



Chapter 8

The next day, Alex watched as they passed through the outskirts of the city. The road quickly turned from cobblestones to dirt and mud. Terrace housing gave way to undulating hills and large estates with fancy drives and gate houses.

Then they were passing through Brython farmland. Sheep were grazing on green pastures, and there was the occasional farmer with his long haired shaggy dog or behind his oxen pulling a plow.

There was hardly any traffic on the road at all. He was intrigued as they passed a huge bright red, steam powered tractor huffing up the road at walking pace. He had never seen such a contraption in person and looked on in amazement as they passed by the machine.

He had to admit, the military gaol he'd spent the night in was by far the cleanest of his now varied incarceration experiences. He'd been given a non-descript grey tunic and pants, with an old pair of shoes, and an opportunity not only to shower, but to shave as well, but being fully supervised doing the latter. The two meals he was served were far better than the ones he'd had whilst being locked up aboard the ship. For once he even managed a decent night's sleep, before being woken rather early and marched to the carriage without breakfast.

After around three hours of steady pace, the coachman pulled up by the side of the road next to a fallen tree, allowing them all a chance to answer a call of nature. One of the guards opened up a stow and pulled out four neatly packed lunches, whilst the horses nibbled at some of the long grass

"Here you are, your lordship," the guard said sarcastically. Alex ignored the remark and accepted the food. It was a rather crude beef and cheese sandwich, but he was thankful that the bread was at least fresh.

Three hours after lunch was concluded they passed a rather large, brightly painted sign welcoming them to Flagstaff.

“Sorry, you don't get the tour,” one of the guards said, with the carriage turning left well before entering the town centre. The houses Alex did see were constructed similarly to those in Lowden, except here most of them had little yards to the front and rear and weren't packed in as tightly. Then it was more open fields and trees again. Dark clouds were also forming overhead, and it was getting quite dark. The carriage had to pull up to allow the coachman to attach two lanterns onto a pair of poles, then slide them into slots in the coach roof. At the same time one of the guards climbed up next to him, armed with a loaded crossbow.

After another hour on the dark road, they turned onto a short paved lane. They halted briefly in front of a large, low lying brick building before being waved on by a prison guard with a lantern. Eventually they reached a second smaller stone building attached to the main wall. The carriage came to a halt, and Alex was prompted to move.

The first thing he noticed was the huge portcullis. Large metal rods bore down menacingly. Behind it was a large wooden door, studded with metal slabs. The wall was equally as imposing, large, bleak

and grey. He felt squeezed in just by looking at them, especially after all his time out on the open sea.

Large watchdogs barked. A pair of guards kept them under control, carefully eyeing Alex as he was escorted to the office building. A rather portly man stepped out and greeted the guards, then led them inside. There wasn't much to the interior, just shelving, papers, a large bench and a metal door at the far end.

"Delivery of one Alexander Bathgate, courtesy of His Majesty's Navy," said one of the guards.

"Paperwork please," replied the clerk. The second guard handed him an envelope, which he slit open with a plain letter opener and unfolded the documents. He gave them the once over, then pressed a buzzer. Within seconds the metal door swung open, and two granite-faced guards emerged. The clerk stamped, initialed and noted the time on his copy, then did likewise to the escort's copy, which he duly gave back to them.

"Pleasure doing business with you," one of Alex's guards said to the clerk.

"Enjoy your new court, your lordship," the other one laughed, briefly explaining the joke to the portly clerk before leaving.

“Welcome to Flagstaff Prison. Mister Stein, Warden Potter wanted to see the prisoner before he was incorporated into the system. Here are his papers.”

One of the guards accepted the papers, whilst the other herded Alex through the door. Both of them were armed with oversized truncheons dangling from their belts.

They led him down a well-lit corridor until they reached a wooden door with a brass handle. One of the guards knocked and a female voice said “Enter”.

The woman behind the desk was in her forties, rather plump, and wore just a little too much make-up. She took the paperwork from the guard then rose and politely knocked on a second door before entering. Seconds later she stepped back out and announced “The Warden will see him now.”

Inside the next room a large fire burned brightly in the hearth. A middle-aged man with a rather oval shaped head, sporting a brass-edged pair of spectacles and finely groomed grey hair sat on a large dark leather settee with a sheaf of papers on one of the arms, nonchalantly sipping a cup of tea whilst scanning them. He looked up at the trio, then rose and walked back behind his desk, placing the fine china cup on a saucer

there. He perused the paperwork on the desk, giving Alex some time to look around the room. The book cases which occupied two of the four walls were made of fine oak, while the warden's desk and a smaller desk with a roll-top lid which sat closed in one corner were made of walnut. He even had time to note that the suit the warden wore was double breasted.

“Welcome to Flagstaff prison Mister Bathgate,” the Warden eventually began. “I stayed back especially just to see you, considering what I have heard about your exploits.”

