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REAPER'S  
**HARVEST**

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ALEC MERRILL

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# ***Reaper's Harvest***

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By Alec Merrill

This story is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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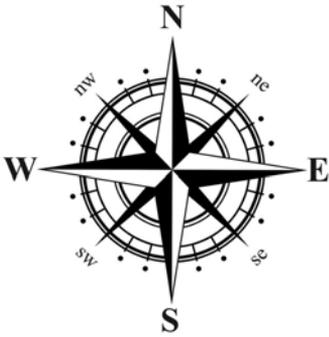
## Swift Series

Swift

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# *Reaper's Harvest*

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**O**n first hearing the name Reaper, the image of a black cloaked skeleton waiting, scythe in hand, to reap or cut down a victim popped into mind. Shuddering at the mental image, Lieutenant Francis Halpenny sincerely wondered if the Reaper would bring about his demise or a long sought after lucky break.

Halpenny first learned of the Reaper while eating dinner in the wardroom of HMS Centurion, a fourth rate sixty-gun ship-of-the-line. Naval officers generally dine, as opposed to eat, but the word dine just didn't seem to belong anywhere near the boiled salt beef they consumed that day. The ship's cook had apparently halted that beef's ten-year deterioration in some barrel, in the expectation that it would serve better as dinner. In Halpenny's opinion, and in that of other officers in the wardroom, the cook erred in judgement and should have left the beef in the barrel to finish rotting.

"Halpenny," said Lieutenant Richard Rollins, the first lieutenant, over the normal dinner chatter. Halpenny was a twenty-six year old lieutenant who had spent the last eleven years at sea battling his way up to the present rank. At five foot nine, Halpenny was willowy. The poor fare on board His Majesty's vessels had its effect, as Halpenny was dependent upon Royal Navy pay and couldn't afford additional rations even if they had been available. Everyone addressed him as Halpenny, never Francis, or the even more detestable Frank or Frankie. It had taken some time and sharp words to ensure everyone ceded to his wishes in that regard.

Conversation was always informal in the wardroom. All the commissioned naval officers in the wardroom shared the same rank of lieutenant, although there was

a great deal of difference between the first lieutenant and Halpenny's position as third lieutenant.

"Yes, Richard."

"Some dispatches came with the supply ship this morning. It seems you'll be leaving us next month when we return to Portsmouth."

That comment stopped all conversation, as everyone in the wardroom strained to hear the news.

"They say why?"

"You're transferred to the Americas as first lieutenant on HMS Reaper."

"Never heard of her. Anyone?"

The master, Mr. Vance said, "The Reaper is a sloop of war. She's a snow, or more precisely a snow-brig, built to the same specifications as HMS Bonetta -- two hundred tonnes with a length of eighty-five and a half feet and beam of twenty-three feet. She carries fourteen 4-pounders and twelve swivels. Although she's bigger than the average brig, to all accounts that extra trysail doesn't make her any faster."

"You know her current station?"

"Last I heard she worked out of Boston," replied Vance.

"Never been there. What's Boston like?"

"All colonial towns are rather drab compared to home. Good harbour. I wouldn't get too concerned however, because the sloops are on station most of the time," replied Rollins, who had experience in waters off the American colonies. "Just pray your patrol station isn't off the Rhode Island colony."

"Why's that?"

"Rhode Island lies south of Boston and the Massachusetts colony. In Rhode Island is Narragansett Bay, which has a reputation as a haven for privateers and pirates. Some years ago, about ten I think, there were so many pirates operating out of Narragansett Bay that we had to go in and remove them. We seized a number of ships and left some of the more notable scoundrels like Thomas Tew dangling from the gallows on Goat Island directly off Newport. After that things settled down."

“I remember that,” said Vance, who had over thirty years experience at sea.

“There was a story going around at the time that the Governor of Rhode Island established a local Admiralty Court to condemn vessels and cargos. Rumour had it so much plunder was taken that the Admiralty Court wanted to ensure the plunder stayed in Rhode Island instead of coming back here.”

“Are you saying the citizens and governor of Rhode Island participated in this activity?”

