



Chapter 1

“Alexander Douglas Bathgate, I hereby pronounce you guilty of all charges. The sentence is ten years hard labour, with non-parole period of seven years, to be served at His Majesty's Correctional Institute Fort Destartes. Bailiffs, take him away!”

The words throbbed in his head like a bad headache. In an instant, gone were the trappings of a comfortable, albeit dull, clerical position in the colonies, to be crudely replaced by a hard sandstone cell.

Keys rattled in the lock, rousing him from his daze. The door was flung open, and two men dressed in slate grey tunics and pants stepped into the room. One carried a big, brass-capped club and held it menacingly as the other slapped a pair of well worn iron hand cuffs. They were tarnished, and appeared to have flecks of dried blood still on them.

“Where are you taking me?” Alex gasped.

“To His Majesty's prison ship, the *Vanguard*,” the club wielder responded. “That's all you need to know.” The other man pulled him roughly forward by the cuffs,

smiling at Alex's discomfort.

Alex tried to peer through the early morning fog as he was led to a courtyard where more chained prisoners, most with blank, unemotional expressions on their faces, waited to be hauled aboard an old wagon which was attached to a pair of old chestnut mares.

As each prisoner was assisted aboard, a guard pushed him to a seat and slapped a pair of leg irons on him. He had time to examine some of his fellow cons. Most were non-descript characters who looked like typical ruffians, with greasy hair, and scars on various parts of their faces. Two did stand out. A weaselly looking man with hardly any teeth, and a large brown man devoid of any hair.

Once all the cons and their escort were aboard, the tailgate was slammed shut and bolted. A harsh voice yelled out "Move those reprobates!" and the wagon lurched forward, before settling into a steady pace.

The few people out in the early morning gloom stopped to stare at the wagon. He recognised some of them, either from his former workplace or as casual acquaintances, and their looks just made him feel worse.

It had been a sudden downfall for him. Everything had been going so well, two years into his ten year indenture to the logging firm, after successfully graduating from the Royal Business College. But he was bored, and tavern life wasn't much of a life for him, so he had decided to change things. It started with the books. A crown here, a crown there, he figured it wouldn't be missed. He spent the ill-gotten gains on books, clothing and memorabilia – some pirate's tri-corner hat, a famous athlete's running shoes, a dagger once used in a series of gruesome murders. Frittered away on trinkets.

But, as he now regretted with a passion, he got too greedy. He wanted more, and he started to find more inventive ways to remove funds. He had started a special account at the foreign merchant's bank in town and it grew, steadily. He figured by the time he had finished his indenture with the company, he would be able to take a long cruise and set himself up in one of the more larger, cosmopolitan colonies.

The funds wouldn't be missed, he had thought at the time. Just a matter of being creative with the figures, yet at the same time, realistic. He had heard things being discussed amongst his classmates, and

had put them into effect. He was surprised to see that they worked.

Then the general manager of the parent company arrived unannounced, along with a wizard Brython accountant. Within forty-eight hours of them arriving, the errors in the book-keeping had been discovered, and Alex had to run. He went straight from home to the bank, cleared out his account, and had no sooner stepped outside the building than he was arrested by the local City Watch.

That was little over a week ago. The logging company had wasted no time in pressing charges, and the manager's influence had seen to a speedy trial. The court house cell had been like a luxury compared to the rat-infested, damp dank cell at the local jail he had spent six nights in.

His court appointed defence counsel had tried hard, and he had to thank him for managing to reduce the sentence from a hanging. He had played the "please have mercy for his first offence" card strongly, but in the end, he had been sentenced to ten years at Destartes, which might as well have been a death sentence.

"Okay worms, one at a time!" a guard roared.

Another gave Alex a whack on the back of the head as they were unloaded onto the jetty.

The prison ship loomed through the early morning fog of the bay, menacingly towering over him and the other prisoners. It's dark timbers and barred portholes echoed the horrid tales that Alex had been told about Fort Destartes and it's prison mine.

