



Chapter 2

"Up and at 'em," a guard announced. "Welcome to another day of good old fashioned hard work".

Most of the prisoners didn't stir, but after three days at sea, Alex didn't need to feel the sharp end of the stick to know it was just the time and place to do what he was told. He tried to get out of the hammock carefully, but tripped and fell onto the floor. The thump stirred several others of the prisoners, who grumbled and cursed. When he had finally righted himself, he noticed a guard walking down the aisles prodding sleeping prisoners with his cudgel. A second was standing in the doorway idly tapping a cudgel against the wall.

After cold porridge, Alex found himself back on deck, swabbing again, like he had been for every day of this journey. There was a stiff breeze, and the cloud cover was racing overhead. There were many tones of grey in them with very little white. The swell was dark but choppy, foaming on the tips of the waves as they

smashed themselves at the side of the ship.

By mid morning, Alex was on the steps to the upper deck. The winds were quite strong, and he had a hard time staying upright as the vessel lurched through the waters like a drunkard staggering home. Land was barely visible on the horizon, but he had no idea where they were.

As he moved up to swab the upper deck at the front of the ship, he could see that some of the other prisoners were reefing the sail and keeping the rigging under control. Orders were being barked, and guardsmen were continuously watching their charges, even giving them some encouragement with a threat of violence. Alex moved on swabbing, proceeding to mop what was already a spotless deck.

After an hour of this thankless chore, there was a shout from the crows nest, which could barely be heard above wind and crashing sea. The superintendent at the helm seemed concerned. One of the junior ratings hastily pulled out a small telescope and looked in the direction the crewman was pointing. Then he handed the device to his superior. He didn't have to look long. Orders were soon barked and crewmen frantically raced around the ship. The prison

guards started exchanging their clubs and cudgels for swords and axes. In the confusion Alex stopped his work, like the rest of his group, and looked out to port. There, in the distance, he could make out a vessel of similar size, bearing down on an intercept course with the *Vanguard*. It's sails an unusual crimson colour.

The superintendent had visibly turned white, but continued to give orders. Some of the guards started to move the prisoners below, but by now they had figured out what was happening, and were deliberately making a nuisance of themselves. One had deliberately fallen down on the deck, causing a guard to stumble. In return he smacked him with the flat of his sword, berating him to get up. Other prisoners were moving in behind the stairwells, taunting frustrated guards to come and get them. Some were even getting in the way of the crewmen trying to carry out their duties. One of the guards, having lost his patience, shot a crossbow bolt into one of the obstinate prisoners. The shot was fatal, and the body was casually dumped over the side.

Suddenly, the whistling of a cannonball pierced the blustery wind. Some ducked out of reflex, but the shot landed with a loud splash short of the vessel. A second shot flew towards them, this time landing in

front of the ship.

The third though was on target. There was a shower of splinters as the missile crunched into the railing. Two nearby crewmen screamed, their arms pierced by multiple wooden fragments. Another cannonball kicked up a fountain of water and Alex found himself being drenched by the spray.

“To arms! To arms!” bellowed the superintendent. “Prepare to repel boarders!” Another shot thudded into the side, guards and prisoners this time being struck by the debris. As the attacking vessel loomed closer Alex could make out their flag: a grinning skull resting over a pair of crossed cutlasses. Below deck guns returned fire, smoke billowing from the hull, but their shots seemed to have no effect.

“It's bloody Mauritz!” yelled a nearby crewman, readying a crossbow.

Alex froze. He had read many stories about pirates. Their escapades were front page news in the colonies. Periodicals had even been dedicated to their adventures. He had hoped that he would never meet one in his lifetime, yet, within a hundred paces of him there was a ship full of them bearing down on him. Not sure of what he was meant to be doing, he continued to

mop, hoping that he would become invisible in the chaos.

He noticed that the pirate vessel had a large metal spike protruding from its prow. It had closed the gap rapidly, giving the *Vanguard* no chance to run, effortlessly gliding across the waves whereas the prison craft was struggling to make ground. To add a sense of foreboding, a bolt of lightning struck the water in the distance and a large crack of thunder hammered out. Rain started to splatter upon the deck, and Alex suddenly longed for the dank, dark prison cell back in Puerto Bella.