“I didn't think my name would have carried back to this isle,” Alex commented.

The taller of the pair of guards gave him a clip across the back of the head with his knuckles.

“What was...” Alex started, turning his head.

The guard then slapped him hard across the mouth, leaving a fat red welt on the left side of his face.

“Permission must be granted to speak, boy,” he sneered.

“Thank you Mister Banyard. That's just one of the many rules you'll have to learn around here Mister Bathgate. If you obey them, things will run smoothly for you and we can put in a positive report when it is time

for parole - when you become eligible. However, If you choose to be rebellious," the warden paused, "we administer our own punishment swiftly, as Mister Banyard has just demonstrated."

Alex looked at the tall, balding guard. Unlike his companion, he carried a few extra pounds, but there was still plenty of muscle in his arms and shoulders. Banyard cracked his knuckles rather loudly, forcing Alex to refocus his attention on the warden.

"You will be notified of your work assignment in due course, which you will carry out on the first six days of the week. On the seventh, you will have time to reflect upon your crimes. Lights go out at nine, you wake at six. You will eat when we tell you, you will wash when we tell you, and you will go to the lavatory when we tell you. Is that understood?"

Alex looked at Banyard before replying. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Your cell assignment is B26, which means Block B, cell 26. Any questions?" The Warden asked dryly.

Alex shook his head.

“Okay then. I leave you in the hands of Mister Stein and Mister Banyard. If you hurry, you can just make dinner. Dismissed.”

The guard known as Stein exited the room first. Alex followed him out of the room, with Banyard barely a pace behind him. The trio continued down the corridor until they reached another door. Stein opened it, allowing Alex to go through it first. A chilling wind blew, and rain started to fall as they crossed to the next building. Another stone-faced guard greeted them from behind a counter. Behind him were racks of clothing and footwear. Stein effortlessly removed the chains and placed them on the counter. Alex couldn't refuse the opportunity to quickly rub his un-manacled wrists.

“Place your personal belongings in the tray,” the guard said unemotionally.

“I don't have any,” Alex responded.

“You're still wearing clothing,” Banyard said.

“Strip.”

Alex, fearing yet more punishment, obeyed. He started with his shoes, then socks, shirt, pants and underclothing. The guard piled up a set of prison clothing, with an old pair of shoes on the top. “Try not to lose them. Here's your number patch.” Alex looked at

the small, square piece of cloth that had FP350-328 stenciled on it in thick, black characters. "Sew it onto your shirt when you get to your cell."

Alex was going to ask for a needle and thread but thought better of it. He hastily re-dressed, stuffing the piece of cloth and the cheap wooden comb into the shirt's only pocket. He was left carrying a pair of white overalls printed with faded black arrows, a towel, and a pocket holy book like the one he had read aboard the *Flying Fortress*.

"Best you read that when you get the chance," said the guard behind the counter. "It might save your soul," he sniggered. The other two guards chuckled softly as well.

"Move!" ordered Stein, and pushed him towards the door.

A stiff breeze blew the rain straight into his face as he crossed the open courtyard. It didn't seem to affect the guards in the slightest. They led him into a large hall occupied by hundreds of prisoners, most of whom were busily eating their evening meal. Some gave him a glance as he passed by, but most of them were more interested in the contents of their plates. Alex looked at one or two as he moved through the hall.

One, a rather large inmate with a large scar across his right cheek, sneered and thrust a spoon at him. He laughed when Alex jumped back in terror. Banyard threatened to whack the prisoner with his truncheon, and he slowly turned back around to finish off his meal.

The dining hall exited into a wide corridor which led to a two storey hall, with cells opened wide on the top and bottom levels. Everything was metal - the gates, the bars on the door, the light fixtures and the tubes that they were connected to, the grills covering the spaces between the elevated walkways, even the skylights. Eventually they arrived at B26. Alex dropped his stuff on the right hand top bunk, it being the only clear bed.

“Hurry up, if you want some food,” Banyard said. Alex quickly followed him back out whilst Stein strode off in a different direction. There was only one person left behind the food counter, a pale-skinned young man of thin build with red hair and freckles.

“A new guest of His Majesty?” he asked. Alex smiled nervously. Banyard plopped a tray in front of him whilst the kitchen hand doled food onto a rather old metal plate. He slapped a large slab of brown bread on top of it before handing it back.

“Enjoy.”

“Thanks,” Alex said, grabbing an empty mug and filling it with water. He found an empty space nearby and sat down. The other inmates ignored him completely as they ate and chatted amongst themselves. Some of the prisoners were already finishing up their meals as Alex started on his. The potatoes were a little underdone, the corn and peas a little dry, and the sausages shriveled and burnt but it was edible.

He didn't realize how hungry he was until the first morsels went down his throat. Realizing he had nowhere else to go, he took his time, until he was the last person to finish. Kitchen hands wandered between the tables picking up the empty plates, trays and mugs under the watchful eyes of the remaining guards.