“I don't know whether the story is true or not, but there seemed to be enough evidence to support the premise that trade in illicit cargos had the backing of powerful citizens in the colony.”

“Sounds like a lovely place.”

“They don't take kindly to the navy.”

“It gets better and better. Anyone know anything about the Reaper's captain?”

“Commander Royston had her a year ago. I'm not sure if he's still in command.”

“Never heard of him either. Anyone?”

“Don't know the man, but I think his father is a Member of Parliament. Rich and lots of influence,” said Lieutenant Millar of the Marines.

Halpenny sat back and reflected on the information gathered. The transfer was from a ship-of-the-line to a small sloop of war. The entire crew of that sloop was liable to be composed of half the number of the men currently in his division. The captain of a ship-of-the-line had far more influence than a commander did; meaning reports on Halpenny's performance had more 'weight' in the current posting. That was a strike against the transfer.

The sloop's patrol station was somewhere off the American colonies. That was a long way from any entertainment found in English ports. The sloop was, according to Rollins, never in port but always on station. The Centurion stayed in port more often and at bigger ports where there was more entertainment. Although his purse was near empty, larger ports with opportunity for entertainment were much preferred to drab colonial ports. That was a second strike against the transfer.

The transfer didn't include any real promotion or increase in pay, despite the

change in title from third lieutenant to first lieutenant. There was an increase in responsibility and probably an increase in workload. There were few officers on a sloop of war. It was likely that the only commissioned officers would be the captain and first lieutenant. The requirement to stand watch would remain. That was yet another strike against the transfer.

The lack of other commissioned officers also meant there would be no wardroom similar to that of the Centurion. Comradeship with midshipmen or standing officers could not occur as a first lieutenant. Additionally, he would have to pay for any special fare, which considering his purse, meant few nice meals and the same poor fare as the men. That was another shortfall.

Taking all of these points into consideration, the upcoming transfer to HMS Reaper seemed far from the lucky break Halpenny needed. There was one bright prospect however. Rumour indicated there were pirates along the coast of the American colonies. Capturing a pirate was lucrative. With no other lieutenants on board the Reaper, Halpenny could expect to collect a full one eighth share for any prize taken. That was far more than could be earned in any other capacity. That might offset all the shortfalls, as he could certainly use the coin.

Leaving the wardroom, Halpenny headed on deck to spell Lieutenant Dick Pryer, the second lieutenant, on watch. That simple courtesy allowed Pryer the opportunity to get some dinner. No one ordered him to the deck; it was Halpenny's way.

"Dick, I'll spell you for a while so you can get some dinner."

"Thanks Halpenny, I'll do the same for you sometime," replied Pryer. "Course is north by west. Report any contacts immediately to the captain."

"I have the deck."

Halpenny checked the course, the set of the sails, and the activity of the watch on duty. Satisfied that all was correct, he paced the deck to work off the effects of dinner.

Pryer returned shortly after quickly gobbling down dinner. As Pryer re-assumed the deck, he sent the watch into the tops to adjust the trim of the sails.

Halpenny didn't know whether to be slighted or amused. Pryer had originally trimmed the sails upon assuming the watch. Halpenny had not altered that trim. Pryer automatically trimmed the sails upon re-assuming the watch to assert his

command. It was also a not so subtle demonstration of his supposedly better understanding of the trim than that of the officer relinquishing the watch. There was little Halpenny could say about it, as he was junior to Pryer and wasn't officer of the watch.

Halpenny shook his head and left the deck. Halpenny had not altered Pryer's trim upon relieving him; hence, Pryer's actions confirmed his pettiness without any doubt to everyone on the watch. Halpenny hoped to leave all this pettiness behind on the new ship.

The remaining time at sea on the Centurion passed slowly. As the time to return to Portsmouth approached, Halpenny became more withdrawn. Soon he would be away from the pettiness of the wardroom. He wished to part without any animosity, and naturally restrained expressing any harsh words or quips. Although he considered none of the officers on the Centurion close friends, they were companions.

