

## Book Three

### The Adventures of Jonathan Moore

# Paladin's War

by Peter Greene



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## 1

### The Lost Echo

Only stars and the faint glow of a cloud-veiled moon lit the way of the eighteen-gun, one-hundred-foot brig-rigged sloop *HMS Echo*. She seemed to float on the milky mist that rolled along the western edge of the island called Dugi Otok. Sailing under only topsails, not even the fluttering of canvas could be heard as the ship slipped through the calm water. Craggy and ashen cliff walls lined the coast and stretched over one hundred feet into the night sky as gentle waves lapped at their sides. Along the silent coast, no other ship was in sight, no people walking in this late hour, no fishermen readying nets—not even a single gull crying in the dark. There was only the sound of soft surf and at times a lonesome sigh from a slight breeze slipping through the rocks and scrub bushes of this desolate corner of the world.

To some persons in another place, the night may have **seemed** peaceful and calming; however, it was anything but that to the newly appointed British captain, Commander Joshua Gray. Standing at the wheel alongside his sailing master, he looked in all directions—for what, he did not know.

Formerly second-in-command of the fighting seventy-four-gun HMS *Trident*, Gray had only been commander of the *Echo* for the few weeks it took to execute his current mission, one that had him uneasy from its beginnings.

“Deep water,” said Lieutenant Hayes calmly from the bow. There was no need to call out loud as was usually the proper procedure. Commander Gray had ordered all to be as silent as mice once the ship had reached just three hundred yards offshore. One could have heard a pin drop.

“Any sign of the inlet, Mister Hayes?” asked the commander, knowing full well the answer. Little could be seen through the darkness and fog, unless a breeze swept in and parted the veil of clouds for a brief moment, allowing a shaft of moonlight to reveal the rugged shoreline.

“Nothing, sir,” answered Hayes softly.

The *Echo* continued on in silence, the crew searching the swirling mist for a sign or watching the black ocean for submerged reefs or sandbars. The stars were obscured most of the time; the moon continued to offer only the least assistance.

The odd nature of the mission had Gray on edge. On the second of March, he sailed from Chatham, and, much to his liking, the core of officers was solid and reliable, with a dependable senior crew. However, as was usually the case with His Majesty’s Navy, he employed a less-than-adequate compliment of experienced seamen. Some new hands had professed that they had sailed for years on merchant vessels, but these were few. That left the fulfillment of the crew to the dreaded *press gangs*—thugs, basically—hired by the Impress Service of the Admiralty to comb the streets and alleys of port towns, the corner pubs, and, as rumor would have it, even jails, to acquire the needed sailors. Their methods were more often than not brutal and entirely unfair. Old men, men with families, boys, and anyone in between, if in an unfortunate place at an inopportune time, could be targeted and taken against their will, then forced to work aboard any of over a thousand British warships. This was a sanctioned procedure protected by law, and because of this practice, many of the newly assigned sailors were not exactly *pleased* about their sudden career change.

Gray watched several of these pressed men at the bow. They were ordered to observe the shoreline; however, some were not. Instead they were standing close together, talking among themselves.

“Styles! Ryder! Evans!” called Gray with some irritation. “Eyes on the shore!”

The men grimaced and slowly turned to their duty.

I will have to deal with them after this exchange is over, thought Gray. A commander needs to retain a firm hand to sustain order. Some form of punishment will have to be administered.

His original mission was to deliver mail to the naval station at Gibraltar, the British-controlled port that regulated access to all ships from the Atlantic as they traveled into the Mediterranean and the many waters to the east. This was a simple mission and very common for a “packet,” such as the *Echo*—a fast ship second only to one other. She was not used as a fighting platform primarily but as a communications vessel that delivered mail and official orders for ships at sea.

The *Echo* had seen action, it was true, and Gray had seen her running fast with the wind to attack a French seventy-four in a multiship action on the seas south of the tip of Africa. The *Echo* performed with distinction, as did the other ships of His Majesty’s Navy, in what was now known as *The Battle of Fire*, as it was fought in the channel just south of the Castelo de Fogo. At that time, Gray was aboard the *Trident* as first lieutenant under the capable command of Captain Jeremy Langley. There, aboard that ship, all was by the book, and nothing was ever out of the ordinary.

