

THE MISTS OF TIME

by Tom Purdom

In a year of anniversary celebrations, the following story commemorates a particularly significant milestone. Tom Purdom sold his first story “Grieve for a Man” in February 1957 and it appeared exactly fifty years ago in the August issue of *Fantastic Universe*—edited by Hans Stefan Santesson. Tom’s second sale hit the stands at the same time, in the August 1957 *Science Fiction Quarterly*, which was edited by Robert Lowndes. Of these two tales, Tom says, “I didn’t hear about the second sale until the magazine came out, so I’ve always considered the *Fantastic Universe* story my first sale. The first chapter of the literary memoir I’m in the process of posting at www.philart.net/tompurdom discusses both stories. I’ve also posted “Grieve for a Man,” in case any Asimov’s readers would like to see what my first appearance in print looked like.” Tom tells us 1957 was important to him for other reasons as well. “It was the year the Russians launched Sputnik. I had been a space travel enthusiast since I was fourteen (I actually became interested in space travel before I started reading SF). Sputnik probably had a permanent effect on my personality. I belonged to one of the last groups to grow up hearing our elders tell us space travel was impossible. Sputnik proved we younger people knew what we were talking about. In one year, I sold my first story, reached full legal adulthood, met my wife, and acquired a permanent, possibly insufferable, confidence in my own judgment.”

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The cry from the lookout perked up every officer, rating, and common seaman on deck. The two masted brig they were intercepting was being followed by sharks—a sure sign it was a slaver. Slave ships fouled the ocean with a trail of bodies as they worked their way across the Atlantic.

John Harrington was standing in front of the rear deckhouse when the midshipman’s yell floated down from the mast. His three officers were loitering around him with their eyes fixed on the sails three miles off their port bow—a mass of wind filled cloth that had aroused, once again, the hope that their weeks of tedious, eventless cruising were coming to an end.

The ship rolling under their own feet, HMS *Sparrow*, was a sixty-foot schooner—one of the smallest warships carried on the rolls of Her Majesty’s navy. There was no raised quarterdeck her commander could pace in majestic isolation. The officers merely stood in front of the

deckhouse and looked down a deck crowded with two boats, spare spars, and the sweating bodies of crewmen who were constantly working the big triangular sails into new positions in response to the shipmaster's efforts to draw the last increment of movement from the insipid push of the African coastal breezes. A single six-pound gun, mounted on a turntable, dominated the bow.

Sub-Lieutenant Bonfors opened his telescope and pointed it at the other ship. He was a broad, well padded young man and he beamed at the image in his lenses with the smile of a gourmand who was contemplating a particularly interesting table.

"*Blackbirds*, gentlemen. She's low in the water, too. I believe a good packer can squeeze five hundred prime blackbirds into a hull that long—twenty-five hundred good English pounds if they're all still breathing and pulsing."

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It was the paradox of time travel. You were there and you weren't there, the laws of physics prohibited it and it was the laws of physics that got you there. You were the cat that was neither dead nor alive, the photon that could be in two places at once, the wave function that hadn't collapsed. You slipped through a world in which you could see but not be seen, exist and not exist. Sometimes there was a flickering moment when you really were there—a moment, oddly enough, when they could see you and you couldn't see them. It was the paradox of time travel—a paradox built upon the contradictions and inconsistencies that lie at the heart of the sloppy, fundamentally unsolvable mystery human beings call the physical universe.

For Emory FitzGordon the paradox meant that he was crammed into an invisible, transparent space/time bubble, strapped into a two-chair rig shoulder to shoulder with a bony, hyperactive young woman, thirty feet above the tepid water twenty miles off the coast of Africa, six years after the young Princess Victoria had become Queen of England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and all the heathen lands Her government ruled beyond the seas. The hyperactive young woman, in addition, was an up and-coming video auteur who possessed all the personality quirks traditionally associated with the arts.

"Four minute check completed," the hal running the bubble said. "Conditions on all four coordinates register satisfactory and stable. You have full clearance for two hours, provisional clearance for five hours."

Giva Lombardo's hands had already started bustling across the screenbank attached to her chair. The cameras attached to the rig had started recording as soon as the bubble had completed the space/time relocation. Giva was obviously rearranging the angles and magnifications chosen by the hal's programming.

"It didn't take them long to start talking about that twenty-five hundred pounds, did it?" Giva murmured.

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John Harrington glanced at the other two officers. A hint of mischief flickered across his face. He tried to maintain a captainly gravity when he was on deck but he was, after all, only twenty-three.

"So how does that break down, Mr. Bonfors?"

"For the slaves alone," the stout Sub-Lieutenant said, "*conservatively*, it's two hundred and sixty pounds for you, eighty-nine for your hard working first lieutenant, seventy-two for our two esteemed colleagues here, sixteen for the young gentleman in the lookout, and two and a half pounds for every hand in the crew. The value of the ship itself might increase every share by another fifth, depending on the judgment of our lords at the Admiralty."

The sailing master, Mr. Whitjoy, rolled his eyes at the sky. The gunnery officer, Sub-Lieutenant Terry, shook his head.

"I see there's one branch of mathematics you seem to have thoroughly mastered, Mr. Bonfors," Terry said.

"I may not have your knowledge of the calculus and other arcane matters, Mr. Terry," Bonfors said, "but I know that the quantity of roast beef and claret a man can consume is directly related to the mass of his purse."

Harrington raised his head. His eyes ranged over the rigging as if he were inspecting every knot. It would take them two hours—perhaps two and a half—to close with the slave ship. *Sparrow* was small and lightly armed but he could at least be thankful she was faster than her opposition. Most of the ships the Admiralty assigned to the West African anti-slavery squadron were two-masted brigs that wallowed through the water like sick whales.

How would they behave when the shooting started? Should he be glad they were still bantering? This would be the first time any of them had actually faced an armed enemy. Mr. Whitjoy was a forty-year-old veteran of

the struggle against the Corsican tyrant, but his seagoing service had been limited to blockade duty in the last three years of the Napoleonic wars. For the rest of them—including their captain and all the hands—"active service" had been a placid round of uneventful cruises punctuated by interludes in the seamier quarters of foreign ports.

"We'll keep flying the Portuguese flag until we come into range," Harrington said. "We still have a bit of ship handling ahead of us. We may sail a touch faster than an overloaded slaver but let's not forget they have four guns on each side. Let's make sure we're positioned straight across their bow when we bring them to, Mr. Whitjoy."

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Giva had leaped on the prize money issue during their first planning session. She hadn't known the British sailors received special financial bonuses when she had applied for the job. She had circled around the topic, once she became aware of it, as if she had been tethered to it with a leash.

The scholar assigned to oversee the project, Dr. Peter LeGrundy, was a specialist in the cultural and social history of the Victorian British Empire. Peter claimed he normally avoided the details of Victorian military history—a subject his colleagues associated with excessive popular appeal—but in this case he had obviously had to master the relevant complexities. The ships assigned to the West African anti-slavery patrol had received five pounds for every slave they liberated, as a substitute for the prize money they would have received if they had been fighting in a conventional nation-state war. Prize money had been a traditional wartime incentive. The wages the Crown paid its seaborne warriors had not, after all, been princely. The arbitrary five pound figure had actually been a rather modest compensation, in Peter's opinion, compared to the sums the *Sparrow's* crew would have received in wartime, from a cargo the government could actually sell.

Peter had explained all that to Giva—several times. And received the same reaction each time.

"There were five hundred captives on that ship," Giva said. "Twenty-five hundred pounds would be what—two or three million today? Audiences aren't totally stupid, Peter. I think most of them will manage to see that the great anti-slavery crusade could be a very profitable little business."

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John Harrington had been reading about the Napoleonic Wars ever since his youngest uncle had given him a biography of Lord Nelson for his ninth birthday. None of the books he had read had captured the stately tempo of naval warfare. He knew the British had spent three hours advancing toward the Franco-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar, but most authors covered that phase of the battle in a handful of paragraphs and hurried straight to the thunder that followed. Lieutenant Bonfors and Lieutenant Terry both made two trips to their quarters while *Sparrow* plodded across the gentle African waves toward their quarry. They were probably visiting their chamberpots, Harrington presumed. Mr. Whitjoy, on the other hand, directed the handling of the ship with his usual stolid competence. Harrington thought he caught Whitjoy praying at one point, but the master could have been frowning at a patch of deck that needed a touch of the holystone.

Harrington had stifled his own urge to visit the chamberpot. He had caught two of the hands smiling the second time Bonfors had trudged off the deck.