Finally, the day came when the Centurion again dropped anchor in Portsmouth harbour. When a ship-of-the-line arrives in port, there is a great deal of activity. While Halpenny was well aware of this activity, there was still disappointment when the wardroom failed to hold any goodbye party or prepare a hearty send-off. After being at sea for two months, all the officers were eager to finish their work and get to shore. There was little time or inclination for anything else. Only a word from a couple of officers, and Halpenny went unceremoniously over the side following his baggage.

If things were dismal upon his departure from the Centurion, they became nearly insufferable after his arrival at the naval offices. There was no space left on the Boston bound packet carrying dispatches. Instead of travelling in a comfortable cabin in a fast ship, the authorities had arranged transit in a slow merchantman. A cursory glance of that merchantman raised questions as to her seaworthiness. Despite these reservations, Halpenny either sailed on the merchantman or paid for the voyage. Given the state of his purse, it was a bitter pill to swallow.

The transfer to HMS Reaper seemed far from a lucky break, and more like a bad omen.

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“Boarding party away,” shouted Captain Royston, as HMS Reaper’s boarding party, led by Lieutenant Halpenny, scrambled into the cutter. It was a short row in rough seas over to a stationary and wallowing merchantman. Even from the distance of the Reaper’s quarterdeck to the merchantman, it was possible to see the scowls on the faces of the merchantman’s crew members as they awaited the arrival of that boarding party.

No merchantman sailor liked any inspection imposed by the Royal Navy. The merchantman captains liked inspections even less. It was bad enough to lose time because of the boarding, but to have some navy officer with little knowledge or interest in commerce rifle through bills of lading and cargo manifests to find non-existent contraband was galling. In most cases, those navy officers wouldn’t recognize contraband unless they literally stumbled over it. Most merchantman officers didn’t fear the cargo inspections, even if some contraband happened to find its way aboard the vessel. Adroit use of manifests could easily conceal such activities, assuming of course that the transport of contraband wasn’t blatant. What truly infuriated all merchantman sailors was the inspection of the crew looking for so-called deserters. A prime sailor could be a foreigner who could barely speak English, yet the Royal Navy would claim the man was a deserter. That sailor would be removed from the ship, forcibly if necessary, to endure a life of near slavery as a pressed man. It was little wonder most merchant sailors scorned the Royal Navy.

“A sour looking lot, if ever I’ve seen one,” said Mr. Guilbault, who scanned the rails of the wallowing merchantman as the cutter approached it. Guilbault was the Reaper’s master-at-arms and the senior rating in the boarding party.

“Ungrateful, if you ask me,” replied Halpenny. “We protect them and any other British ships involved in commerce. There’s been a threat of pirates in these waters for years. In wartime, there are enemy warships and privateers that prey upon them. This very ship which we are about to inspect could very well be taken without our presence. You’d think the bastards would be grateful for that protection and our presence. Yet, not only aren’t they grateful, they openly despise us. I’d like to see the shoe on the other foot for once.”

“Not likely to see that, sir.”

“Yes, t’is a pity though.”

Halpenny pushed all these thoughts aside as the Reaper’s boat scraped alongside the merchantman. It was time to put on a false smile and be nice to an ungrateful merchant captain. The battens below the merchantman’s entry port were slippery. Combined with the erratic rolling of the ship in the rough seas, it made ascent from the Reaper’s boat to the merchantman’s deck hazardous and time consuming. To make matters worse, the ship’s captain didn’t even exhibit the courtesy of opening the entry port through the bulwark. The boarding party had to climb the extra distance over the bulwark. It was an irritation and added to the unpleasantness of the boarding.

Standing and composing himself once on deck, Halpenny scrutinized everyone to locate the captain. Only hostile stares from two dozen men met his gaze. No one stepped forward to welcome him aboard. The lack of greeting was a further annoyance setting the tone for the inspection. If this captain wanted to be snobbish, Halpenny could match him snub for snub.