What was uncommon and suspicious about his new command was the literally last-minute change in his orders that had brought him past Gibraltar and deep into the Adriatic Sea east of Italy, to the maze of stone islands off the coast of Austrian-ruled Dalmatia. He was allowed to ask no questions, and no clarification was given—just the directive to proceed to the western coast of the island named Dugi Otok, just north of the small fishing village of Telašćica. There, he was to search northward and find an inlet described in his written orders as “a cove guarded by two gnarled pines, one with a dangling rope.” Once located, he was to meet a party identifying himself by using the coded phrase “I am Volpone,” and he was to reply, “And I am not.”

The orders further dictated that he perform a prisoner exchange. The man he had transported, one Nikomed Aggar, was to be exchanged for an unnamed British subject of great importance to the Crown.

En route to their destination, the *Echo* had favorable winds, at times making fifteen knots as she traveled south past France and Portugal, then east past Gibraltar Station and continuing into the Mediterranean. The voyage to the eastern portion of the Adriatic Sea was completed in just twelve days. Speed was the weapon of the *Echo*, and accordingly, she was able to avoid any entanglements with French and Spanish warships with ease. There was rumor of a peace, a treaty being discussed in Amiens, France, and though not officially in effect, tensions had been somewhat eased.

The *Echo* continued along the coast of Dugi Otok slowly and steadily. All hands on deck and all officers searched

the bank of dark haze, straining to see anything that resembled an inlet to a small bay flanked by two trees. At times Gray would look away to the open sea behind, suspecting something amiss, some threat.

"This is surely disquieting," he whispered to his sailing master.

"Yes sir, 'tis that," came the reply from Geoffrey Spencer. He was an experienced master, having sailed around the world at least twice. Spencer had been assigned to the famous HMS *Victory* as an assistant sailing master at one time, and he was a welcome addition to the crew of the small packet.

Gray strained to see through the night. Blast this fog! he thought. I've a mind to call off this entire operation and return to London. I just don't—

"A tree, sir!" came a slightly elevated cry. It was young Ike Williams, just eleven years old but an experienced mate. He had previously sailed aboard the *Echo* as loblolly boy, an assistant to the ship's surgeon, however, the blood and gore became too much for him. Now a deckhand—and one with superb eyesight—he was positioned in the crow's nest, and had spotted the first landmark. "And another tree...with a rope!" he added.

"Drop the bow anchor," called Gray calmly, though he was anything but calm inside. "Adams! Cardew! Reef the topsails."

As the men in the tops took in canvas to slow the ship, the crew on deck seemed to lean to the starboard side and strain their eyes to peer into, and hopefully through, the drifting fog.

"Back to your duty, men," Gray said calmly, more a reminder than an admonishment. He patted Spencer on the shoulder, then strode to the bow as the anchor silently dropped into the shallows. Within seconds, the slow-moving ship ceased its forward motion, though with a turn of the wheel from Spencer, the stern began swinging away from the coast. Another anchor was poised to deploy from the stern hawser, crew at the ready, looking toward Gray for the order. Within a moment, when the *Echo* was almost perpendicular to the coastline, Gray commanded the crew to drop the stern anchor.

"Slowly, men," Gray whispered.

The anchor dropped silently into the sea and within a few seconds had hit bottom. The hawser was immediately lashed tight, holding the ship in place. The *Echo* now pointed bow first, directly toward the inlet.

Still uneasy, Gray surveyed the surroundings. It was impossible to see anything moving on earth or sea; however, he searched still, looking for a lantern, a signal fire, a soul waving arms, or just to hear the call of the code phrase. There was no sound and only the bleak fog occasionally rolling just enough to give a glimpse of the shore. Again he caught sight of the tall, barren rock walls and now saw the opening that formed the entrance to the inlet.

His orders had stated that once the inlet was discovered, he was to proceed directly in, not with any of his smaller boats that were secured to the deck of the ship, but with the *Echo* itself.

"Mister Hayes, bring the prisoner to the deck, and have Wilson and Sherland lower the boat over the starboard side," Gray said softly but firmly. "Spencer, captain the jolly boat."

"Beg your pardon, Commander," whispered Hayes cautiously as Spencer left his post and proceeded to the rail. "I understood there was to be no boat until we were inside the bay. Sir."