The pirate's cannons stopped, instead aiming for a clear intercept course. Its deck was higher than that of the *Vanguard*, on par with the upper deck where Alex was still absent mindedly swabbing. The superintendent, handing the wheel to another crew member, made his way toward Alex, issuing orders as he strode but ignoring him completely. The cannons from the *Vanguard* boomed out once more before final impact.

A large groan emanated from the very fibres of the ship. Wood splintered as the large iron spike ploughed into the *Vanguard*, causing the deck to buckle and split.

Grappling hooks flew across, securing the two vessels. Archers, crossbowmen and musketeers started peppering their opponents with missiles, and here and there crewmen from both sides were struck. One, quite close to Alex, caught a bolt with his head and tumbled over the railing, his body crashing into the water between the two ships.

With a throaty roar the pirates leapt down from the bow onto the transport's deck. "At 'em lads!" yelled the first mate, and hacked at the first of the pirates to cross over.

A pair of muskets cracked simultaneously, striking two more attackers. One shrugged off the injury and surged into the fight, whilst the other staggered and fell overboard. There was a twang of a crossbow and another pirate fell to the deck, the bolt protruding from his shoulder. A musket ball smacked into the railing near Alex, causing him to abandon his mop and seek cover beneath the cover over the top of the bow of the boat.

The superintendent was shouting multiple orders to his crew that appeared to be largely ignored. A marksman took aim at him as well, the shot thudding into the wheel. A pirate managed to get clear of the

melee on the main deck and raced up the stairs towards the ship's master. Kinney easily stepped inside the blow, then returned a vicious backhand swipe that cut deep into his side. The pirate staggered backwards then toppled over the railing onto the deck below.

The crew and guards were putting up a decent fight, and there were quite a few pirates who had fallen in the battle. Some of the prisoners decided to join in the melee, using their chains or picking up dropped weapons to attack their minders. Most of them though were viciously dealt with by the guards. Alex saw one convict hack at a guard with a machete, only to be run through with a pike. The guard in turn was skewered by a flamboyant looking pirate who sported a black moustache.

Then a large pirate with a metal arm weighed into the fray. He was swinging wildly, collecting heads and shoulders and leaving battered bodies in his wake. His appearance turned the tide of the battle, and pirates slowly wore down the crew. The deck was practically completely covered in gore and blood, and the fallen were being mercilessly trodden underfoot.

The pirates were soon mercilessly overpowering the crew, cutting them down and treading heavily on the

fallen. One or two of the crew surrendered, their weapons clattering to the deck. With the battle over, Superintendent Kinney put down his weapon and slumped to his knees. Through the throng, a pirate wearing a spectacular red jacket with felt sleeves and black leather boots ascended the stairs to the fore deck. His long black hair blew in the wind, showing more than a few flecks of grey, but the rest of his face was clean-shaven. His face was weather-worn, but it showed intelligence as well as strength. His green eyes glinted murderously. Another boom of thunder echoed out across the decks of both ships.

"I surrender, utterly. I simply request that you spare my life and the life of those guards who still remain alive. What you do with the prisoners and the *Vanguard* is entirely up to you," Kinney barely managed.

"Oh no, that won't do at all," the pirate captain replied. "You see, I have all these pirates to set an example for. I could kill you in cold blood," he continued, "but that would hardly show this motley lot my prowess with a long knife." He smiled, a wicked, but cunning grin. Alex tried to make himself as small as possible behind the barrel, but could not bear to look

away.

"On your feet. A duel, to the death. If you win, you might just get out of this alive."

With that, a large wave broke into the side of the *Vanguard*, sending the vessel creaking away from the pirate ship, rocking to the starboard side. The superintendent seized the moment, grabbed his short sword from the deck, pushing away from the captain and regaining his footing. The pirate, caught off guard by the wave, stumbled back, away from the duel but regained his balance and moved in. Another bolt of lighting, jagged and sharp, pierced the sky. Kinney slowly retreated as the captain advanced, their blades clashing in testing blows. They circled, Kinney stepping backwards surefooted, the captain advancing. Twice, thrice, a swish forward and back, watching, parrying. No real blows, just dancing blades. They circled past Alex, not much more than a foot away. Alex sat behind his cover, motionless, but the two were so engrossed in staying alive that they were completely oblivious to him. After they had completed another quarter circle around the upper deck, the captain lunged. Kinney parried successfully, and tried to counter blow, but the captain regained his footing and fended off the counter. The

superintendent continued his backward pedal, paced and sure. The captain continued to advance slowly, looking for an opening. Then, without warning, the superintendent stopped his backpedalling, and started to advance on the captain, thrusting and flashing his sword in a haphazard manner. Unsure, the captain was now on the back foot, moving backward toward the middle of the upper deck, parrying as best he could. Another large wave crashed into the ship and the superintendent lunged his blade into the captain's left arm. The pirate let out a groan, hardly audible over the wind and the waves, and staggered back, parrying madly.

