



Chapter 7

For the next three days Alex was quite content to rest and recuperate. He dined well, with the food just as good, if not better at times, than the fare served by Pierre on board the *Narwhale*. The civilian passengers were quite keen to hear of his exploits. Pierre scowled at him often during the meals, but said nothing, leaving Alex to create some rather fanciful versions of the events during his time with the pirates.

At night he slept peacefully in one of the guest cabins, in clean linen. The captain had even found some spare clothes for him.

On the fifth day aboard the *Floating Fortress*, Captain Bligh once again summoned him. Alex started to panic slightly when guards escorted him to the captain's private cabin.

“Please, be seated,” Bligh said. The guards once again did not leave the room. “It appears that your information concerning the location of Sea Wolf Cove was quite accurate. An assault on the location is due to take place any day now.”

“That is indeed good news,” Alex said, sounding quite relieved.

“So, when we reach Lowden, I'm sure His Majesty will be quite happy to greet you personally and reward you handsomely.”

“We are sailing directly to Brython?” Alex asked hesitatingly.

“Yes, that is our destination. Many of the soldiers aboard this ship are being returned home on leave. The passengers are also landing there.”

Alex rose to leave. “Is that all then?”

The two guards stepped forward and forced him back into his chair. “No, Mister Bathgate, that is not all.”

Alex's heart sank.

Bligh continued. “We did a bit of checking. Whilst there is indeed a Grafhelm, and there is indeed a fifth Earl of that city, he is eighty-five years old and has been bed-ridden for most of the last six months.”

“Oh,” Alex responded dejectedly.

“There was no *Spessart* captured by pirates or reported missing in the area recently either. However, a prison ship, the *Vanguard*, failed to arrive at Fort Destartes and has now been missing for well over a fortnight. Amongst the prisoners aboard that vessel was one Alexander Douglas Bathgate, who had been convicted of fraud and theft in Puerto Bella. Have you anything to say about this?”

“Umm, yes. I am traveling incognito?”

Bligh smiled and softly shook his head. “We had thought of that, but your description relayed to us by the court officials in Puerto Bella, and one of current Earl of Grafhelm relayed from Lowden leave me with no doubt. There are no other claimants to the Grafhelm title, false or legitimate, so it appears that you really don't have a leg to stand on, figuratively speaking. Attempting to deceive servants of His Majesty, particularly given that you are a citizen of the Brython empire, is quite a serious offence. However, in lieu of what you have told us about Sea Wolf Cove, we may be quite lenient with you. Now, if you don't mind, please tell us what really happened.”

Alex sighed, and did as he was told, starting with the attack by the *Narwhale*, finishing with Mauritiz

and his men leaving the vessel to raid Port Royale. “But I was little more than an unchained prisoner aboard that ship,” he added in conclusion.

“Noted. And Mister Baguette?”

Alex thought about this. Much as he wanted to drop him right in it, he just couldn't do it, considering that the halfling would no doubt do the same to him. “He was forced to cook for them. He served up a bad stew one night and was chained to the prow.”

Bligh nodded. “See, that wasn't so hard, was it? Guards, please escort our guest to his new quarters.”

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The small detention cabin in the bowels of the ship became Alex's home for the remainder of the journey back to Brython. It was damp, poorly lit and rats occasionally scurried around the floor. More than once he had to swat them away as they climbed his legs, or across his chest as he tried to sleep. His only relief from the confines was the hour-long exercise period he was allowed on deck every day, if it wasn't raining. On deck the other passengers gave him a wide berth, looking at him with disdain. Alex had shivered as the weather

became colder, and it was more than merely the just time of year. On a few outings he noticed that there was even ice on the ropes, something Alex had not seen since he was a boy. More than once he considered just throwing himself overboard to bring an end to it. Perhaps being fed to the sharks when the *Vanguard* was captured wouldn't have been such a bad idea after all. At least it would have been quick.

Pierre often poked his head in to tease and cajole him. Alex hated to admit it, but the halfling's teasing helped break up the monotony of the voyage. The guards would rarely converse with him at all. The most he got was "On yer feet" or "'ere's your food". He could see and hear them laughing at his expense at times.

The only sympathy Alex received was from a traveling priest. He took his confession, urged him to repent, and left him with a pocket holy book. With nothing else to read Alex thumbed through it in between the rats, Pierre, and the exercise periods.

One morning Alex woke to the sound of sea birds wheeling and crying to each other. The ship's lack of motion led him to believe that they were in a bay of

some kind. His hands were numb from the cold, and his breath misted in front of him when he exhaled.

He knew they had finally arrived at Lowden when two guards appeared to reacquaint him with the joys of wearing manacles. A large iron ball was attached to the leg irons, however the leg irons were not attached to his cuffs. Carrying the ball, Alex needed assistance up onto the deck.

Lowden was easily the largest city he had ever seen. Smoke haze from thousands of chimneys sat heavy in the morning light, turning everything a tinge of orange. The harbour was busy, with boats chugging in and out under steam, and ferries crossing the large river. Most of the buildings were of timber and stone, similar to what Alex was used to, but everything had a black, sooty facade, including the windows.

