? Help! Help! The Brythons are attacking and..." The halfling suddenly composed himself. "Bonjour."

"And a good day to you sir. Tell me, where's Dread Pirate Mauritz and the rest of the crew?"

"How the hell should I know! I've been tied to the prow for the last two days. I hope they've been eaten by giant snakes."

"You might have over heard something."

"I've not heard a thing, except the waves rushing in my ears. Literally."

"So I can see. Information from you on their whereabouts could be advantageous for you..."

Pierre's eyes lit up. "Like how useful?"

"If you like, we can transport you to our next port of call."

"Agreed. They lost a lot of money on a Sand Brawl match a few days ago and they're making their way through the jungle to Port Royale to recoup their losses and grab materials to repair the ship."

Bligh nodded appreciatively. "Well, thank you very much for that information mister..."

"Baguette, Jean Baguette. And you are?"

"Charles Bligh, Captain of *The Floating Fortress*. Mister Coxwain, take this gentleman back to the ship and see that he is treated with the same treatment as any of our other civilian guests."

"Yes sir!"

"Can I grab my belongings first?" Pierre asked.

"Why of course." Pierre quickly waddled off below deck, only pausing briefly to give Alex a vicious glare on the way past. "Mister Petty."

The younger officer approached him. "Yes sir?"

"Thomas, make sure that one is watched around the clock. I suspect he was part of the crew and this was some form of punishment."

"I'll assign a couple of the men to take watches," Petty replied

"Right, to our next guest." Bligh turned to Alex and looked him up and down for a considerable time. "Well, it appears you have been in the wars quite a bit of late sir. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am Alexander von Bathgate, the fifth Earl of Grafhelm," Alex announced with all the confidence he could muster.

"Grafhelm?" Charles queried in disbelief.

"Surely you know Grafhelm? A hundred leagues up the River Rhene from our cultural inferiors the twin cities of Stutgard and Mienshtem?"

"Why, yes, of course," Bligh responded unconvincingly. "Tell me, why are you so far from home?"

"To seek adventure of course! However I was captured by these dreadful rogues and, well, as you can see, roughed up quite a bit and made to do menial chores."

"Mister Bligh sir!" interrupted one of the soldiers.

"Yes Mister Jarvis, what is it?"

"Apart from a few holes in the galley and one on the upper gunnery deck, everything is in order captain. The larder has provisions, the guns have powder and shot, and we have recovered quite a bit of plunder sir."

"Well done Mister Jarvis. Make sure it gets taken back aboard the *Fortress*."

"Very good sir!" the soldier saluted and left. Pierre then reappeared in a change of clothes, carrying a backpack and with satchels slung over each arm that looked decidedly heavy. Alex wondered how much of the loot he had pinched before the soldiers found it, or if he had another secret stash nobody else knew about.

"Mister Petty. I am pleased to inform you that you are now the new captain of *The Narwhale*. Once you have seen to your other duties aboard the *Fortress*, return with a skeleton crew, where you will continue to escort the *Flashing Silver* to Fort Henderson. Ensure that you replace the flags to loudly proclaim her as Brython. Most ships in these waters would mistake her for a pirate boat if they aren't flown loud and clear, seeing she has a unique enough profile. Leave now, and inform Port Royale that Mauritz and his men are on foot and are planning a raid."

"Yes sir!"

“Oh, and take Mister Baguette and the Earl here back to the ship. We'll stay here until you return in case Mauritz's band reappears.”

“Yes sir!”

Alex was duly led away with Pierre. "If you tell, I'll tell, and we'll both be hanged," Pierre whispered. He reluctantly nodded in agreement.

★

★

★

Alex was led, with a guard on each arm, down to the captain's quarters. Captain Bligh was already inside, talking. The door was slightly ajar, and Alex could see him sitting at his table, with a dull yellow glow emanating from something sitting on his desk. He appeared to be talking directly into it.

"Where there any casualties?" There was a short pause before he spoke again. "Any prisoners taken?" Again, another pause. "Good, yes, she does need a quick patch up and some provisions, oh and a long boat or two.... Yes, an extra detachment would be appreciated.... Yes, you're right, we should get rid of the spike, but the *Flashing Silver* needs to get to Fort Henderson fairly soon, so we really can't delay it....

Register it as *The Low Rider*, considering how it escaped capture yesterday.... Thank you very much for that. Understood. Over and out." The light then gradually faded. "Come in," he eventually said.

As Alex entered, he noticed this was a lot brighter, cleaner and less cluttered than the great cabin aboard the *Narwhale*, not to mention larger and roomier. A small teak table stood in the center of the room with several chairs surrounding it. He saw the device the captain had been talking into, a small crystal ball, which sat recessed into the desk.

The captain motioned for Alex to sit down. The guards remained stoically standing behind him.

"Now then, your lordship..."

"Please, call me Alexander."

"Thank you. I need to clarify a few things. You can begin by telling me, briefly, how you came to be on board *The Narwhale*."

Alex was grateful that he had had sufficient time to construct some answers to possible questions. "I was an envoy aboard the *Spessart*, touring the Mosquito Coast. We had been invited to sign a trade agreement with the Iberians at Puerto Bella, primarily for rum. Barely three days out we were attacked and

the dread pirate was ruthless. The crew put up a valiant fight, but it was to no avail and the ship and myself were captured.”

“What happened to this ship?” Bligh was scribbling a few notes down on some paper. Alex noticed it was lined, and not the rough, yellowing stuff that Mauritz used.

“He left a prize crew aboard the ship, with orders to follow the *Narwhale* to Sea Wolf Cove.”

Bligh's eyes lit up. “Did you travel with them to the cove?”

Alex nodded.

There was a hint of excitement in Bligh's voice. “Could you tell me roughly where it is?”

“I am very unfamiliar with these waters, captain. Besides, I was kept fully occupied aboard doing menial chores during the day and at night I was chained below deck. However, I did catch a glimpse of the island as we approached it.”

“Tell me what you can remember.”

Alex did. “If it's of any assistance to you, one of my tasks was to clean the captain's cabin, I can try and locate it on a map.”

Bligh nodded eagerly, and opened a wide drawer underneath the desk. He pulled out maps of the area and spread them over the table. Alex rose and examined them. First, locating Puerto Bella, then Fort Descartes. His eyes roamed the table, looking for the landmarks that Mauritz was measuring that day. It took a while, then he spotted the island chain that he felt was the location. He gave Barabbas' warning a small thought then dismissed it as he pointed to the spot.

“It's around here. I should warn you, it is well defended, with gun emplacements either side of the entrance, as well as on the beach. They have lookouts on the cliff-tops as well.”

Bligh scribbled down the co-ordinates. “If your information is correct, I'm sure His Majesty would be very generous in rewarding you for this service.”

Alex smiled. “Think nothing of it. I am pleased to be of assistance to the Brython Navy, and am glad that I can get one back on the pirates. Are there any further questions?”

“Yes, what happened to the *Spessart*?”

“Oh, it was lost, on a wager, at the cove. I believe the current owners are a group of Nausican pirates.”

Bligh sighed, and nodded. "Well, I think that about does it. I'll let these gentlemen escort you back to your quarters. Dinner will be at six, I would be delighted if you joined us."

Alex rose. "Thank you. I shall look forward to it."