It had been Midshipman Montgomery who had spotted the sharks. The other midshipman, Davey Clarke, had replaced Montgomery in the lookout. Montgomery could have gone below, but he was circling the deck instead. He stopped at the gun every few minutes and gave it a thorough inspection. Montgomery would be assisting Mr. Terry when the time came to open fire.

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Giva had started defending her artistic integrity at the very beginning of her pre-hiring interview. "I get the final edit," Giva had advised the oversight committee. "I won't work under any other conditions. If it's got my name on it, it represents my take on the subject."

Giva had been in Moscow, working on a historical drama. Emory had been staring at seven head-and-shoulder images on his living room imaging stage and Giva had been the only participant in the montage who had chosen a setting that accented her status. All the other participants had selected neutral backdrops. Giva had arranged herself so the committee could see, just beyond her shoulder, two actors who were dressed in flat, twenty-first century brain-link hats.

"There's one thing I absolutely have to say, Mr. FitzGordon," Giva

said. "I appreciate your generosity. I will try to repay you by turning out the best possible product I can. But please don't think you can expect to have any influence on the way I do it. I'm not interested in creating public relations fog jobs for wealthy families."

Emory had listened to Giva's tirade with the thin, polite smile a tolerant parent might bestow on a child. "I wouldn't expect you to produce a fog job," Emory responded. "I believe the facts in this case will speak for themselves. I can't deny that I specified this particular incident when I offered the agency this grant partly because my ancestor was involved in it. I wouldn't have known the Royal Navy had engaged in an anti-slavery campaign if it hadn't been part of our family chronicles. But I also feel this episode is a typical example of the courage and devotion of a group of men who deserve to be remembered and honored. The crews of the West African anti-slavery patrol saved a hundred thousand human beings from slavery. They deserve a memorial that has been created by an honest, first-class artist."

The committee had already let Emory know Giva Lombardo was the candidate they wanted to hire. Giva had friends in the Agency for Chronautical Studies, it seemed.

She also had ability and the kind of name recognition that would attract an audience. Emory had been impressed with both the docs that had catapulted Giva out of the would-be class. The first doc had been a one hour essay on women who bought sexually enhancing personality modifications. The second had been a rhapsodic portrait of a cruise on a fully automated sailing ship. The cruise doc was essentially an advertisement funded by the cruise company, but it had aroused the enthusiasm of the super-aesthete audience.

Emory's family had been dealing with artists for a hundred and fifty years. His great-grandfather's encounter with the architect who designed his primary residence was a standard item in popular accounts of the history of architecture. It had become a family legend encrusted with advice and observations. *All interactions between artists and the rich hinge on one basic fact*, Emory's great-grandfather had said. *You need the creatives. The creatives need your money.*

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Harrington placed his hands behind his back. The approach was coming to an end. Mr. Whitjoy had placed *Sparrow* on a course that would

cross the slaver's bow in just four or five minutes.

He took a deep breath and forced the tension out of his neck muscles. He was the captain of a ship of war. He must offer his crew a voice that sounded confident and unperturbed.

"Let's show them our true colors, Mr. Whitjoy. You may advise them of our request as soon as we start to raise our ensign, Mr. Terry."

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Lieutenant Bonfors led the boarding party. The slaver hove to in response to Lieutenant Terry's shot across its bow and Lieutenant Bonfors settled his bulk in the stern of a longboat and assumed a rigid, upright dignity that reminded Emory of the recordings of his great-grandfather he had viewed when he had been a child. Harrison FitzGordon had been an ideal role model, in the opinion of Emory's father. He was courteous to everyone he encountered, according to the family catechism, but he never forgot his position in society. He always behaved like someone who assumed the people around him would treat him with deference—just as Lieutenant Bonfors obviously took it for granted that others would row and he would be rowed.

Bonfors maintained the same air of haughty indifference when he hauled himself aboard the slaver and ran his eyes down its guns. Two or three crewmen were lounging near the rear of each gun. Most of them had flintlock pistols stuck in their belts.

A tall man in a loose blue coat hurried across the deck. He held out his hand and Bonfors put his own hands behind his back.

"I am Sub-Lieutenant Barry Richard Bonfors of Her Majesty's Ship *Sparrow*. I am here to inspect your ship and your papers in accordance with the treaties currently in effect between my government and the government of the nation whose flag is flying from your masthead."

"I am William Zachary," the officer in the blue coat said, "and I am the commander of this ship. If you will do me the honor of stepping into my cabin, I will be happy to present you with our papers."

"I would prefer to start with an inspection of your hold."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Sub-Lieutenant. I assure you our papers will give you all the information you need."

“The treaties in effect between our countries require the inspection of your entire ship, sir. I would be neglecting my duties if I failed to visit your hold.”

Captain Zachary gestured at the guns. “I have two twelve pound guns and two eighteen pounders on each side of my ship, Sub-Lieutenant. You have, as far as I can tell, one six pounder. I have almost fifty hands. What do you have? Twenty-five? And some of them boys? I’m certain a visit to my cabin and an inspection of my papers will provide you with a satisfactory report to your superiors. As you will see from our papers, our hold is stuffed with jute and bananas.”

Zachary was speaking with an accent that sounded, to Emory’s ear, a lot like some of the varieties of English emitted by the crew on the *Sparrow*. Giva’s microphone arrangement had picked up some of the cries coming from the slaver’s crew as Bonfors had made his progress across the waters, and Emory had heard several examples of the best known English nouns and verbs. The ship was flying a Brazilian flag, Emory assumed, because it offered the crew legal advantages they would have missed if they had sailed under their true colors. British citizens who engaged in the slave trade could be hanged as pirates.

The legal complexities of the anti-slavery crusade had been one of the subjects that had amused Emory when he had been a boy. The officers of the West African Squadron had operated under legal restrictions that were so complicated the Admiralty had issued them an instruction manual they could carry in their uniforms. The Royal Navy could stop the ships of some nations and not others, and it could do some things on one country’s ships and other things on others.

Emory had been five when he had first heard about John Harrington’s exploits off the African coast. Normally the FitzGordon adults just mentioned it now and then. You were reminded you had an ancestor who had liberated slaves when your elders felt you were spending too much time thinking about some of the other things your ancestors had done, such as their contributions to the coal mining and timber cutting industries. In Emory’s case, it had become a schoolboy enthusiasm. He had scoured the databanks for information on Lieutenant John Harrington and the great fifty year struggle in which Harrington had participated. Almost no one outside of his family had heard about the Royal Navy’s anti-slavery campaign, but the historians who had studied it had all concluded it was one of the great epics of the sea. Young officers in small ships had fought the slavers for over half a century. They had engaged in hotly contested ship to ship actions. They

had ventured up the rivers that communicated with the interior and attacked fortified slaveholding pens. Thousands of British seamen had died from the diseases that infested the African coast. The African slave markets north of the equator had been shut down. One hundred thousand men, women, and children had been rescued from the horrors of the slave ships.

The campaign had been promoted by a British politician, Lord Palmerston, who had tried to negotiate a general international treaty outlawing the slave trade. Palmerston had failed to achieve his goal and British diplomats had been forced to negotiate special agreements country by country. The officers on the spot were supposed to keep all the agreements straight and remember they could be fined, or sued, if they looked in the wrong cupboard or detained the wrong ship.

In this case, the situation was relatively straightforward. The ship was flying the flag of Brazil, and the *Sparrow* therefore had the right to examine its papers and search its hull. If the searchers found any evidence the ship was engaging in the slave trade—such as the presence of several hundred chained Africans—the *Sparrow* could seize the slaver and bring the ship, its crew, and all its contents before the courts the navy had established in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

“Look at that,” Emory said. “Look at the way he’s handling himself.”

Bonfors had turned his back on Captain Zachary. He was walking toward the ladder on the side of the ship with the same unhurried serenity he had exhibited when he came aboard.

Did Bonfors’s back itch? Was he counting the number of steps that stretched between his present position and the minimal safety he would enjoy when he reached the boat? For Emory it was a thrilling moment—a display of the values and attitudes that had shaped his own conduct since he had been a child. Most of the officers on the *Sparrow* shared a common heritage. Their family lines had been molded, generation after generation, by the demands of the position they occupied in their society.

“You are now provisionally cleared for six hours total,” the hal said. “All coordinates register satisfactory and stable.”