A man who might be the ship’s captain stood on the quarterdeck tapping a foot impatiently. The only clue that this man might be the captain was a formal hat, which no one else wore. A nod to the master-at-arms sent the boarding party to strategic locations across the deck. Halpenny headed for the man on the quarterdeck and once again attempted a friendly smile. After so many boarding parties in the past few months, the process was routine.

“Captain, Lieutenant Halpenny of His Majesty’s Ship Reaper. Could I see your ship’s papers, cargo manifests and logs, please?”

“Captain Lockie of the Virginia Star. Let’s get this over with. If you will follow me to my cabin, I will present everything for your inspection.”

“Mr. Guilbault, carry on,” ordered Halpenny. While Halpenny checked the ship’s documents, Guilbault and the boarding party checked the cargo and the men aboard. Halpenny turned aft to follow Lockie, barely acknowledging Guilbault’s reply.

A comparison between the cargo manifests and inspection of the cargo verified the accuracy of the manifests. There were no irregularities with the Virginia Star’s cargo or with the crew. Halpenny had a mind to press one of the sailors from the Virginia Star to teach the captain and crew to be more courteous; however, the Reaper had a full crew and didn’t need the extra man. Pressing a man wouldn’t harm the Virginia Star’s captain and wouldn’t do anything to

improve the morale on either ship, so Halpenny decided to leave without any further delay.

“Mr. Guilbault, get everyone back in the cutter.”

“Aye, sir,” replied Guilbault, who motioned the boarding party back to the boat.

Halpenny turned to look at Captain Lockie before stepping over the bulwark. Maliciously, he decided a final parting shot was in order.

“Captain Lockie, you may not like having a boarding party stop and inspect you. I don’t care to do the inspections all that much myself, but I do what I’m ordered. All the same, a little courtesy would be welcome, like opening the entry port. I have no problem pressing that man, that man and that man, to teach you a lesson,” said Halpenny while pointing at three different men. The statement had the desired effect; the three designated men paled and looked pleadingly at Lockie, who grimaced, but said nothing.

Halpenny turned and descended the battens into the waiting boat, his false smile replaced with a huge grin. He turned stone-faced to see the master-at-arms’ smiling face.

“Cast off.”

The return trip to the Reaper was a wild ride. The rough seas had worsened while the boarding party completed the inspection of the Virginia Star. Salt spray splattered over everyone and everything regardless of one’s position in the cutter. Salt impregnated cloth rubbed mercilessly. It was another irritant, as there was little fresh water available to clean uniforms.

Arriving back at the Reaper, Halpenny climbed aboard and reported to the captain while the crew manoeuvred the cutter into position for hoisting aboard.

“She’s the Virginia Star, Captain, carrying a load of grain and tobacco to New York. We didn’t find any contraband. I didn’t press anyone as we have a full crew.”

“Very well, Mr. Halpenny, get the cutter on board and resume our course.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Halpenny turned to check on the cutter. Things were well in hand, as the crew swung the cutter inboard.

“Bosun, sheet home those sails. Helmsman, course, north by northwest.”

\* \* \*

Patrolling the same waters day after day ground down every man on board the Reaper. Whereas the ships-of-the-line headed to the West Indies for the winter, most of the smaller ships, including the Reaper, remained on station, regardless of the cold winter weather.

Patrolling in the North Atlantic during winter was brutal. Standing watch in sub zero temperatures, every man aboard the Reaper wore as much clothing as possible. Halpenny was better off than most men were, as he had good shoes, boots, and additional clothing. Most men had no shoes and few clothes.

Cold, piercing wind and bone chilling spray that froze on contact with the lines and bulwarks, posed challenges. Unsafe footing when walking, or the loss of grip when working in the tops, was hazardous to one's health. That spray also posed other challenges. Spray or precipitation could rapidly saturate clothes leaving a man shivering and cursing. Once a man was wet, the cold wind made life miserable. If the clothing dried, the salt irritated the skin. There seemed to be little relief.

As the salt encrusted collar of the jacket rubbed against his raw neck one more time, Halpenny cursed the sloop. On HMS Centurion, the quarterdeck was higher and further from the bow, meaning that little if any spray reached it in normal conditions. On the sloop, the quarterdeck was only slightly drier than the forecabin. For the most part Captain Royston remained in his cabin and avoided the inclement winter weather. The rest of the crew were not so fortunate.