"Yes, that is what the orders state. Nevertheless, call me an old lady or a prissy young girl, but I am still suspicious of this entire affair." He paused for a moment, wondering if he was making the correct decision. This was, for all practical reasons, a simple exchange, and they would be on their way. However, why would a ship as famous and decorated as the *Echo* be used for such a mundane task? It was this portion of the operation that was perplexing.

"Discretion is the better part of valor, Mister Hayes," Gray said. "After we determine that the bay is safe, we will proceed inward with the *Echo*. Let us allow Spencer to explore a bit.

"Aye, sir," Hayes said as he went belowdecks to retrieve the prisoner, Aggar.

The largest of the boats the *Echo* carried, the jolly boat, was freed from the deck and raised over the side. Once lowered into the water, it was filled with Mister Spencer and fifteen men who all entered quietly and began rowing toward the shore.

"Spencer?" called Gray as the small boat slowly moved alongside.

"Aye, Cap'n?"

"Silently. Take a good look and see what you can see. I don't like this at all. Eyes and ears."

"Yes, sir," Spencer replied.

Within minutes, with only the sound of the oars dipping into and out of the water to mark their passage, the boat and its crew disappeared into the mist.

Gray remained on edge, his stomach in a sour knot as he waited. He eyed the point where the jolly boat had disappeared into the fog and turned about often, watching astern. He scanned the deck, noticing the few marines, guns at the ready.

"Here he is, Cap'n. As ordered," announced Hayes upon his return.

Gray turned to consider the prisoner.

Aggar was a dark-haired man, maybe in his later thirties, but he looked as if life had tested him physically. He

seemed slightly ragged, more so than just any common criminal who spent time in captivity. Gray could see that in his eyes were many sleepless nights, and he was thin from lack of a proper diet. The commander had little to do with Aggar since he came aboard, just asking the crew if the man was fed, if he was behaving himself, and if he was seemingly in good health.

“Did you remove his manacles, Mister Hayes?” asked the commander, noticing the restraints were absent.

“They were already off when I retrieved him from below, sir.”

“Come again?” asked Gray, slightly agitated that a prisoner had been left unrestrained aboard his ship.

“A *ca-rew-mon* did this,” said Aggar in his heavy, Slavic accent.

“A crewman? Which one?” asked Gray, but Aggar only shrugged.

“The boat, Cap’n!” called Williams softly from the top. “She’s returning!”

Gray shook his head as he moved toward the port rail. “Keep an eye on our friend, Mister Hayes.”

“Yes, sir,” said Hayes, embarrassed that somehow, some crewman had removed the restraints from the prisoner, and surely the commander thought Hayes might be that person. It was hard to please any captain, and the fact that Gray was one of the more amiable ones with somewhat more humane standards for managing a crew meant that no officer or hand wanted to fall from his good graces.

Gray looked overboard and addressed Spencer directly.

“Report?”

“Nothing, sir,” replied Spencer. “There is nothing in there. The bay is not large—maybe three hundred feet to the far shore and no more than a hundred side to side. ’Seems at least ten fathoms deep. There’s enough space for us to slide inside, but it will be tight.”

Gray was still not certain at all if this looked proper. And what should proper look like? he thought. I have never exchanged a prisoner, and I don’t think anyone in the entire service of His Majesty has done so under such secrecy and mystery.

“Did you see anyone in there? Another boat? Anyone on shore?” asked Gray.

“No, sir. The cliff walls climb as far as these here,” Spencer said, motioning to where the tall bluffs were hiding behind the mist. “They surround the cove completely. If anyone is in there, they’re made of rocks and fog, sir.”

Or our contacts will come from the open sea as we did, blocking our exit, thought Gray.

“Is there any breeze in there?” asked the commander.

“Yes, sir, a wee bit coming from inland over the top o’ these cliffs, though not much,” Spencer replied. “The whole inlet is like a bowl, sir. High sides all around and only this opening here. Not much space for breeze to get going, if you catch my drift.”

“Thank you, Mister Spencer,” Gray said. He turned and frowned as he addressed Hayes. “I’ll not be trapped in there, having to maneuver to get out.”