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The slaver was turning. Harrington noted the hands in the rigging making minor adjustments to the sails and realized the slaver’s bow was shifting to the right—so it could bring its four starboard guns to bear on

Sparrow.

Mr. Whitjoy had seen the movement, too. His voice was already bellowing orders. He had been told to hold *Sparrow* lined up across the slaver's bow. He didn't need further instructions.

Conflicting courses churned across Harrington's brain. Bonfors had reboarded his boat and was still crossing the gap between the ships. The slave ship couldn't hit the boat with the side guns, but it had a small chaser on the bow—a four pounder that could shatter the boat with a single lucky shot. The wind favored the slaver, too. The two ships had hove to with the wind behind the slaver, hitting its sails at a twenty degree angle....

He hurried down the narrow deck toward the bow. Terry and Montgomery both looked at him expectantly. The swivel gun was loaded with chain shot. The slow match smoldered in a bucket.

"Let's give our good friend Mr. Bonfors time to get aboard," Harrington said.

"Aren't you afraid they'll fire on the boat with their chaser?" Montgomery said. "Sir."

Terry started to say something and Harrington stopped him with his hand. Montgomery should have kept his thoughts to himself, but this wasn't the time to rebuke him.

"It's obvious Mr. Bonfors didn't finish the inspection," Harrington said. "But we won't be certain they refused to let him go below until he makes his report. We don't want to give the lawyers any unnecessary grounds for complaint."

He glanced around the men standing near the gun. "Besides, everybody says these slavers tend to be poor shots. They're businessmen. They go to sea to make money."

He paused for what he hoped would be an effect. "We go to sea to make *war*."

Montgomery straightened. Harrington thought he saw a light flash in the eyes of one of the seamen in the gun crew. He turned away from the gun and made his way toward the stern with his hands behind his back, in exactly the same pose his second commanding officer, Captain Ferris, would have assumed. A good commander had to be an actor. Good actors

never ruined an exit line with too much talk.

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Emory had started campaigning for Giva's removal a week after he'd audited the first planning meeting. Giva had nagged at the prize money issue for a tiresome fifteen minutes at the end of the fourth meeting and Emory had maintained his link to Peter LeGrundy after she had exited. Giva had still been in Russia at that state of their association. Emory was staying at his New York residence, where he was sampling the opening premieres of the entertainment season. Peter had based himself in London, so he could take a firsthand look at the Royal Navy archives.

"Are you really sure we can't do anything about her supporters in the chronautical bureaucracy?" Emory said. "It seems to me there should be some *small* possibility we can overcome their personal predilections and convince them she has a bias that is obviously incompatible with scholarship. A ten minute conversation with her would probably be sufficient."

"She's peppery, Emory. She feels she has to assert herself. She's young and she's an artist."

"And what's she going to be like when she's actually recording? We'll only have one opportunity, Peter—the only opportunity anybody will ever have. Whatever she records, that's it."

Under the rules laid down by the chrono bureaucrats, the *Sparrow's* encounter with the slaver was surrounded by a restricted zone that encompassed hundreds of square miles of ocean and twenty hours of time. No one knew what would happen if a bubble entered a space/time volume occupied by another bubble—and the bureaucrats had decided they would avoid the smallest risk they would ever find out. The academics and fundraisers who had written the preamble to the agency's charter had decreed that its chrononauts would "dispel the mists of time with disciplined onsite observations," and the careerists and political appointees who ran the agency had decreed each site would receive only one dispelling. Once their bubble left the restricted zone, no one else would ever return to it.

"She's what they want," Peter said. "I've counted the votes. There's only one way you can get her out of that bubble—withdraw your grant and cancel the project."

"And let the media have a fiesta reporting on the rich idler who tried to

bribe a committee of dedicated scholars.”

Peter was being cautious, in Emory’s opinion. He could have changed the committee’s mind if he had made a determined effort. Giva had flaunted her biases as if she thought they were a fashion statement. But Peter also knew he would make some permanent enemies among the losing minority if he pressed his case.

Peter was a freelance scholar who lived from grant to grant. He had never managed to land a permanent academic position. He was balancing two forces that could have a potent impact on his future: a rich individual who could be a fertile source of grants and a committee composed of scholars who could help him capture a permanent job.

Emory could, of course, offer Peter some inducements that might overcome his respect for Giva’s supporters. But that was a course that had its own risks. You never knew when an academic might decide his scholarly integrity had to be asserted. In the end, Emory had adopted a more straightforward approach and applied for a seat in the bubble under the agency’s Chrono Tourist program. The extra passenger would cost the agency nothing and the fee would increase his grant by 30 percent. Giva would still control the cameras on the bubble, but he could make his own amateurish record with his personal recording implant. He would have evidence he could use to support any claim that she had distorted the truth.

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Harrington could have leaned over the side of the ship and called for a report while Bonfors was still en route, but he was certain Captain Ferris would never have done that. Neither would Nelson. Instead, he stood by the deckhouse and remained at his post while Bonfors climbed over the side, saluted the stern, and marched across the deck.

“He threatened me,” Bonfors said. “He pointed at his guns and told me I could learn all I needed to know from his account books.”

“He refused to let you visit the hold?”

“He told me I could learn all I needed from his books. He told me he had eight guns and fifty hands and we only had one gun and twenty-five.”

Harrington frowned. Would a court interpret that as a threat? Could a lawyer claim Bonfors had deliberately misinterpreted the slave captain’s words?

“It was a clear refusal,” Bonfors said. “He gave me no indication he was going to let me inspect the hold.”

Harrington turned toward the gun. He sucked in a good lungful and enjoyed a small pulse of satisfaction when he heard his voice ring down the ship.

“You may fire at your discretion, Mr. Terry.”

Montgomery broke into a smile. Terry said something to his crew and the lead gunner drew the slow match from its bucket.

Terry folded his arms over his chest and judged the rise and fall of the two ships. Chain shot consisted of two balls, connected by a length of chain. It could spin through the enemy rigging and wreak havoc on any rope or wood that intersected its trajectory.

Terry moved his arm. The lead gunner laid the end of the match across the touchhole.

It was the first time in his life Harrington had stood on a ship that was firing on other human beings. It was the moment he had been preparing for since he had been a twelve-year-old novice at the Naval School at Portsmouth, but the crash of the gun still caught him by surprise.

Montgomery was standing on tiptoe staring at the other ship. Terry was already snapping out orders. The sponger was pulling his tool out of its water bucket. Drill and training were doing their job. On the entire ship, there might have been six men who could feel the full weight of the moment, undistracted by the demands of their posts—and one of them was that supreme idler, the commanding officer.

The slaver’s foremast quivered. A rip spread across a topsail. Bonfors pulled his telescope out of his coat and ran it across the slaver’s upper rigging.

“I can see two lines dangling from the foretopsail,” Bonfors said.

Harrington was playing his own telescope across the slaver’s deck. Four men had gathered around the bowchaser. The two ships were positioned so the slaver’s ball would hit the *Sparrow* toward the rear midships—a little forward of the exact spot where he was standing

He had assumed they should start by destroying the slaver's sails. Then, when there was no danger their quarry could slip away, they could pick it off at their leisure, from positions that kept them safe from its broadsides. Should he change that plan merely because he was staring at the muzzle of the enemy gun? Wouldn't it make more sense to fire at the gun? Even though it was a small, hard-to-hit target?

It was a tempting thought. The slavers might even strike their colors if the shot missed the stern gun and broke a few bodies as it hurtled down the deck.

It was a thought generated by fear.

"Well started, Mr. Terry. Continue as you are."

The slaver's gun flashed. There was a short pause—just time enough to feel himself stiffen—and then, almost simultaneously, his brain picked up the crash of the gun and the thud of the ball striking the side of *Sparrow's* hull.

The ball had hit the ship about where he had guessed it would. If it had been aimed a few degrees higher, it would have crossed the deck three steps to his right.

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The *Sparrow's* gun fired its second shot moments after the slaver's ball hit the hull. The sponger shoved his tool down the gun barrel, the crew fell into their drill, and the *Sparrow* hurled a third ball across the gap while the slaver's crew was still loading their second shot.

"The slaver's got a crew working on the rear boat," Giva said.

Emory had been watching the two gun crews and looking for signs they were actually creating some damage. The third shot from the *Sparrow's* gun had drawn an excited, arms-raised leap from the midshipman posted with the gun crew. The upper third of the slaver's forward mast had bounced away from the lower section, and sagged against the rigging.