"Welcome to Lowden, Earl" Bligh cried out, his sarcasm clear to all and sundry. It got a laugh from the crew and even some of the passengers. He then barked orders and the crew tossed ropes onto the pier, which were caught and fastened to the moorings. A small, official welcome party waited. Most appeared to be officers in the traditional red and blue, although several wore black tunics. Two hooded and robed men

with cowls embossed with royal heraldry in golden thread also stood nearby.

Beyond the pier, a crowd that had gathered in the port area was waving and calling, craning to get a view of the crew. They were wearing heavy coats and fur jackets which Alex had assumed were relatives and loved ones of the soldiers and crew. A quick glance either side of him confirmed it, when he saw the soldiers and sailors on deck responding.

Then the gangplank was lowered and the civilians began to disembark.

Pierre left with his backpack and satchels. The halfling turned briefly to poke his tongue out at Alex before disappearing into the crowd.

Then came Alex's turn. He had a musket-carrying redcoat to the front and behind him as he stepped down. They led him through the crowd, where a few faces stared at him with some mild interest. Most of those in the crowd were common folk out to gawk at the newly arrived boat from foreign waters. The ladies wore laced up bodices and frilled caps and were obviously in their best garb for the outing.

He was led to a cobblestone roadway lined with terrace housing where four black carriages, each

hitched to a team of six horses stood waiting with a red-coated soldier at the reins. Alex was pushed into one, and the two guards climbed inside after him.

"It's good to be home, innit Jones?" one commented.

"I don't miss the weather, but it'll be grand to see the missus," the other responded.

The guards continued their small talk as the carriage progressed through the streets. Craning around the head of one of the guards, he could make out short glimpses of shops, taverns and stone office buildings all crammed up against one another, tall and thin to make the most of the small space into which they had been squeezed.

The convoy made their way straight to a military compound on a low hill. As Alex was herded out, he briefly peered back down towards the harbor where he could see that the *Flying Fortress* being unloaded and the port a hive of activity. Before he could take in the view of the rest of the city through the haze, he was prodded forward and down a long hallway into an office. Inside a large map was drawn onto a huge board which was rested on a long wide table. It appeared to be of the entire globe, with Brython territory painted in bright

red. Other countries were similarly color-coded, and there were small models of boats, soldiers and cannons of varying colors positioned on it.

There was nobody present.

A large mahogany desk sat at one end, leather topped and almost bare except for small boxes of spare models for the board, a gilt pen sitting in an ink well and a crystal scrye ball. Alex stood silently, looking around. The guards were at attention. Whomever they were to meet was obviously someone of importance.

Suddenly, one of the shortest men Alex had ever seen entered. He could have looked straight at his belt buckle.

The short man was well decorated, the medals gleaming on his navy blue uniform. Only a few strands of black hair survived on his otherwise bald pate. Alex guessed that he was in his fifties at least.

"Well, is this the pretending Earl of Grafhelm?"

"Yes sir," replied the guard known as Jones.

"So what am I to do with you, eh? The current earl would no doubt get a laugh if he found out he had an impersonator. I must visit him again soon, before he passes away." He crossed to his desk and opened a

folder from the top drawer. “Alexander Bathgate, born in Fort Saxon, correct?”

“Umm, yes, sir.”

“Qualified accountant, convicted thief, a pirate, and a bad impersonator. Why Grafhelm?”

Alex shrugged. “I remembered it from my history classes for some reason, from the continental wars.”

“Ah, yes, of course. The wavering third Earl of Grafhelm, who changed sides as often as he changed his pants.” He closed the folder and walked over to Alex. “Believe it or not, I once knew your father.”

Alex was surprised. Before he could react the short man continued. “He assisted me once, in the colonies, preventing me from causing a potentially damaging rift with our Iberian allies. He did it for entirely selfish reasons, with his eyes on his own profits, but it was something that saved my career politically. I would like to return the favor, which is why you will not be placed in one of the rat-infested gaols here in Lowden, or on one of the rotting prison hulks.”

“Umm, thanks,” Alex mumbled.

“Don't mention it. You will serve out your original sentence at one of the newer, private institutions, the Flagstaff Correctional Facility. As prisons go, it's quite

good. You'll get plenty of exercise, given the current warden's mandate is one of redemption through hard labor. You'll be transferred there in the morning. Until then, we shall keep you in the lock-up. Guards!”

The two guards clicked their heels on the floor.
“Yes sir?”

“Escort our guest to his new quarters and make sure he's fed, cleaned and given a new set of clothes.”

“Yes sir,” they saluted.

“Before you go, you will be pleased to know that the raid on Sea Wolf Cove was an unqualified success.”

“It was?”

“Along with destruction of the pirate base and it's hostile inhabitants, we sank two pirate vessels, rescued a number of female captives, and recovered a large haul of loot. We even recaptured the *Vanguard*.”

“What about Mauritz and his men?”

“Still on the run. Their raid on Port Royale was a failure, and they lost a dozen men in the process. No doubt they're still in the jungle around that city. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do. Dismissed.”