Gray considered preparing the eighteen-pound, long-gun bow chaser to cover the entrance to the inlet. Unknown to many, the *Echo* had specially mounted bow and stern chasers on swivel mounts, actually bringing the total gun count aboard to twenty. Typically, these chasers were not used to crack hulls or blast masts into splinters. That was left to the powerful, short, light-iron, thirty-two-pound carronades that were secured to carriages on the top deck. Chase guns were too light for that work. Their specialty: a well-aimed shot that could damage rigging rope and wooden yards—the horizontal pieces of the mast—thereby causing the target to lose performance. Aimed through cut-out ports on either side of the bowsprit or the stern rail, these guns were effective and necessary.

Gray thought, somewhat in jest, that without the extra weight, he could possibly reach the same speeds as his sister ship, HMS *Paladin*. However, it was his opinion that the *Echo* was fast enough, and having chasers fore and aft to slow down an enemy either ahead or behind would be worth the loss of speed.

“Lieutenant Johnson!” Gray called, making up his mind. “Prepare the bow chaser. Have it loaded and manned. Also, have the marines posted on stern and bow, guns at the ready.”

“Aye, sir,” came the reply.

“Spencer,” the commander continued, calling over the rail. “Secure a line to the stern cleat, and pull us in stern first. We may catch some wind in the bay and exit quickly if need be.”

The jolly boat and crew, somewhat distraught at the fact that towing the *Echo* in stern first would take additional exertion, proceeded as ordered. Gray directed a half dozen men to work the stern anchor and raise it once Spencer had secured a line.

It was hard going. The supposedly experienced crew had some decent hands, but Styles, Ryder, and Evans, for example, left much to be desired. They fumbled a bit, almost as if they had trouble understanding orders. There were many, thought Gray, who were not educated or experienced in the English language let alone in the ways of the British Navy. As irritating as it was that he seemed to have more than his share of novices at the moment, he realized that he would need to give these men some further training. Hayes could do this, thought the commander. He has patience.

The going was slow; however, eventually the *Echo* moved toward the opening to the bay, with Gray himself at the wheel. The cliff walls loomed above them to each side, like great stone doors open only a crack, and to Gray, it seemed that once inside they would close shut, trapping him like an animal being caged.

Gray thought of the *Echo* as a beautiful bird, and many in His Majesty's Navy felt it was one of the most handsome ships afloat, second only to HMS *Paladin*. And like that ship, the *Echo* had strikingly sleek lines, slightly raked masts, and somewhat larger sails than most ships her size. She did not have the famous teak deck found on the *Paladin*. However, she was not without her charms—namely, a rich blue stripe down each side that was trimmed in gold and, most notably, a carved figurehead of a beguiling young woman with long blond hair, calling out with one delicate hand to her lips, the other to her ear. Like the Greek mythological figure after which she was named, the *Echo* was beautiful to many—not only to the gods. She was as fast as a wind and a smooth sailor in every measure. To trap such an elegant lady in a cage would be an injustice.

Gray took another look around the deck as the ship slowly moved onward. All men were in proper position, and the prisoner, Aggar, seemed alert, almost on edge, eyes darting about from time to time as he appeared to be searching the fog. Any slight noise, like the creaking of the ship or the *shhhhh* of some rope being dragged across the deck would cause him to start in surprise. He would then calm down again and resume his gaze, mostly looking outward and upward.

"I assume you know what this is about, Aggar?" asked Gray.

Aggar halted his search and addressed the commander. "I know nothing. I understand I am to go home. That is all I know," he replied.

"Well," continued Commander Gray, "I am not sure where you are going or who you are going with, but if all unfolds well, you will be off this ship and I assume on another."

Aggar grunted and returned to his search.

Whatever is he looking for? wondered Gray. Maybe he is as nervous as I, not knowing how this will turn out.

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Tense moments passed, the *Echo* now moving beyond the two pine trees guarding the opening to the inner water. The mist lessened once the ship entered the cove, and all aboard could see the surroundings more clearly. Indeed, as Spencer had stated, the bay was much like a large bowl with high stone cliffs all around and not much room for anything except their vessel. The stone walls held a few scraggly bushes and saplings, impossibly hanging on to the steep face with great effort, scratching out a foothold by some means in the barren rock. The water reflected a few stars above. The slight wind was intermittent.