Harrington's report to the Admiralty said the slaver had brought out a boat and used it to pull the ship around, to bring its broadside into play. Harrington hadn't said when they had lowered the boat. Emory had assumed they had done it after the battle had raged for awhile.

“It looks like they’re going to lower it on the other side of their ship,” Emory said. “Is that going to cause any problems?”

“The rotation program can correct for most of the deficiencies. We can always have a talking head explain some of the tactics—some professor who’s goofy about old weapons. We could even have you do it, Emory. You probably know more about the anti-slavery patrol than Peter and all the rest of the committee combined. That could be a real tinger—the hero’s descendant talking about the ancestor he hero-worshipped as a boy. After he had actually seen him in action.”

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Harrington was making another calculation. The slaver’s boat was pulling the slaver’s bow into the wind. There was no way Mr. Whitjoy could stay with the bow as it turned and avoid a broadside. Should he pull out of range, circle around, and place *Sparrow* across the enemy’s stern? Or should he hold his current position, take the broadside, and inflict more damage on their sails?

The blow to the slaver’s mast had weakened its sailing capabilities but it wasn’t decisive. He wanted them dead in the water—totally at his mercy.

The slaver’s bow gun was already pointing away from *Sparrow*. There would be a period—who knew how long?—when *Sparrow* could fire on the slaver and the slaver couldn’t fire back.

“Hold position, Mr. Whitjoy. Keep up the good work, Mr. Terry.”

Harrington was holding his pocket watch in his hand. The swivel gun roared again and he noted that Terry’s crew was firing a shot every minute and twenty seconds.

He put his hands behind his back and watched the enemy ship creep around. It was all a matter of luck. The balls from the slaver’s broadside would fly high or low—or pass over the deck at the height of a young commander’s belly. They would intersect the place where you were standing or pass a few feet to your right or left. The odds were on your side.

And there was nothing you could do about it.

Bonfors glanced back. He saw what Harrington was doing and

resumed his telescopic observations of the enemy ship.

Terry's crew fired three more times while the slaver made its turn. The second shot cut the broken topmast free from its support lines and sent it sliding through the rigging to the deck. The third shot slammed into the mainmast with an impact that would have made every captive in the hold howl with joy if they could have seen the result—and understood what it meant. The top of the mast lurched to the right. The whole structure, complete with spars and furled sails, toppled toward the deck and sprawled over the slaver's side.

Harrington felt himself yield to an uncontrollable rush of emotion. “*Take her about, Mr. Whitjoy! Take us out of range.*”

Whitjoy barked orders. Hands raced to their stations. The big triangular main sail swung across *Sparrow's* deck. The hand at the wheel adjusted the angle of the rudder and Harrington's ship began to turn away from the wind.

Some of the crew on the other ship had left their guns and rushed to the fallen sail. With luck, one or two of their compatriots would be lying under the wreckage.

If there was one virtue the Navy taught you, it was patience. You stood your watches, no matter how you felt. You endured storms that went on and on, for days at a time, without any sign they were coming to an end. You waited out calms. And now you locked yourself in your post and watched the elephantine motions of the ships, as *Sparrow* turned away from the wind, and the muzzles of the enemy guns slowly came to bear on the deck you were standing on....

The flash of the first gun caught him by surprise. He would have waited at least another minute before he fired if he had been commanding the other ship. A huge noise whined past *Sparrow's* stern. The second gun lit up a few seconds later, and he realized they were firing one gun at a time.

This time the invisible Thing passed over his head, about fifty feet up. Mr. Terry fired the swivel gun and he heard Montgomery's treble shout a word of encouragement at the ball.

The slaver hurled its third shot. A tremendous bang shook the entire length of *Sparrow's* hull. He looked up and down the deck, trying to find

some sign of damage, and saw Montgomery covering his face with both hands.

A gunner grabbed Montgomery's shoulders. Terry stepped in front of the boy and seized his wrists. The rest of the gun crew gathered around.

"Mr. Bonfors—please see what the trouble is. See if you can get the gun back in action."

Bonfors shot him one of the most hostile looks he had ever received from another human being. It only lasted a moment but Harrington knew exactly what his second in command was thinking. The captain had seen an unpleasant duty and passed it to the appropriate subordinate. They both knew it was the right thing to do—the only thing a captain *could* do—but that didn't alter the basic fact that the coldhearted brute had calmly handed you a job that both of you would have given almost anything to avoid.

A crewman was standing by the railing near the bow. He pointed at the railing and Harrington understood what had happened. The big bang had been a glancing blow from a cannonball. Wooden splinters had flown off the rail at the speed of musket balls. One of the splinters had apparently hit Montgomery in the face.

* * * *

"It looks like we now know who Montgomery is," Emory said.

Giva was looking at a rerun on her display. "I got it all. The camera had him centered the whole time. I lost him when they all crowded around him. But I got the moment he was hit."

Lieutenant Bonfors had reached the gun and started easing the crew away from Montgomery with a mixture of jovial comments and firm pushes. "Let's keep our minds on our work, gentlemen. Take Mr. Montgomery to the captain's cabin, Hawksbill. I believe we've got time for one more shot before we pull away from our opponent, Mr. Terry."

Their planning sessions had contained one moment of pure harmony. They had all agreed Giva would have two cameras continuously tracking both midshipmen. They knew one of the boys was going to be hit but they didn't know which one. They knew the boy was referred to as Mr. Montgomery in Harrington's report but they didn't know what he looked like or when it would happen. They only knew *Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Clarke acquitted themselves with courage and competence. I regret to report*

that Mr. Montgomery has lost the sight of his left eye. He is bearing his misfortune with commendable cheerfulness.

* * * *

Sparrow put a solid half mile between its stern and the slaver before it turned into a long, slow curve that ended with it bearing down on the slaver's stern. The men in the slaver's boat tried to turn with it, but Mr. Whitjoy outmaneuvered them. The duel between sail power and oar power came to an abrupt end as soon as *Sparrow* drew within firing range. Harrington ordered Terry to fire on the boat, the second shot raised a fountain of water near the boat's bow, and every slaver in the boat crew lunged at the ladder that hung from the side of their ship.

Bonfors chuckled as he watched them scramble onto the deck. "They don't seem to have much tolerance for being shot at, do they?"

Harrington was eyeing the relative positions of the two ships. In another five minutes *Sparrow* would be lying directly behind the slaver's stern, poised to hurl ball after ball down the entire length of the other ship.

"You may fire at the deck as you see fit, Mr. Terry. We'll give them three rounds. And pause to see if they strike."

* * * *

"They're opening the hatch," Emory said.

Captain Zachary and four of his men were crouching around the hatch in the center of the slave ship. They had drawn their pistols and they were all holding themselves close to the deck, in anticipation of the metal horror that could fly across their ship at any moment.

The four crewmen dropped through the hatch. Captain Zachary slithered backward and crouched on one knee, with his pistol clutched in both hands.

* * * *

Harrington threw out his arm as soon as he saw the first black figures stumble into the sunlight. "Hold your fire, Mr. Terry."

The slavers had arranged themselves so he could enjoy an

unobstructed view of the slaves. The Africans were linked together with chains, but the captain and his crew were still training guns on them. Two of the slaves slumped to the deck as they came out of the hold. Their companions picked them up and dragged them away from the hatch.

“I’d say a third of them appear to be women,” Bonfors said.

Harrington raised his telescope and verified Bonfors’ estimate. One of the women was holding a child.

He lowered his telescope and pushed it closed. “Organize a boarding party, Mr. Bonfors. I will lead it. You will take command of the ship.”

* * * *

“My God,” Emory said. “He didn’t waste a second.”

They had known what Harrington was going to do. It was in his report. But nothing in the written record had prepared Emory for the speed of his decision.

I ascertained that we could no longer punish their crew with our gun , Harrington had written, and I therefore determined to take their ship by assault, with one of our boats. The presence of the unfortunate innocents meant that our adversaries could repair their masts before our very eyes and perhaps slip away in the night. There was, in addition, the danger they would adopt the infamous course others have taken in such a situation and avoid prosecution by consigning their cargo to the sea.

* * * *

Terry volunteered at once. Davey Clarke wanted to go, but Harrington decreed they couldn’t risk another midshipman.

“We’d have a fine time keeping the ship afloat with both of our young gentlemen laid up, Davey.”

The hands obviously needed encouragement. Four men stepped forward. The expressions on the rest of them convinced Harrington he had to give Bonfors some support.

“A double share for every man who volunteers,” Harrington called out. “Taken from the captain’s portion.”