There wasn't even any relief below decks, as the cold air permeated through hatches and into one's bones. With little or no heat, trying to dry clothes was also impossible. In most cases, men went to sleep in wet clothes and hoped those clothes would be dry by the time the next watch commenced. In most cases, this didn't happen.

Standing watch provides time and opportunity for a man to think. While pacing the quarterdeck, several thoughts kept popping into Halpenny's conscious thoughts. The most important was whether the time spent on the Reaper was a

stepping-stone toward advancement or a slide into obscurity. After months of duty on the Reaper, the answer was still unclear.

The fastest way to promotion in the navy was to have influence or to have the eye of the admiral. As the son of a merchant, Halpenny had no influence. Living on naval pay, he couldn't afford to purchase any. As far as having the eye of the admiral, that was a dead end. When the merchantman carrying Halpenny from England arrived in Boston, HMS Reaper had been anchored only a stone's throw away. The remainder of the fleet was at sea; consequently, the only senior officer Halpenny had ever seen in the Americas was Commander Royston. To the admiral, Halpenny was no more than a name on a sheet of paper, the same as dozens of other officers.

That left only two paths to promotion. The first was through long dedicated service. Being an efficient first lieutenant was no guarantee of promotion, but being an inefficient one was a sure path to being passed-over. Halpenny therefore applied considerable effort in training the crew and keeping the Reaper ship-shape so there was nothing with which the captain could find fault.

The second path was to stand out somehow from the mass of other lieutenants. It was common knowledge that if the admiral needed someone to command a ship, the appointed officer would be someone whom the admiral knew or recognized, not merely some name on a list. The admiral would more readily recognize lieutenants serving on any ship-of-the-line under his command due to their proximity and by having a senior captain extolling their qualities. Since Halpenny didn't meet these criteria, he needed something else that would allow his qualities to stand out. Capturing a pirate or a contraband runner was the only thing that came to mind. Given the ship's continuing operation well out to sea, that possibility seemed remote.

The Reaper cruised constantly off the coast of Rhode Island, ostensibly to protect the citizens of Rhode Island and to protect ship owners from acts by hostile parties. As England currently was at peace with everyone, the only hostile parties were pirates. There were occasional reports of Spanish ships raiding commerce to the south along the Carolinas. Whether Spanish, some other nationality, or stateless pirates, it mattered not; if the Reaper encountered them, they would be taken and dealt with accordingly.

Although HMS Reaper cruised with a primary purpose of protecting English

commerce from raiders, she also had secondary duties. The Reaper represented the crown and supported the collection of revenue taxes. In Halpenny's opinion, enforcement of the Revenue Act produced more benefits for the crown than meaningless patrols against pirates that failed to appear. Those revenue taxes helped pay for navy ships and navy crews. The drawback was that active enforcement of the revenue laws placed the Reaper's crew in direct conflict with some of Rhode Island's businessmen. Many of those businessmen had different ideas about the worthiness of the revenue laws and tended to skirt them wherever possible. The Reaper's presence supposedly kept those businessmen honest. Vessel and cargo inspection of all ships was the only way to ensure that honesty.

Inspection of all vessels was impossible. Most vessels plied the routes between larger ports such as Boston and New York and smaller outlying areas. During the harvest season, virtually every ship transported the harvest to the larger ports for further shipment to Europe. Ships returning to the smaller ports loaded goods to assist the settlers in weathering the winter. There were simply far too many ships to check. Most of these outlying areas were inaccessible during the winter when the rivers or harbours froze. Once freeze-up occurred, the inter-coastal trade virtually ceased. Most ships sailing during the winter headed to or from Europe or the Indies.

The small number of ships sailing made it possible to inspect most of them; however, patrolling along a line well out to sea meant ships sailing close inshore were rarely seen from the Reaper's patrol station, especially at night. Without inspection, it was questionable whether those ships sailing close inshore carried legitimate or contraband cargo. Failure to search those vessels did call into question the effectiveness of the Reaper's patrolling.