Once in the center, Gray called for anchors to be dropped at both bow and stern and for men to assume positions around the rail to keep an eye out for the presumed boat that would be meeting them. Others, he sent to the tops and had them prepare to let out all canvas at a moment's notice. The bow chaser was also positioned on deck, pointing straight ahead at the entrance to the bay, manned and armed.

After a few minutes, all was secured. The men were in place.

Commander Gray and Hayes escorted Aggar to the stern, where they each stared directly into the bay.

"Sir, I believe," Hayes said, "that anyone wanting to meet us will approach from the sea. I don't believe anyone could approach through the land side."

"It only makes sense, Mister Hayes, but let's keep an eye around us as well," the commander said. "It could be that someone is hiding in the few bits of scrub along the shoreline or in a hidden cave or crook that is invisible to us in the dark."

And they waited. No sound was heard except for the slight creaking of the ship, the occasional footfall of someone in the tops, and waves gently lapping on the hull. Shortly, a mild breeze parted the clouds and fog, and the moon shone brightly, lighting the scene. The men aboard the *Echo* could now clearly see their surroundings as the white, limestone cliff walls seemed to glow, exposing details that were previously hidden.

Then, quite surprisingly, Aggar let out a long, low whistle. He turned to Gray and smiled.

A shot rang out. Then another.

"Who is firing?" demanded Gray as he turned to look about. Two marines fell dead at their positions.

"Return fire!" called Hayes loudly.

"At what?" came the call from the remaining marines.

"Where is the fire coming from?" asked Johnson, though he never heard the answer as several more shots rang out, one finding his heart. A ball struck a spar by Gray, sending wooden splinters flying about, the commander turning his head just in time. Another shot, and another man fell, wounded. Men continued to be hit. Lucky members of the crew dropped to the deck, taking cover behind anything that presented a form of shelter. Soon, all was a cacophony of confused instructions and random gunfire.

“Does anyone see a flash?” Gray called frantically.

There was no answer. The sounds of guns continued, and more men fell. “Drop all sail!” called the commander. “Hayes, to the wheel! I will tend the anchors! Get the men off that boat!”

Gray ventured that if they could catch a slight breeze, they would have a chance of escape. He could feel a waft as the ship strained at the anchor. He had enough wind to move the *Echo*. Now, if he could cut the anchor lines, there would be a chance.

As he ran to the bow, he was struck hard in the back, not from a ball, but from a large, blunt object, as if someone had struck him with their shoulder. He toppled over, head first. He spun around. There, standing above him, was Aggar.

“You’ll not be commanding the ship any longer, Captain Gray,” Aggar said calmly, his accent a little less pronounced than it had been earlier. He produced two pistols from under his coat and leveled one at Gray, the other at Hayes.

“Aggar! W-what is this?” demanded Gray, trying to stand. He was answered with a quick kick to the chest and sent back down to the deck.

“Stay down, if you want to live,” ordered Aggar. “Though to me, it would be just as easy to kill you now.”

Shots continued to ring out. Men cried in anguish. Gray looked about frantically. Despite the fact that men were falling from the yards above them, the mainsail was almost down completely, and the *Echo* strained at her ropes.

Gray was now able to ascertain that fire was coming from many directions, including above them. He saw flashes from the edges of the cliffs, and soon he could make out men there, firing downward at the ship. Even more disturbing was what he witnessed on deck: several of the crew, namely Styles, Ryder, and Evans, were firing pistols at other crewmen.

“Do you surrender your ship, Captain?” Aggar asked with a laugh. Then he called out loud, his voice echoing off the stone cliff walls, “*Astanevische Vasha Gon!*” Two more shots were heard.

“Pachenko! Nababkin! Oleski!” called Aggar, yelling to Styles, Ryder, and Evans. He held up his right hand, fingers extended and palm outward. “*Ostanovit!*”

The men, now revealed as agents of Aggar, halted their fire.

Hayes had moved toward his captain and whispered so softly it was all but impossible to hear, “Who are these men?” Gray could only shrug.

“Well, they are not speaking French,” added Hayes. “They sound Slavic to me.”

There were many dead, and many more wounded lay on the deck. From below there was the sound of scuffling, a shot or two, and then shortly, men appeared on deck, hands above their heads, followed by two more of the *Echo*’s newer crew members, each holding muskets and now joining the corps of traitors.