A ball from the slaver's stern gun ploughed into the water forty feet from *Sparrow's* port side. Bonfors' arm shot toward the splash while it was still hanging over the waves. "It's the easiest money you'll ever earn, lads. You've seen how these fellows shoot."

In the end, fifteen men shuffled up to the line. That would leave ten on the *Sparrow*—enough to get the ship back to port if worst came to worst.

* * * *

Giva smiled. "He just doubled their profit, didn't he? He didn't mention that in his report."

* * * *

Harrington placed himself in the front of the boat. Terry sat in the back, where the ranking officer would normally sit.

Their positions wouldn't matter that much during the approach. The slavers would be firing down from the deck. They would all be equally exposed. When they initiated the assault, however, he had to be in front. The whole enterprise might fail if he went down—but it was certain to fail if the men felt their captain was huddling in the rear. The assault had been his idea, after all.

They had boarded the boat on *Sparrow's* starboard side, with *Sparrow's* hull between them and the enemy guns. For the first few seconds after Terry gave the order, they traveled along the hull. Then they cleared the bow.

And there it was. There was nothing between him and the stern gun of the enemy ship but a hundred yards of sunlight and water.

Terry was supposed to steer them toward the rear of the slaver's starboard side. They had agreed he would aim them at a point that would accomplish two objectives. He would keep the boat outside the angle the slaver's broadside could cover and he would minimize the time they would spend inside the stern gun's field of fire. Terry was the best man to hold the tiller. No one on *Sparrow* had a better understanding of the strengths and limitations of nautical artillery.

They had overcome their boat's initial resistance as they had slid

down *Sparrow's* hull. Terry called out his first firm "*Stroke!*" and the bow shot toward its destination. Terry gave the rowers two cycles of *stroke* and *lift* at a moderate pace. Then he upped the pace and kept increasing it with every cycle.

Every push of the oars carried them out of the danger presented by the stern gun. But it also carried them toward the armed men who were crowding around the rail.

Harrington's hands tightened on the weapons he was holding—a pistol in his right hand, a cutlass in his left. He was keeping his fingers on the butt of the pistol, well away from the trigger and the possibility he would fire the gun by accident and leave himself one bullet short and looking like a fool. Two more pistols were tucked into his belt, right and left. The men behind him were all equipped with two pistols, two loaded muskets wrapped in oilcloth, and a cutlass laid across their feet.

The stern gun flashed. The impulse to squeeze himself into a package the size of his hat seemed irresistible but he focused his eyes on the side of the slaver and discovered he could hold himself fixed in place until he heard the bang of the gun reaching him from a distance that seemed as remote as the moons of Jupiter.

"*Stroke ... lift ... stroke ... lift.*"

Was there anything more beautiful than the crash of a gun that had just fired in your direction? The noise had made its way across the water and you were still alive. You could be certain four pounds of iron had sailed harmlessly past you, instead of slamming into your bones or knocking holes in your boat and mutilating your shipmates.

"That should be the last we'll hear from that thing," a voice muttered behind him.

"I should hope so," a brasher voice said. "Unless these darkiewhippers have picked up some pointers from Mr. Terry in the last half hour."

The second voice belonged to a hand named Bobby Dawkins—a veteran in his fourth decade who was noted for his monkeyish agility and the stream of good-natured comments he bestowed on everything that happened around him. Dawkins had been the first man to volunteer after Harrington had augmented the cash reward.

* * * *

Armed men were lining up along the rail of the slave ship. More men were falling in behind them.

Emory ran his eyes down the rail, picking out faces that looked particularly vicious or threatening. He had begun his recording as a weapon in his contest with Giva, but he was beginning to think along other lines. He wanted a personal record of this—the kind of record a tourist would make. It wouldn't be as sharp as Giva's work but it would be *his*—a personal view of his ancestor's courage.

* * * *

The slavers started firing their muskets when the boat was still fifty yards from its destination. Harrington had been hoping they would waste a few of their shots, but he still felt himself flinch when he saw the first flash. Everybody else in the boat had something to do. The hands had to row. Terry had to steer. He had to sit here and be a target.

He knew he should give his men a few words of encouragement but he couldn't think of a single phrase. His mind had become a blank sheet. Was he afraid? Was this what people meant when they said someone was *paralyzed*?

The slavers shoved two African women up to the rail. The men in the center of the firing line stepped aside and more slaves took their place.

"The swine," Dawkins said. "Bloody. Cowardly. *Bastards*."

Black faces stared at the oncoming boat. Harrington peered at their stupefied expressions and realized they didn't have the slightest idea they were being used as shields. They had been pushed in chains along trails that might be hundreds of miles long. They had been packed into a hold as if they were kegs of rum. They were surrounded by men who didn't speak their language. By now they must be living in a fog.

"Make sure you aim before you shoot. Make these animals feel every ball you fire."

He was bellowing with rage. He would have stood up in the boat if he hadn't been restrained by years of training. He knew he was giving his men

a stupid order. He knew there was no way they could shoot with that kind of accuracy. It didn't matter. The slavers had provoked emotions that were as uncontrollable as a hurricane.

More slaves were shoved to the railing. Muskets banged. Slavers were actually resting their guns on the shoulders of the slaves they were using for cover.

"We're inside their guns," Terry yelled. "I'll take us forward."

Harrington pointed at a spot just aft of the forward gun. "Take us there. Between one and two. First party—stow your oars. Shoulder your muskets. Wait for my order."

They had worked this out before they had boarded the boat. Half the men would guide the boat during the final approach. The other half would pick up their muskets and prepare to fight.

* * * *

Giva had stopped making comments. Her face had acquired the taut, focused lines of a musician or athlete who was working at the limits of her capacity. She was scanning the drama taking place outside the bubble while she simultaneously tracked the images on six screens and adjusted angles and subjects with quick, decisive motions of her hands.

Emory had noted the change in her attitude and turned his attention to his own record. What difference did it make how she felt? The people who saw the finished product would see brave men hurling themselves into danger. Would anybody really care why they did it?

* * * *

Musket balls cracked in the air around the boat. Metal hammered on the hull. Four members of the slaver crew were running toward the spot where Harrington planned to board. The rest of them were staying near the middle and firing over their human shields.

"Hold her against the side," Harrington yelled. "Throw up the grappling hooks."

The four hands who had been given the job threw their grappling hooks at the rail. The man beside Harrington tugged at the rope, to make sure it was firm, and Harrington fired his first pistol at the ship and handed

the gun to one of the rowers. He grabbed the rope and walked himself up the side of the hull, past the gun that jutted out of the port on his left. His cutlass dangled from a loop around his wrist.

He knew he would be most vulnerable when he went over the rail. His hands would be occupied. He would be exposed to gunfire and hand to hand attacks. He seized the rail with both hands as soon as he came in reach and pulled himself over before he could hesitate.

Four men were crouching on the roof of the rear deckhouse. A gun flamed. Harrington jerked his left pistol out of his belt and fired back. He charged at the deckhouse with his cutlass raised.

The slavers fired their guns and scampered off the deckhouse. Harrington turned toward the bow, toward the men who were using the slaves as shields. His boarding party was crowding over the rails. He had half a dozen men scattered beside him. Most of them were firing their muskets at the slavers and their flesh and blood bulwarks.

“Use your cutlasses! Make these bastards bleed!”

He ran across the deck with his cutlass held high. He could hear himself screaming like a wild man. He had tried to think about the best way to attack while they had been crossing the water. Now he had stopped thinking. They couldn't stand on the deck and let the animals shoot at them.

The Africans' eyes widened. They twisted away from the lunatics rushing toward them and started pushing against the bodies behind them. The slavers had overlooked an important fact—they were hiding behind a wall that was composed of conscious, intelligent creatures.

The African directly in front of Harrington was a woman. She couldn't turn her back on him because of her chains, but she had managed to make a half turn. The man looming behind her was so tall she didn't reach his shoulder. The man was pointing a pistol at Harrington and the woman was clawing at his face with one hand.

The pistol sounded like a cannon when it fired. Harrington covered the deck in front of him in two huge leaps—the longest leaps he had ever taken—and brought his cutlass down on the slaver with both hands.

Steel sliced through cloth and bit into the slaver's collarbone. The man's mouth gaped open. He fell back and Harrington shouldered the female slave aside and hoisted his legs over the chain dangling between

her and the captive on her right.

* * * *

Emory was clamping his jaw on the kind of bellow overwrought fans emitted at sports events. Giva had shifted the bubble to a location twenty-five meters from the side of the slave ship. He could see and hear every detail of Harrington's headlong rush.