Sensing the momentum had changed, Kinney advanced, using more aggressive thrusts and moves. The captain continued to backpedal towards Alex. The captain's attempts to stop the advance were deftly blocked and countered. The captain realised he was running out of room, and stepped sideways, lunging down at Kinney's legs. Kinney leapt over the swipe, bringing his own sword down towards the captain's back, but he had spun away and again the clash of steel rang out over the weather. They had spun completely around so that now the superintendent was

cornered in the bow. The captain flashed steel, trying to keep the head guard in his place. Alex watched in horror as the superintendent stumbled on his mop, inches away from Alex's hiding space .

"What the...?" he exclaimed as he noticed Alex for the first time. The pirate didn't need any more encouragement, and his blade cut deeply into Kinney's neck, almost severing it right through. His body collapsed at once, blood spurting from the wound.

"Thanks," he said, with a puzzled look upon his face. He then strode over to the wheel, raised his arms into the air, his blood soaked sword held high and yelled out "Huzzah!"

The rest of the crew replied, much louder.

"Right. Let's see what spoils there are," he shouted. Alex grabbed a rag from his swabbing gear, and walked over to the captain.

"Here you go," he said. "Press that on your arm." Blood was dripping through his fancy shirt. It almost the same hue.

"Thanks again," he said, fastening the cloth around his wound. "Down on main deck," he motioned with his head to where the other prisoners were being gathered. Rain began to fall steadily on the ship, cold,

harsh and blown about by the squall. Alex, for some strange reason, had picked up his mop. He leant on it, his knees weak from nervousness. Somehow the weasel ended up next to him again.

"If I don't make the cut, it's been nice knowing you," he muttered.

The captain had left the helm, and had gone to examine the damage of to the *Vanguard*. The metal armed pirate, who had obviously seen better days, approached the line up. Alex was able to see the device close up. Instead of a hand, a large three-fingered claw was in its place.

"Right!" He exclaimed, pointing with the metal arm. It moved surprisingly quickly, if a little jerkily. "We need replacements. Anyone who doesn't want to join the ranks of the *Narwhale*, you can go for a long walk off a short plank." He swung around to point to where some of the pirates had positioned a boarding gangplank where the railing had been shattered, beyond which the rough seas surged. None of the prisoners stirred. "That's what I thought."

He started sizing up the prisoners, beginning at the other end of the line. Several burly prisoners, one with dark skin and another huge specimen with an olive

complexion, had been instructed to move over to the stern. All of the slightly built ones were herded, some silently, some blabbing and cowering, to the plank where they were promptly ushered overboard. It was a horrible sound, hearing their last screams over the howling wind and wild sea. One prisoner resisted and was run through, with his still thrashing body pushed over the edge.

Alex could see where this was heading. He wasn't muscular, and though he could run fast and work hard if he had to, the description 'wiry' would have fitted him better if he hadn't spent the best part of the last five years behind a desk.

Soon it was the weasel's turn. He was dripping wet and had begun to shiver as well, but no one else seemed to be paying the weather any mind. There had only been about fifteen prisoners lined up.

"Why should I save your hide?" the one armed pirate asked.

For once the weasel had nothing to say.

"Right. Over the side," the pirate responded after ten seconds.

"I'm good with locks," the weaselly man finally said. "I can open these chains given a few minutes with

the right tools. And chests. And doors."

"Too late. Maybe if you were out of them already I'd be listening," the pirate retorted. And with Weasel snivelling, he was herded to the gangplank. Alex couldn't watch, as a metal digit pointed toward Alex's face, distracting him. His replacement arm was obviously longer than his other, coming surprisingly close to his nose from where the man stood. This man had a muscular frame, however was almost gaunt, and thinner from what he obviously once was. His face had dark rings around his eyes as though he had trouble sleeping. Perhaps it was because of the metal arm.

Alex didn't have any further time to look him over as he asked, "Good with a mop and bucket?"