The attackers on the cliff tops were now rappelling off the stone walls. Evans and Styles, pistols ready, commandeered the boat, shooting and killing Spencer as he fought back. This froze the others in fear, and they complied with orders to return to the deck of the *Echo*. Within moments, the small craft had been taken and was headed to the rocky shore, obviously to collect the boarding party. Soon the ship would be crawling with the enemy—whoever they were.

“I ask you one last time,” said Aggar as he cocked his pistols. “Do you surrender your ship?”

Gray glared at him, then looked to Hayes. The man was injured, a small bit of blood trickling down his temple from what looked like a splinter that struck him as a nearby plank was shattered by a bullet. Hayes was still sitting up as he regarded his captain.

“W-we are beaten, Commander,” Hayes responded, holding his wound. “No use.”

Gray looked down and took a deep breath. Is this how his first command was to end? By the looks of things, this is how his *life* would end. These men are stealing the *Echo*, and they will not want witnesses, he was sure. Time! He need time to think!

“Captain, I will count to—”

“Strike colors!” Gray called out strongly. “Lower our flag! Surrender the ship!”

Gray looked up and almost immediately saw the British flag from the mainmast being lowered. He had lost the *Echo*.

“Ah! Good!” called Aggar. “Very good, Captain! Now, leave your men in the tops, and have the deckhands form a line along the starboard rail. Hurry now!”

Gray knew the odds of surviving this event were slim. Standing slowly, he quickly realized that he had two choices: to take back the ship, which was obviously impossible at the moment, or abandon her and try to save the lives of as many of the crew as he could. To do this, it was clear that he needed to get his men off the ship before many more were murdered. Gray knew this game. Aggar, or whoever would be the commander, only needed enough Englishmen to complement his crew, maybe fifty or sixty at the most. The *Echo* had over one hundred hands.

“Echoes! Deckhands along the starboard rail! The rest, stay in the tops,” he called. “Not you, Williams! Get down from there!”

As Young Ike Williams came down from the crow’s nest, Gray grabbed his arm, and in the confusion whispered a

final command.

The deck crew slowly complied with the captain's directive and gingerly walked, limped, and crawled to the starboard rail. Now boarding the ship was yet another boatload of men from the shore. Within another half hour there would be almost forty of Aggar's men aboard, all armed with various muskets, knives, and swords. With the men in the tops, Aggar would have almost a complete crew.

"Aggar," pleaded Gray, "allow me to attend to the injured as best I can! One of your men shot our surgeon—so I am the only hope the wounded have!"

"Captain Gray," Aggar said as he pulled him aside, "the injured...will not make it out of this, eh? If you follow my instructions to the letter, you and a small number of your crew may have a...fighting chance at living at least a few more days. Now, get in line."

Gray stared at Aggar, held his gaze, then moved slowly to the starboard rail. As he passed Hayes, he quickly whispered a few words. Hayes nodded ever so slightly, and the captain slowly moved aft along the line of men to take his place at the farthest point.

"The sail, Kowalski!" called Aggar to the jolly boat as it appeared with a batch of men. "Come aboard quickly, and have these fine British sailors reduce sails to only the tops. She's straining at the lines. Ha! She is a fast one, like a pony at a gate, ready to run!"

"Yes, sir," said Kowalski as he began his ascent.

Williams, according to Gray's orders, was now at the captain's storage, as the men called it, a small area at the base of the rear ladder. The captain's cabin on the *Echo* was pretty by any standard of the British Navy, however, it was too small to hold all of the personal effects of its commander. To remedy this, the shipwrights built a space about the size of a breadbasket placed behind a small door in the floorboards. In this nook, there was a locked safe holding the captain's valuables. In the case of Commander Gray, among the valuables were two exquisite German dueling pistols given to him by his great uncle, and a small flint, powder, and ball supply. Williams loaded the weapons, hid them in his shirt, and took them to the deck.

The jolly boat now headed back to the shore. So far, it had completed three trips, each producing a dozen or more of Aggar's crew. Once aboard, they took positions about the ship, eyeing their captives, now and again calling to them forcibly in a language none of the Englishmen could understand. Likewise, the British men in the tops had difficulty understanding Kowalski, who had begun ordering the taking in of sails; however, it was a slow process, and many of the men were confused and frightened.