Half a dozen men had joined Harrington's assault. More had fallen in behind as they had come over the side. Most of the men in the first rank were running at a crouch, about a step behind their captain. One sailor was holding his hand in front of his face, as if he thought he could stop a bullet with his palm. Emory had been watching combat scenes ever since he was a boy, but no actor had ever captured the look on these men's faces—the intense, white faced concentration of men who knew they were facing real bullets.

A slaver backed away from the pummeling fists of a tall, ribby slave and fired at the oncoming sailors. For a moment Emory thought the shot had gone wild. Then he glanced toward the rear of the assault. A sailor who had just pulled himself over the side was sagging against the rail.

Giva had expanded her display to eight monitors. Her hands were flying across her screens as if she were conducting the action taking place on the ship.

* * * *

The slavers in front of Harrington were all falling back. Most of them seemed to be climbing the rigging or ducking behind boats and deck gear. On his right, his men had stopped their rush and started working their muskets with a ragged, hasty imitation of the procedure he had drilled into them when he had decided it would be a useful skill if they ever actually boarded a ship. They would never load and fire like three-shots-to-the-minute redcoats but they were doing well enough for a combat against a gang who normally fought unarmed primitives.

The slaver captain—Captain Zachary?—was standing on the front deckhouse, just behind the rail. He stared at Harrington across the heads of the slavers who were scattered between them and Harrington realized he was pulling a rod out of the pistol he was holding in his left hand.

It was one of those moments when everything around you seemed to

stand still. Harrington's cutlass dropped out of his hand. He reached for the pistol stuck in his belt. He pulled it out and cocked it—methodically, with no haste—with the heel of his left hand.

On the deckhouse, Zachary had poured a dab of powder into the firing pan without taking his eyes off Harrington. He cocked the gun with his thumb and clutched it in a solid two-handed grip as he raised it to the firing position.

* * * *

“*Look at that!*” Emory said. “Are you getting that, Giva? They’re facing each other like a pair of duelists.”

If this had been a movie, Emory realized, the director would have captured the confrontation between Harrington and Zachary from at least three angles—one long shot to establish that they were facing each other, plus a close-up for each combatant. How did you work it when you were shooting the real thing and you couldn't re-enact it several times with the camera placed in different positions? He turned his head and peered at Giva's screens.

Giva's hands were hopping across her screens. She had centered the gunfight in a wideview, high angle shot in the second screen in her top row.

Zachary's hands flew apart. The tiny figure on Giva's screen sagged. The life-size figure standing on the real ship clutched at his stomach with both palms.

The captain of the slaver received a mortal bullet wound during the fray, Harrington had written. His removal from the melee soon took the fight out of our adversaries. There had been no mention that Harrington himself had fired the decisive shot.

“Is that all you got?” Emory said. “That one long shot?”

He had searched her screens twice, looking for a close-up of the duel. Half of Giva's screens seemed to be focused on the slaves.

Giva jabbed at her number three screen. Emory glanced at the scene on the ship and saw the African woman Harrington had shoved aside stiffening as if she was having a fit. The image on the screen zoomed to a

close-up and the camera glimpsed a single glassy eye before the woman's head slumped forward.

Giva pulled the camera back and framed the body sprawling on the deck. The woman's only garment had been a piece of blue cloth she had wrapped around her breasts and hips. The big wound just above her left breast was clearly visible.

* * * *

"You got him, sir! Right in the bastard's stomach!"

Bobby Dawkins was moving into a position on Harrington's right. He had a raised cutlass in his right hand and he was waving a pistol with his left.

More men took their places beside Dawkins. Nobody was actually stepping *between* Harrington and the enemy, but they were all making some effort to indicate they were willing to advance with their captain.

Harrington's hands had automatically stuffed the empty pistol into his belt. He dropped into an awkward crouch and picked up his cutlass. Most of the slavers in front of him were looking back at the deckhouse.

* * * *

"You just lost the most dramatic event of the whole assault—something we'd never have guessed from the printed record."

"I can zoom in on the scene when I'm editing," Giva muttered. "I'm a pro, Emory. Let me work."

"So why do you need the close-up you just got? Why do you have so many cameras focused on the slaves? Couldn't you edit that later, too?"

* * * *

Four hands were standing beside Harrington. Three more hands were standing a pair of steps behind them. Three of them had muskets pressed into their shoulders. The other four were cursing and grunting as they worked their way through various sections of the reloading drill.

"Hold your fire!" Harrington snapped. "Train your piece on a target but hold your fire."

He heard the jumpy excitement in his voice and knew it would never do. Use the voice you use when the wind is whipping across the deck, he told himself. Pretend you're thundering at the mast and Davey Clarke has the lookout.

His right arm was raising his sword above his head. "Your captain has fallen! *Yield. Lay down your arms.* Lay down your arms or I'll order my men to keep firing."

* * * *

"Is that your idea of *scholarship*, Giva—another weepy epic about suffering victims?"

* * * *

John Harrington knew he would be talking about this moment for the rest of his life. He knew he had managed to sound like a captain was supposed to sound—like a man who had absolute control of the situation, and assumed everyone who heard him would obey his orders. Now he had to see if they really would submit. He had to stand here, fully exposed to a stray shot, and give them time to respond.

Captain Zachary was slumping against the railing of the deckhouse with his hands clutching his stomach. The two slavers who were standing directly in front of him had turned toward Harrington when they had heard his roar. Their eyes settled on the muskets leveled at their chests.

Zachary raised his head. He muttered something Harrington couldn't understand. One of the slavers immediately dropped to one knee. He placed his pistol on the deck.

"The captain says to surrender," the sailor yelled. "He says get it over with."

Harrington lowered his sword. He pushed himself across the deck—it was one of the hardest things he had ever done—and picked up the musket.

"You have my sincerest thanks, Captain Zachary. You have saved us all much discomfort."

* * * *

“This is *my* project, Emory. I was given complete control of the cameras and the final product. Do you have any idea what you and the whole chrono bureaucracy would look like if I handed in my resignation because you tried to bully me while I was doing my job?”

“I’m not trying to bully you. You’re the one with the power in this situation. No one has to draw me a power flowchart. I’m got my own record of the dueling incident. Anybody who looks at my recording—or yours for that matter—can see you’ve ignored a dramatic, critical event and focused on a peripheral incident.”

“Don’t you think those *blackbirds* deserve a little attention, too? Do you think they’re having a fun time caught between two groups of money-hungry berserkers?”

* * * *

Dawkins was picking up the slavers’ weapons as they collected near the starboard rail. Five other hands were aiming their muskets over the slavers’ heads. Harrington had positioned the musket men six paces from their potential targets—close enough so they couldn’t miss, far enough away so none of their prisoners convinced themselves they could engage in a rush before the muskets would fire.

The regulations said the slavers had to be transported to *Sparrow*. The prize crew he assigned to the slaver would have enough trouble looking after the Africans. How many prisoners could he put in each boatload as they made the transfer, given the number of men he could spare for guard duty? He could put the prisoners in irons, of course. But that might be too provocative. They had been operating in a milieu in which chains were associated with slavery and racial inferiority.

He turned to Terry, who had taken up a position behind the musket men. “Keep an eye on things, Mr. Terry. I think it’s time I ventured into the hold.”

* * * *

The world around the space/time bubble turned black—the deepest blackness Emory had ever experienced. They had known it could happen at any time—they had even been exposed to simulations during their pre-location training—but the reality still made him freeze. There was

nothing outside the bubble. *Nothing.*

The world snapped back. A male slave near the front of the ship was staring their way with his mouth gaping. He gestured with a frantic right hand and the elderly man beside him squinted in their direction.

* * * *

Harrington had known the hold would stink. Every officer who had ever served in the West African squadron agreed on that. He had picked up the stench when the boat had approached the ship's side, but he had been too preoccupied to react to it. Now his stomach turned as soon as he settled his feet on the ladder.

In theory, the slavers were supposed to wash their cargo down, to fight disease and keep it alive until they could take their profit. In practice, nothing could eliminate the stink of hundreds of bodies pressed into their storage shelves like bales of cotton.

The noise was just as bad as the odor. Every captive in the hold seemed to be jabbering and screaming. The slaves in a cargo could come from every section of the continent. They were brought to the coast from the places where they had been captured—or bought from some native chief who had taken them prisoner during a tribal war—and assembled in big compounds before they were sold to the European slave traders. It would be a miracle if fifty of them spoke the same language.