"Yes, sir," Alex managed. He got a wry smile at the 'sir'.

"No need for that. There's not much to you. I don't think we need hangers on." Without any clearer explanation he turned on his heel and walked towards the captain. Another two pirates approached Alex.

"You heard him. Say good-bye," one of them growled. Alex was suddenly faced with two large scimitars pointed at him, crossed over each other in a near mockery of the pirate's flag. Alex, stalling for time,

slowly headed across to the plank.

"Hurry up," the same pirate muttered in a guttural tone. "We haven't got all day."

Alex stepped up onto the gangplank. Peering over, Alex observed that the deep blue seas, churned with white foam, had lost all traces of its previous visitors, who had sunk without a trace. Once again, he regretted what an idiot he had been to steal that money.

"Hold up!" The captain strode across to the gangplank. "Is this the last one, then?" He inquired of his crew.

"That's right, boss," one replied.

"I have need of one more," the captain replied. "Keep this one."

The pirates nodded, and stepped aside to allow Alex to get off the plank. "Come over here," the captain motioned with his head again, walking with Alex over to where several of his new crew were now sitting.

"Consider us even," the captain stated.

He then pulled aside his metal-armed first mate. "The damage to the *Vanguard* isn't as bad as it looks - even in this squall it's still sail-worthy. Leave a prize crew under José."

"Aye, captain," the first mate replied.

“Okay, get this lot aboard before the rain gets any heavier. We have at least a couple o’days sailing ahead of us fore we reach the cove.”

One by one the prisoners were assisted aboard the Narwhale. The bodies of guards, prisoners, crew, even pirates, were cast over the side with little ceremony, but not before any baubles or items of interest were removed. Boots were popular, and there were quite a few bodies cast over the side without them. A macabre litter trailed behind the boats as the bodies bobbed away in the white capped, stormy swell behind them.

"Captain," came the call over the wind from the crows nest. The first mate turned to look up at the pirate up in the nest.

"We'z better be moving, this squall's going to be getting worse fast," the moustached pirate shouted loudly over the sea and background noise. Even from Alex' vantage point, he could see a particularly black and foreboding front rolling towards them. The sea looked even rougher and darker beyond that, almost black, seething in the distance.

"Let's part ways then shall we?" the Captain stated to the first mate, ordering crew on final orders as

cargo was thrown from one deck to another in final preparations for departure.

The prisoners were ordered to follow a pirate who scurried up a narrow ladder made from rope with metal rungs strung between the vessels. Hugging it, the survivors scampered up to the *Narwhale*, despite their chains. They were herded below in one long line. Alex threw a look over his shoulder, to see the Captain at the helm of the *Narwhale*, motioning to some of the crew on the rigging. With a wrench that sent Alex stumbling to the timber work, the *Narwhale* floated free.

Ahead of him below deck he could hear the sounds of jingling, and metal scraping against metal. After five minutes or so, a small voice called out “Next!” and the line would advance. Alex would soon find out that the voice belonged to a rather short person. He had with him a mallet, some large tools that looked like sharp screwdrivers, and some smaller tools that were thinner than your average pencil. What looked like a large metal toothpick was sitting in his mouth. He was a chubby man, with round cheeks and had a neatly kept black moustache. He wore a fob watch, a specifically tailored pair of britches and a mid-blue jacket covering something plain and white underneath that looked like a

chef's apron.

"What? Never seen a halfling before?" the little man retorted, in a whining, affleunt accent.

"No," Alex replied, honestly.

"Hmmp," he added, then set to work removing the chains. He worked quickly, his stubby fingers easily manipulating the tools at his disposal. Within a couple of minutes, the lock clicked and Alex was able to discard the chains onto a pile in the corner.

"Thank you," Alex said, gleefully rubbing his wrists.

"You can thank me later by helping me prepare the main meal. I need a new assistant, seeing my previous one's been sent to the boneyard."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Yes. If you choose not to, I get Keg," and he motioned to a rather portly, but large pirate standing in the corner, "to take you above deck and cast you over the side. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Get changed, then come back. I will have finished by then. Next!" Alex took the only exit offered to him. As he wandered down the corridor there was loud, wooden groan. The ship lurched, Alex

crashed against the wall, and the ship was in motion again. He found the sleeping quarters easily enough, where he was greeted by a pirate who looked more scar than face. The pirate gave him the once over, then grabbed a set of britches for him.