"Attention, all you fine British sailors!" came the raised voice of Nikomed Aggar as he strolled the deck, already proud of his new command. "We thank you for this wonderful vessel! She is a fine lady, and even now, with the slightest wind at her back, she is anxious to be underway! This will suit our purposes well!"

Hayes stared intently, not at Aggar but at Gray, awaiting a signal.

After another moment, Williams arrived from his secret task belowdecks and covertly handed Gray the two weapons, now loaded. He then stood next to his captain, shaking with fear.

"I ask that you all turn toward the rail and watch the approaching boat," boomed Aggar. "It contains the last of my crew who will need assistance securing the skiff alongside. Once aboard, we will allow you to depart for the shore. If you do not assist us, you will die."

A lie, thought Gray as he fumbled behind his back.

"Cherepanyanko! Kowalski! Take some of these English dogs and have them haul up the boat!" commanded Aggar as the jolly appeared with the last of his men. They climbed like rats onto the ship. Within moments, the boat was secured on deck.

"All of you Englishmen, against the rail!" boomed Aggar as he laughed. "Yes, yes, keep turning."

This entire mission was a farce from the beginning, thought Gray. A traitor succeeded in changing our orders, leading us to this point, and allowing Aggar to pop up and steal the ship easily. Yet he is no pirate. Pirates are thankfully few these days and would never attack a British Navy ship. And the men under Aggar's command are too well trained, and some—Styles, Evans, and Ryder, surely—were placed aboard my ship in Chatham! He will leave no witnesses, thought Gray. We are all dead, except maybe the men in the tops. He means to kill the rest of us as soon as our backs are turned. It is now or never.

Ever so slightly, he caught the eye of Hayes and nodded.

"Abandon ship!" bellowed Gray as loud as a hurricane. "Overboard! Now!"

Gray grabbed Williams and tossed the boy into the water. Cardew and Adams immediately went over the side.

Using the marlin spike that he had loosened from its position at the rail, Hayes immediately struck the enemy closest to him in the temple. He grabbed the man's sword and immediately cut the hawser, freeing the stern anchor line. At the exact same moment, Gray produced one of his fine pistols, took aim, and sent a ball directly into the line holding the bow anchor.

Free of constraint, the *Echo* lurched forward, sending many on both sides of the conflict to the deck.

“I said over the bloody rail, Echoes! Or damn you all!” boomed Gray, livid that so few had gone overboard as of yet.

Hayes, done with his duty at the rope, reached an arm out to each side, grabbed Sherland and Hill by the collars, and tossed them over board. Wilson grabbed Neil and pushed him over the rail. Others immediately followed.

Aggar, seeing that his plan was being challenged, bellowed the order, “We need the men in the tops! Address them!”

His men immediately aimed their weapons to the sails and rigging, preventing many from escaping.

“Aggar!” yelled Gray, who now stood on top of the rail.

Aggar turned and pointed a pistol at Gray. However, the Englishman had produced his second pistol and fired. Narrowly avoiding the blast, Aggar dropped to the deck.

Gray turned to jump, then looked up. A bit of luck, finally! he said to himself as the moon set behind the cliffs, plunging all into almost complete darkness. The view from the *Echo* of the swimming men was fast becoming shrouded in fog and darkness as the ship exited the bay. He smiled and leapt into the water.

Aboard, the men in the tops were taken under control and worked the sails as best they could. The *Echo* was now almost completely out of the inlet, steadily slipping away into the dark sea.

“The English commander and at least a dozen men must have made it ashore, Captain Aggar,” said Cherepanyanko, the tall, blond lieutenant.

Aggar cupped his hands and called to the unseen shore, laughing. “Very well, Captain Gray! Bravo! Though, you leave me with no anchors, so I must leave *you*—leave you to die in this forsaken place! Nowhere to go and no way to get there! Thank you most kindly for this beautiful lady!”

Gray had indeed made it to the rocky shoreline, exhausted from his strenuous swim in the heavy uniform he wore. He quickly assisted several other men—some wounded, others just having trouble climbing the rocks that dotted the coast. He took a moment to glance out to sea.

Through the mist, he saw the stern of the *Echo* disappear into the night, hearing only the continuing laughter of her new commander.