He paused at the bottom of the ladder and stared at the patch of blue sky over the hatch. He was the commander of a British warship. Certain things were required.

He unhooked the lamp that hung beside the ladder and peered into the din. White eyes stared at him out of the darkness. A glance at the captives he saw told him Captain Zachary had adapted one of the standard plans. Each slave had been placed with his back between the legs of the slave behind him.

He had been listening to descriptions of slave holds since he had been a midshipman. He had assumed he had been prepared. The slaves had been arranged on three shelves, just as he had expected. They would spend most of the voyage staring at a ceiling a few inches above their faces. The passage that ran down the center of the hold was only a little wider than his shoulders.

* * * *

“We have encountered a space/time instability,” the hal said. “I must remind you an abort is strongly recommended.”

“We have to stay,” Emory said. “We haven’t captured the liberation of the slaves. There’s no finale.”

The mission rules were clear. Two flickers and the hal would automatically abort. One, and they could stay if they thought it was worth the risk.

No one knew if those rules were necessary. The bureaucrats had established them and their electronic representative would enforce them. Time travel was a paradox and an impossibility. Intelligent people approached it with all the caution they would confer on a bomb with an unknown detonating mechanism.

Giva kept her eyes focused on her screens. If she voted with him, they would stay. If they split their vote, the hal would implement the “strong recommendation” it had received from its masters.

The slave who had pointed at them seemed to have been the only person who had seen the instability. There was no indication anyone else had noticed the apparition that had flickered beside the hull.

“I think we should stay,” Giva said. “For now.”

“The decision will be mandatorily reconsidered once every half hour. A termination may be initiated at any time.”

* * * *

Harrington made himself walk the entire length of the passage. He absorbed the odor. He let the clamor bang on his skull. He peered into the shelves on both sides every third step. He couldn’t make his men come down here if he wasn’t willing to do it himself.

On the deck, he had yielded to a flicker of sympathy for Zachary. Stomach wounds could inflict a painful slow death on their victims. Now he hoped Zachary took a whole month to die. And stayed fully conscious up to the last moment.

He marched back to the ladder with his eyes fixed straight ahead. He

had lost his temper in the boat when he had seen Zachary's cutthroats using their captives as human shields. It had been an understandable lapse, but it couldn't happen twice in the same day. His ship and his crew depended on his judgment.

Terry glanced at him when he assumed his place on the deck. Most of the slaver's crew had joined the cluster of prisoners. Some of them even looked moderately cheerful. They all knew the court at Freetown would set them free within a month at the most. An occasional incarceration was one of the inconveniences of their trade.

"There should be at least four hundred," Harrington said. "Two thousand pounds minimum. And the value of the ship."

* * * *

Emory made a mental calculation as he watched the first boatload of prisoners crawl toward the *Sparrow*. At the rate the boat was moving, given the time it had taken to load it, they were going to sit here for at least two more hours.

Giva was devoting half her screens to the crew and half to the Africans, but he knew he would look like a fool if he objected. The crew were stolidly holding their guns on their prisoners. The Africans were talking among themselves. The two Africans who were chained on either side of the fallen woman had dropped to their knees beside her.

The moment when the slaves would be brought into the sunlight was the moment Emory considered the emotional climax of the whole episode. He had been so enthusiastic when he described it during their planning sessions that Peter LeGrundy had told him he sounded as if he had already seen it.

I ordered the liberated captives brought to the deck as circumstances allowed, Harrington had written. They did not fully comprehend their change in status, and I could not explain it. Our small craft does not contain a translator among its complement. But the sight of so many souls rescued from such a terrible destiny stimulated the deepest feelings of satisfaction in every heart capable of such sentiments.

* * * *

“You think we could press this lad, Captain? We could use some of that muscle.”

Harrington turned his head. He had decided he should let the men standing guard take a few minutes rest, one at a time. Dawkins had wandered over the deck to the Africans and stopped in front of a particularly muscular specimen.

“I wouldn’t get too close if I were you,” Harrington said. “We still haven’t given him any reason to think we’re his friends.”

Dawkins raised his hands in mock fright. He scurried back two steps and Harrington let himself yield to a smile.

“We’d get a sight more than five pounds for you if we took you to Brazil,” Dawkins said to the African. “A nigger like you would fetch three hundred clean if he scowled at white people like that for the rest of his black life.”

* * * *

Giva was smiling again. She hadn’t said anything about the way the British sailors used the word *blackbird*, but Emory was certain she was noting every use she recorded. Emory had first encountered the word when he had started collecting memoirs and letters penned by men who had served in the anti-slavery patrol. Slave trading had been called “blackbirding” and British sailors had apparently started applying the term to the people they were supposed to rescue. Peter LeGrundy claimed the British thought up insulting names for every kind of foreigner they met.

“They called Africans blackbirds and other derogatory terms,” Peter had said, “in the same way they attached contemptuous epithets to most of the inhabitants of our planet. Frenchmen were called frogs, for example, apparently because there was some belief they were especially fond of eating frogs. People from Asian countries were called wogs—an ironic acronym for Worthy Oriental Gentlemen.”

Harrington watched the next to last boatload pull away from the slaver. The mob of prisoners had been reduced to a group of seven. Three of the prisoners were crouching beside their captain and offering him sips of water and occasional words of encouragement.

“Mr. Terry—will you please take a party below and bring about fifty of the unfortunates on deck? Concentrate on women and children. We don’t

have the strength to handle too many restless young bucks.”

* * * *

“Your ancestor doesn’t seem to have much confidence in his ability to handle the animals,” Giva said. “What do they call the African women? Does?”

“If you will do a little research before you edit your creation,” Emory said, “I believe you’ll discover *British* young men were called young bucks, too. It was just a term for young men with young attitudes. They would have called *you* a restless young buck if you’d been born male, Giva.”

* * * *

Harrington hadn’t tried black women yet. His sexual experience had been limited to encounters with the kind of females who lifted their skirts for sailors in the Italian and South American ports he had visited on his first cruises. Bonfors claimed black women were more ardent than white women, but Bonfors liked to talk. It had been Harrington’s experience that most of his shipmates believed *all* foreign women were more ardent than their English counterparts.

Some of the women Terry’s men were ushering on deck looked as if they were younger than his sisters. Several were carrying infants. Most of them were wearing loose bits of cloth that exposed their legs and arms and other areas civilized women usually covered.

Harrington had read William Pitt’s great speech on the abolition of the slave trade when he had been a boy, and he had read it again when his uncle had advised him the Admiralty had agreed to give him this command. There had been a time, Pitt had argued, when the inhabitants of ancient Britain had been just as savage and uncivilized as the inhabitants of modern Africa, “a time when even human sacrifices were offered on this island.”

In those days, Pitt had suggested, some Roman senator could have pointed to *British barbarians* and predicted, “*There* is a people that will never rise to civilization—there is a people destined never to be free—a people without the understanding necessary for the attainment of useful arts, depressed by the hand of nature below the level of the human species, and created to form a supply of slaves for the rest of the world.”

The women in front of him might be barbarians. But they had, as Pitt

had said, the potential to rise to the same levels the inhabitants of Britain had achieved. They had the right to live in freedom, so they might have the same opportunity to develop.

* * * *

A woman sprawled on the deck as she emerged from the hatch. Two of the hands were pulling the captives through the opening. Two were probably pushing them from below.

One of the sailors on the deck bent over the fallen woman. His hand closed over her left breast.

“Now there’s a proper young thing,” the sailor said.

The sailor who was working with him broke out in a smile. “I can’t say I’d have any objection to spending a few days on *this* prize crew.”

The officer who was supposed to be supervising the operation—the gunnery officer, Mr. Terry—was standing just a step away. John Harrington had been watching the slaves stumble into the sunlight, but now he turned toward the bow and eyed the seven prisoners lounging in front of the forward deckhouse.

The next African out of the hatch was a scrawny boy who looked as if he might be somewhere around seven or eight, in Emory’s unpracticed judgment. The woman who followed him—his mother?—received a long stroke on the side of her hip as she balanced herself against the roll of the ship.

“The African males don’t seem to be the only restless young bucks,” Giva said. “These boys have been locked up in that little ship for several weeks now, as I remember it.”

“It has been one half hour since your last mandatory stay/go decision,” the hal said. “Do you wish to stay or go, Mr. FitzGordon?”

“Stay.”

“Do you wish to stay or go, Ms. Lombardo?”