"Get moving!" the stick-wielder bellowed. Alex did what he was told for fear of being hit again.

"I reckon someone will run," the weaselly man said, as he was dragged into line after Alex.

"How do you know?"

"Someone always does. They don't call it 'Club Dead' for nothin'." Alex had a much longer look at him. The man was short, but thin. His black, greasy hair was balding and his narrowly, opened mouth revealed several missing teeth, with the surviving ones being grey and off-coloured, clinging to his gums with their last strength. His breath was indescribable. "People just know there's no coming back."

There were about thirty prisoners snaking their way across the wharf towards the ship, most with their heads down, resigned to their fate. Alex had spotted at least ten guards involved in the prison transfer with two

more guards either side of the gangplank as they boarded the vessel, with large pikes at the ready.

“Halt!” one of the guards bellowed. The prisoners obeyed to a man. Keys were rattling in locks ahead of him. Several days without shaving had left a thick stubble across his cheeks and chin. His normally well-groomed hair was now resembling a greasy mop. His blue eyes were now watery and bloodshot. Once, he had stood tall and proud, now he stooped, weighed as he was by chains and the sentence imposed upon him. He had lost weight as well as his appetite thanks to the meals served to him in jail.

A guard removed the lock from his ankles, then continued to the next man. Even though he was slightly taller than most of his fellow prisoners, he could only see some parts of what was happening up the line, as the other prisoners were in the way and the mist was still clearing. They were a motley bunch, and Alex guessed probably half of them were in for violence related crimes.

The chain holding all the prisoners clanked as it was pulled to the front, leaving him manacled by and between his hands and legs, but no longer chained to the other prisoners. Almost on cue, the large dark

prisoner swung with both fists at the nearest guard, who crumpled into a heap. Wildly, the dark-skinned man looked around for the shortest route to safety. Then he was off, the escapee bolting for the town as fast as his irons would allow. He was quick and obviously desperate, making good ground, reaching a set of barrels on the wharf that were to be loaded onto the neighbouring vessel. Alex wondered how he could move so quickly with all the chains still binding him.

The other guards didn't seem interested in giving chasing him. They just stood there looking to the front guard. Without a single word, a crossbow clicked from up on the deck of the ship, sending a bolt across the dock and straight into the back of the fleeing man. He fell, crashing out of sight. It was a hell of a shot Alex thought. Three of the guards at the rear moved cautiously to examine the con.

"Don't get any ideas!" the nearest guard exclaimed. One of the guards thoroughly checked the prisoner, then stood up and drew his index finger across his neck. Another signalled for a stretcher, and the deceased was carted away without a fuss. Once the guards returned to their places the line began to move again.

The tide was high, and the gangplank rose up to the deck of the vessel. Because of its steep angle, timber had been nailed into it in rudimentary steps so as to help the ascent onto the ship.

"Abandon hope all ye who enter here," the weasel stated, obviously disappointed that there hadn't been more of a fight. One at a time the prisoners were herded up and onto the vessel. Soon enough, it was Alex's turn. He was shaking, and it wasn't just the morning chill that was causing it. He almost tripped up the gangplank, stumbling, but caught his footing before plunging over the side. The dark waters below lapped gently at the hull, uncaring about the morning's gloomy business.

Once on deck, Alex was herded to one side, where the prisoners were lined up. There were another dozen or so guards already on deck. Some crewmen, in white attire were working on the mainsail, while the guards were still pointing their crossbows at those yet to arrive on board. It almost looked like the crew of any other large galleon, only the prisoners were this ship's cargo.

"Welcome aboard," the weasel muttered. His narrowed eyes darted around, looking at the ship as if

there were to be a magic escape presenting itself. The transport was impressive, but it was obvious that it's military days were long over. It still looked more solid than any ship Alex had been on before. There weren't any cannons on deck, but the clamps were evident where they once had been. He assumed any remaining guns were below deck. The ship was far bigger than what was required to transport the ragtag bunch of criminals assembling on deck. It had almost certainly already been loaded with food and supplies as well, probably the day before. The prison settlement Alex was bound for had plenty of resources available to be able to afford a ship of this calibre.