Some of the other prisoners were already acquainting themselves with the pirate crew. Alex, thinking of his task, didn't dally, and changed quickly, then tossed his convict clothing into a barrel that was nearly full of prisoner clothing. He hastily returned to the galley to find the halfling packing away his tools.

"Have you worked in a kitchen before?" he asked.

"No," the former prisoner replied.

"Well then, it shouldn't take long to learn. This is a potato, this is a potato peeler. Think you can manage the rest?"

Alex nodded and set to work on a small mound of the vegetables. The halfling had removed his jacket and was busily preparing various items of food and putting them into a large pot over a metal cast iron stove, unaffected by the clanging of saucepans and pots hanging from hooks around the kitchen as the boat dipped violently. Alex was appreciative of the heat it

was generating, since it was had been cold and wet on deck. The knife he was using was obviously blunt, and he often removed more of the potato than what he should have. The halfling watched him for a moment or two before interrupting.

"Too slow," he stated and took around half the spuds off him and started peeling. Once they were completed, they were cut up into little chunks and tossed in the pot.

Next, he found himself washing up. Alex wasn't much faster at that, and before he had finished, the halfling had taken the pot off the stove and into the galley.

"Finish them later," he called out. Alex finished the chopping board he was washing and stepped into the dining area. All of the former prisoners were there, mingled with the regulars of the pirate crew. The captain was at the head of the table. Alex sat down at a spare seat at the far end of the table and grabbed a bowl when they were handed around. There was no ceremony. Once the stew had been doled into the bowl, the pirates started eating. The food was quite good, better than anything he had eaten over the last week.

When the meal had finished, the captain stood up. "This is induction for our new crew mates," he

begun with a deep, throaty voice, “I run a tidy ship. You answer to me and if you do something that I don't like, then your life expectancy will be very short indeed. There are four rules to remember. One: you do what you are told by anyone above you in rank, which to you new crew is everybody else. Two: you respect other people and their property. If you are caught stealing, I will make sure you suffer. In the worst case I will tie you to the *Narwhale's* horn until you are eaten by the seabirds. Three: if you have a beef with someone, you settle it on deck when time allows. If I catch you brawlin' then you both get a lick o' the cat and a night tied to the mast. Four: I'm the captain. Question my authority, and I will have you hung from the yard-arm, before casting you o'er the side. Any questions?”

There were none.

“Good. You'll find that I am a fair man, and I make sure all that serve me get their share of the plunder when the time comes. When this cruise comes to an end, you can take your money and leave, or sign up for another venture. Understand?”

The new crewmen nodded in the affirmative.

“Right then. That prison hulk had some good drink aboard her. Tonight we toast those who fell, and

those who have taken their places!” A couple of crewmen plopped bottles of wine onto the table, which were quickly, but crudely opened and tipped into waiting mugs.

Alex enjoyed the drink, he hadn't had such a luxury from quite some time. It was sweet, and it savoured every drop of it as it trickled down his throat. As the evening wore on, more bottles appeared and the singing begun. Alex decided that this was a good time to excuse himself.

"Not so fast, my little kitchen hand," the halfling said. "We have not finished in the galley."

With that, he was herded back into the ship's kitchen where all the bowls and cups had been piled into the sink, ready for washing up. It took a long while and his back started to ache. If that wasn't enough, he started to feel queasy because of the rocking of the ship. He felt as if he wasn't going to keep dinner down. He found a jug of water, and tipped part of it down his throat, hoping that would settle his queasy stomach. For some reason he wasn't sure which way was up but for the surroundings. The pans clattered and the herbs swung from the hooks above the shelves. Alex ploughed on until he had finished the washing, the

drying, then the stacking. Finally done, as the water swished down the plug hole, Alex added his dinner to it. After he had finished heaving he finished off the water in the jug and extinguished the lanterns.

A few of the crew, tired from the day's fighting, had fallen asleep on the table. He staggered past them, careful not to wake them, then ventured down the corridor to the sleeping quarters. He found them easily enough once he heard the snoring. Alex eventually found an empty bunk, and fell into it, despite the fact that it had obviously been occupied the previous night by someone else. Boots and a small locket were hung from the rafter above the hammock. In the dim light he could just make out a small painting of a lithe blonde lady dressed in a fancy green gown. He soon fell into a deep but disturbed sleep, wondering if the woman was a wife, a girlfriend, or if the locket had been stolen.

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