“Stay, of course. We’re getting some interesting insights into the attractions of African cruises.”

* * * *

Harrington ran his eyes over the rigging of the slaver. He should pick the most morally fastidious hands for the prize crew. But who could that be? Could any of them resist the opportunity after all these months at sea?

He could proclaim strict rules, of course. And order Terry to enforce them. But did he really want to subject his crew to the lash and the chain merely because they had succumbed to the most natural of urges? They were good men. They had just faced bullets and cannonballs to save five hundred human souls from the worst evil the modern world inflicted on its inhabitants.

And what if some of the women were willing? What if some of them offered themselves for money?

He could tell Terry to keep carnal activity to a minimum. But wouldn't that be the same as giving him permission to let the men indulge? He was the captain. Anything he said would have implications.

"Mr. Terry. Will you come over here, please?"

* * * *

Harrington was murmuring but the microphones could still pick up the conversation.

"I'm placing you in command of the prize, Mr. Terry. I am entrusting its cargo to your good sense and decency."

"I understand," Terry said.

"These people may be savages but they are still our responsibility."

Emory nodded. Harrington was staring at the two men working the hatch as he talked. The frown on his face underlined every word he was uttering.

"That should take care of that matter," Emory said.

Giva turned away from her screens. "You really think that little speech will have an effect, Emory?"

"Is there any reason to think it won't? He won't be riding with the prize

crew. But that lieutenant knows what he's supposed to do."

"It was a standard piece of bureaucratic vagueness! It was exactly the kind of thing slot-fillers always say when they want to put a fence around their precious little careers."

"It was just as precise as it needed to be, Giva. Harrington and his officers all come from the same background. That lieutenant knows exactly what he's supposed to do. He doesn't need a lot of detail."

"When was the last time you held a job? I've been dealing with *managers* all my life. They always say things like that. The only thing you know when they're done is that you're going to be the one who gets butchered if anything goes wrong."

* * * *

Harrington stood by the railing as the last group of prisoners took their places in the boat. A babble of conversation rang over the deck. The African captives they had brought out of the hold had mingled with the captives who had been used as shields and they were all chattering away like guests at a lawn party.

It was an exhilarating sight. He had never felt so completely satisfied with the world. Five hours ago the people standing on the deck had been crowded into the hell below decks, with their future lives reduced to weeks of torment in the hold, followed by years of brutal servitude when they finally made land. Now they merely had to endure a three-or four-day voyage to the British colony in Freetown. Half of them would probably become farmers in the land around Freetown. Some would join British regiments. Many would go to the West Indies as laborers—but they would be indentured laborers, not slaves, free to take up their own lives when they had worked off their passage. A few would even acquire an education in the schools the missionaries had established in Freetown and begin their own personal rise toward civilization.

He had raised the flag above the slaver with his own hands. Several of the Africans had pointed at it and launched into excited comments when it was only a third of the way up the mast. He could still see some of them pointing and obviously explaining its significance to the newcomers. Some of them had even pointed at *him*. Most liberated slaves came from the interior. The captives who came from the coast would know about the anti-slavery patrol. They would understand the significance of the flag and the blue coat.

“We’re all loaded and ready, sir.”

Harrington turned away from the deck. The last prisoner had settled into his seat in the boat.

He nodded at Terry and Terry nodded back. The hands had managed to slip in a few more pawings under the guise of being helpful, but Terry seemed to have the overall situation under control.

“She’s your ship, Mr. Terry. I’ll send you the final word on your prize crew as soon as I’ve conferred with Mr. Bonfors.”

* * * *

“It looks to me like it’s about time we hopped for home,” Giva said.

“Now? He’s only brought one load of slaves on deck.”

“You don’t really think he’s going to decorate the deck with more Africans, do you? Look at my screens. I’m getting two usable images of your ancestor returning to his ship. It’s a high feel closure. All we need is a sunset.”

“There’s five hundred people in that hold. Don’t you think he’s going to give the rest of them a chance to breathe?”

“He exaggerated his report. Use your head, Emory. Would you go through all the hassle involved in controlling five hundred confused people when you knew they were only four or five days away from Freetown?”

“You are deliberately avoiding the most important scene in the entire drama. We’ll never know what happened next if we go now.”

“You’re clinging to a fantasy. We’re done. It’s time to go. Hal—I request relocation to home base.”

“I have a request for relocation to home base. Please confirm.”

“I do not confirm. I insist that we—”

“Request confirmed, Hal. Request confirmed.”

Time stopped. The universe blinked. A technology founded on the

best contemporary scientific theories did something the best contemporary scientific theories said it couldn't do.

The rig dropped onto the padded stage in Transit Room One. The bubble had disappeared. Faces were peering at them through the windows that surrounded the room.

Giva jabbed her finger at the time strip mounted on the wall. They had been gone seven minutes and thirty-eight seconds local time.

"We were pushing it," Giva said. "We were pushing it more than either of us realized."

The average elapsed local time was three minutes—a fact they had both committed to memory the moment they had heard it during their first orientation lecture. The bump when they hit the stage had seemed harder than the bumps they had experienced during training, too. The engineers always set the return coordinates for a position two meters above the stage—a precaution that placed the surface of the stage just outside the margin of error and assured the passengers they wouldn't relocate *below* it. They had come home extra late and extra high. Giva would have some objective support for her decision to return.

The narrow armored hatch under the time strip swung open. An engineer hopped through it with a medic right behind her.

"Is everything all right?"

"I can't feel anything malfunctioning," Giva said. "We had a flicker about two hours before we told Hal to shoot us home."

Emory ripped off his seat belt. He jumped to his feet and the medic immediately dropped into his soothe-the-patient mode. "You really should sit down, Mr. FitzGordon. You shouldn't stand up until we've checked you out."

The soft, controlled tones only added more points to the spurs driving Emory's rage. Giva was sprawling in her chair, legs stretched in front of her, obviously doing her best to create the picture of the relaxed daredevil who had courageously held off until the last minute. And now the medic was treating him as if he was some kind of disoriented patient....

He swung toward the medic and the man froze when he saw the hostility on Emory's face. He was a solid, broad shouldered type with a face

that probably looked pleasant and experienced when he was helping chrononauts disembark. Now he slipped into a stance that looked like a slightly disguised en garde.

“You’re back, Mr. FitzGordon. Everything’s okay. We’ll have you checked out and ready for debriefing before you know it.”

Peter LeGrundy crouched through the hatch. He flashed his standard-issue smile at the two figures on the rig and Emory realized he had to get himself under control.

“So how did it go?” Peter said. “Did you have a nice trip?”

Emory forced his muscles to relax. He lowered his head and settled into the chair as if he were recovering from a momentary lapse—the kind of thing any normal human could feel when he had just violated the laws of physics and traveled through three centuries of time. He gave the medic a quick thumbs up and the medic nodded.

He had his own record of the event. He had Giva’s comments. Above all, he had Peter LeGrundy. And Peter LeGrundy’s ambitions. He could cover every grant Peter could need for the rest of Peter’s scholarly career if he had to. The battle wasn’t over. Not yet.

You need the creatives. The creatives need your money.

* * * *

I ordered the liberated captives brought to the deck as circumstances allowed. They did not fully comprehend their change in status, and I could not explain it. Our small craft does not contain a translator among its complement. But the sight of so many souls rescued from such a terrible destiny stimulated the deepest feelings of satisfaction in every heart capable of such sentiments.

Two well-placed candles illuminated the paper on John Harrington’s writing desk without casting distracting shadows. The creak of *Sparrow*’s structure created a background that offered him a steady flow of information about the state of his command.

He lowered his pen. He had been struggling with his report for almost two hours. The emotions he had ignored during the battle had flooded over him as soon as he had closed the door of his cabin. The pistol that had

roared in his face had exploded half a dozen times.

He shook his head and forced out a sentence advising the Admiralty he had placed Mr. Terry in command of the prize. He had already commended Terry's gunnery and his role in the assault. He had given Bonfours due mention. Dawkins and several other hands had been noted by name. The dead and the wounded had been properly honored.

It had been a small battle by the standards of the war against Napoleon. A skirmish really. Against an inept adversary. But the bullets had been real. Men had died. *He* could have died. He had boarded an enemy ship under fire. He had led a headlong assault at an enemy line. He had exchanged shots with the captain of the enemy.

The emotions he was feeling now would fade. One hard, unshakeable truth would remain. He had faced enemy fire and done his duty.

He had met the test. He had become the kind of man he had read about when he was a boy.