Inbound ships, especially from the south, were always of interest. Ships from the Indies usually carried molasses, sugar and rum, which the Revenue Act specifically singled out for close examination.

During the winter, rum was a coveted product. The American colonists had more time to sit around and drink with little else to keep them occupied. Rum also warmed the body faster than beer did and was a type of medication for all sorts of ailments. Demand for rum was therefore high. The supply of rum came directly from the Indies, or from the distilleries of Rhode Island. If coming from the New England distilleries, the increased demand in rum increased the need

for molasses, a critical ingredient when distilling rum. Rhode Island businessmen constantly imported both rum and molasses. Whether those imports were legal or illegal could only be determined by checking the northbound ships heading into Narragansett Bay. It was only common sense in Halpenny's opinion; some of those ships had to be carrying contraband cargo. Nevertheless, the Reaper continued her offshore patrolling, indifferent to the possibilities closer inshore.

It was a continuing point of contention between Halpenny and the captain. Royston's focus on patrolling against suspected pirates to the detriment of revenue enforcement activities irked Halpenny. There was little excitement in patrolling against pirates unlikely to appear; besides, seizing any contraband runner had the double benefit of catching the admiral's eye and lining one's pocket at the same time.

Halpenny tended to express this opinion whenever he could do so prudently. Captain Royston didn't share Halpenny's opinion. In conversation after conversation, the discussion took the same course.

"Sir, the lookouts have spotted a merchantman attempting entry into Narragansett Bay. She is coming from the south and appears to hug the coast. She looks mighty suspicious. Shall we investigate?"

"No, Mr. Halpenny. We will maintain station. Any merchantman heading into the bay is probably heading to Newport and no concern of ours."

"With respect, sir, it's possible that the ship may carry contraband. Wouldn't it be sensible to check? She does look suspicious."

"Mr. Halpenny, our mission is to protect the sea lanes against pirates. You know as well as I that to prove a ship has contraband on board is difficult. If we found anything suspicious, we would have to take that ship to Boston for full examination. If we couldn't prove the load was contraband, I would have to pay restitution to the owners for the loss of revenue while the ship underwent that detailed inspection. I'm not willing to take that risk. Besides that, escorting a ship to Boston would take us off our patrol station. If I sent a prize crew aboard instead, there is no telling when or if I'd get the men back. Then there's the reception we'd get in Newport; at present, they barely tolerate us. If we started taking ships, any hospitality would evaporate. We'll maintain our present course."

“Aye, aye, sir.”

It was futile to argue any further. Any such argument would result in a deteriorated working relationship with Royston, which might reflect poorly on his performance report. It was more sensible to refrain from further comment. Biting his tongue was a challenge for Halpenny, however.

Something else irked Halpenny. Royston closely guarded the orders for the Reaper, so no one but the captain knew their exact content. Based on previous experience, it was possible to speculate the nature of those orders. On any of His Majesty's ships in which Halpenny previously had served, the ship remained on station until it was time to re-provision. As the Reaper carried three months provisions, the captain seemed to bend the rules every thirty days when the Reaper sailed into Newport harbour and anchored for a day or two.

Occasionally, some provisions, like fresh meat or vegetables, would come aboard. On each stop the captain went ashore and occasionally allowed the trusted men from a watch ashore as well; then it was back to sea. Despite reservations, Halpenny had to admit that bending the rules benefited the ship. Morale was high, in spite of the mundane and repetitive nature of the patrols.

For thirty days, the Reaper patrolled well off the New England shore ranging from Nantucket Island in the north to part way down Long Island in the south. All the time the course was north or south or slight deviations from those courses. On that patrol line, any time the crew members sighted a sail inshore of the Reaper's position they didn't investigate. Any sail on the same course or further out to sea, they chased. If they were able to overtake a ship, the routine was simple. Halpenny would lead a boarding party across to the stopped vessel. The captain of the vessel would present the ship's papers and cargo manifests. The boarding party physically examined the cargo and compared those contents against the cargo manifests. The boarding party checked every man on board to identify deserters from the Royal Navy. So far, in all inspections, everything had appeared in order and Halpenny had allowed the ships to proceed.