As the gangplank was drawn in by two guards, another of the prisoners, a large, muscular man, broke rank. "I won't be digging shafts at Descartes!" he yelled, and promptly jumped over the far side of the ship. Alex leaned over to look where he had dived, with the other prisoners following suit. Over bay side, the water splashed as the large man broke the surface with his plunge for freedom. The man thrashed wildly, suddenly realising his ability to swim was seriously hampered by his chains. He managed one blubbery "Help!" before he sank.

"Anyone else want to try?" came a crisp voice, instantly diverting the prisoners attention.

The head guard was standing about ten paces from the prisoners, with an assistant armed with a crossbow either side of him, eyeing the prisoners off. He was a short and stocky man, with red hair poking out from beneath what looked like a military hat of some kind.

"I am Superintendent Kinney, and you will call me sir," his voice cutting through the morning fog. "As you know, this is no pleasure cruise. The guards have been extremely kind to you this morning. From now on you shall be doing work on the *Vanguard*, and you shall be very kind to her. You might not have ever been on board a ship before, let alone been a sailor, but you'll soon get the hang of it."

And with that promise, Kinney turned on his heel and strode toward the wheel. Several of the guards pulled four of the prisoners towards the ropes to assist hauling the rigging, while another couple of crew cast off.

Alex watched quietly as the picturesque Puerto Bella slowly enveloped in the morning fog, Alex's old life disappearing behind him into the mist. The tide took

the *Vanguard* slowly out of port, but within half an hour a gentle wind was pushing her out into clear waters. The fog began to burn off, leaving glimpses of a devilishly bright day.

The superintendent had his crew put most of the prisoners to work, either above or below deck with various kinds of menial labour. There was no guided tour, but Alex was no stranger to a ship and understood the general layout. He was put to work cleaning the deck with a mop and bucket. Not that the ship looked like it needed it. The deck was free from salt spray and was still glistening from the mist that had settled, dew-like, on the deck. Not wanting to be involved in more back breaking work, Alex settled in to do a thorough job.

★

★

★

The wind had picked up by the time the lunch meal was brought up onto the deck by some roped-in crew. Despite the meagre fare, it was good to be back out in the sun, the wind keeping Alex cool. It had been a difficult week locked up in the local brig, facing court, and being sentenced. He didn't realise how much he had missed the sun and wind until now. The break

didn't last long, and he was soon swabbing the deck once more.

The day passed slowly, and by the time the crew were herded down to the hold, Alex was sore, the manacles had rubbed his wrists raw, causing them to bleed. Alex longed for a shower, but there were obviously no provisions for it aboard this ship. The other prisoners looked equally exhausted. They were lined up with a wooden bowl and spoon and received their evening fare from the same slop barrel. As Alex sat on the timber floor, he quietly listened to the other prisoners. Some had been on kitchen duty, cleaning and preparing food. Some had been mucking the stalls of the livestock. Yet others had been tying down the cargo in another part of the hold in case of rough weather.

The main meal was a solemn affair, the prisoners barely talking at all between mouthfuls. Five guards were still observing the dining prisoners, and all of them were armed with weighted cudgels. At random intervals one of them sauntered up and down the aisle, threatening a blow if any of the convicts looked at him. The room was dimly lit with a single lantern hanging from the low roof. After Alex had finished, the bowl was

returned to an empty pot, which became someone's work in the morning. Then they were led down a narrow passage to a room where hammocks hung from the support beams. Within minutes of finding one, Alex was out like a light.

But he didn't sleep that well, waking several times, noticing that the swell had obviously picked up. He was a little nauseous as it felt like the ship was moving to and fro quite sharply. The rocking action eventually sent Alex back to sleep, but it was not deep.

★

★

★