Unescorted, he slowly walked back to his cell. Four men were already sitting on their bunks and chatting when he entered.

“Ah, our new cellmate has arrived,” said one of the prisoners. He carefully rose off his bunk and took a step towards him. He was almost as tall as Alex, and whilst not muscular, he was quite wiry, with a rather

weather-beaten face and brown curly hair which was thinning at the top. He was a little tubby in the middle.

Alex stopped suddenly. He shook his head, then rubbed his eyes. "Gordon Tanner?" he said hesitatingly.

The man grinned. "Ah, a fan," the other three men laughed.

"But you're..."

"Were," he stuck out a hand, waiting patiently for Alex to shake it, which he did, eventually.

"Wow. Of all the prisons I get sent to, it happens to be the one the famous slinger's in," Alex said.

"I'd offer you an autograph, but we're not allowed writing implements in the cells."

Everybody laughed, including Alex, albeit a little nervously.

"Let me introduce you to the gang. This is Filch." Alex shook hands with a rather tall, thin man with greasy black hair which was slicked back.

"If you want anything, let me know," he said. "Reasonable rates, but no IOUs."

"This is Josh," Gordon said next. The man was no taller than him, but was a little fatter. His hair was black and scraggly, which matched the rather unkempt facial hair he sported. He banged his head on the bunk

as he got up to greet Alex, much to everybody's amusement.

"Cam," Gordon said next. The tall, blonde haired figure who was a little broader in the middle than the rest of the people in the room lent down from the top bunk to shake his hand.

"I have leftover bread," said a voice from behind them. Alex turned around to see the red-haired kitchen hand who had served him at meal time. "Oh, hello. You're our new number six, eh?"

"Yes. What happened to the last one?"

"Killed whilst trying to escape," Cam said.

"Anyway, who are you?"

"Alexander Bathgate, but you can call me Alex."

"Nice to meet you Alex. I'm Kym," said the redhead. "Bread?"

Alex took a slice off him. "Thank you," and climbed up on his bunk to eat it.

"So, what are you in for?" Josh asked, as he munched on his piece of bread.

"Well, I was originally arrested for theft and tax evasion, but I think they'll add piracy and impersonating gentry as well."

"You were a pirate?" Kym asked, surprised.

“For a week or so,” Alex responded, and told them how he managed to get into that situation.

“Gees, talk about out of the frying pan,” Gordon said.

There was a loud clanging on the door.

“Washroom time,” a guard announced. He was rather tall, quite solidly built and with a short cropped head of steel grey hair. “Move it.”

“Yes Mister Wardle sir,” said Filch and the group grabbed their towels and were escorted back down the hall to the washroom. A second guard escorted Kym to a separate area.

“Trusty,” Gordon said. “Has special privileges.” They were all issued a small thin bar of soap and a razor.

“I want that poor excuse for a beard shaved off, Petch,” Wardle ordered. “Or I’ll do it for you with a blunt razor.”

“Yes sir,” said Josh. The group undressed and shaved with the towels wrapped around their waists. The mirrors were highly polished flat sheets of metal. As they finished another guard collected the razors, giving them a quick rinse and a wipe on a cloth before putting them back into a bag.

The group then stepped underneath the showerheads. The same guard who was responsible for the razors then turned a metal wheel fixed in the wall. Water suddenly squirted out, drenching all of those underneath in a sudden spray. The water was barely lukewarm. One by one they left the stalls to visit the lavatories. Alex again was the last to finish, being left dripping as the guard turned the water off.

With their ablutions completed, the group was led back to their cell. Kym was already there. "Tell us more about the pirates," he said.

"Like what?" Alex asked.

"I don't know. Like, what do they do when they're not pirating?"

Alex smiled and looked at Gordon. "They play Sand Brawl. Heard of it?"

Gordon nodded. "Played a pre-season beach tournament on the Turquoise Sea once in my rookie season. The nightly parties, the Tuscany girls - it was a lot of fun. Tell us about your experience."

Alex sat on his bunk and told them about the game he watched at Sea Wolf Cove. He was surprised to see them all interested in what he had to say. He was reaching the climax of the story when a loud voice

cried out “Lights out!” He just managed to crawl beneath the coarse grey blanket when the cell light suddenly was snuffed and one by one the doors slammed shut.

Then there was silence.

“So, who won?” Josh whispered from below.

“The Nausicans did,” Alex replied. A lit lantern suddenly appeared at the doorway.

“No more talkin!” the guard harshly ordered. Then moved on.

The mattress wasn't very thick, and neither was the pillow, but compared to the pirate ship and most of the prison cells he had been in over the last couple of months, it was luxury. At least this one didn't rock.

Within ten breaths of the guard passing by, Alex was dead to the world.