After watching activities around the coast and in Narragansett Bay for the past few months, Halpenny privately thought that the pirates might have left, but the attitudes of the remaining residents hadn't changed all that much. Those residents still showed a willingness to trade in illicit cargo and were not above breaking the law if a profit were possible. Halpenny had little doubt that a sizeable portion of incoming trade conducted in the Rhode Island colony was

with contraband items, on which, no collection of revenue taxes for the Crown would occur.

While there was no concrete evidence to support this belief, the number of suspicious vessels sailing closer inshore, especially the ones arriving at night, was enough to cause concern. Given the number of distilleries in Newport and in the Rhode Island colony, there was a near constant demand for molasses.

In the several months since his arrival on board, HMS Reaper had not stopped a single ship carrying non-British molasses or sugar. Few of the ships that the Reaper stopped for inspection carried molasses, yet there was no shortage of molasses in Newport. To Halpenny, that meant the molasses arrived on the uninspected ships hugging the coast.

Captain Royston's failure to inspect ships heading into Narragansett Bay, combined with the apparent bending of orders by anchoring at Newport, posed some concern for Halpenny. Although it was unclear whether these actions violated any orders, they were suspect. Halpenny could say nothing about them to anyone lest he appear unsupportive toward his captain. If any comment about unsupportive talk or actions were on his record, it would be the kiss of death. Any prospect of a promotion would end forever.

Halpenny walked a tightrope between his ambitions and convictions. Confident a boarding party would eventually find contraband on one of the ships entering Narragansett Bay if allowed to inspect, Halpenny could find no suitable argument to convince the captain to undertake these inspections. It was a fine line. If pushed too hard, the captain might enter some negative comments on his performance report.

Thinking deeply about these things, Halpenny failed to notice the captain's presence on deck. The captain's orders jarred Halpenny back to reality.

"Mr. Halpenny, bring her about. We'll head north for the remainder of the watch."

"Aye, sir, do you wish to move closer inshore, sir."

"No, Mr. Halpenny, there's nothing for us to find closer inshore."

"The lookouts reported vessels closer inshore yesterday, sir. Perhaps sir, we might investigate the cargo carried by those vessels?"

“No, Mr. Halpenny, those vessels are British vessels conducting honest trade. Our quarry is much more elusive, and probably not British.”

“Very well, sir. Bosun, get the watch moving. Helmsman, hard larboard, new course due north.”

The bosun roared and the men on watch jumped. The Reaper settled in on her new course. The Reaper's lookouts saw nothing on the horizon in any direction. The further they sailed to the north, the likelihood that they would spot anything heading into Narragansett Bay diminished.

Frustrated at the lack of action, Halpenny paced back and forth across the deck, as there was little else any subordinate could do once the captain gave an order.

\* \* \*

“Deck there, sail in the distance on the starboard quarter heading south, only topgallants visible. She's a full rigged ship. No flag visible,” shouted the masthead lookout.

It was the first indication of a possible change in the monotonous routine. Halpenny turned to send a runner to the captain's cabin, but halted as the captain appeared on deck.

“Investigate her, Mr. Halpenny.”

“Aye, sir. Bosun, call the watch. Helmsman put your helm over. Course due east.” Due east would provide a rough intersecting course until the ship became visible from the deck.

“Master-at-arms, detail a boarding party, fifteen men.”

It took the better part of two hours to reach the ship and get her to lower her sails. The boarding party routine was so common on the Reaper that there was no impatience or visible concern. Halpenny departed the deck and retrieved his sword. No one required further orders, as everyone knew his job. Halpenny carefully climbed down the Reaper's battens and timed jumping into the cutter. Once safely aboard, orders commenced.

“Cast off, give way starboard, give way larboard.” The boat's crew pulled toward the waiting three-mast ship. Once there, the bowman hooked on at the side

entry and Halpenny scrambled up the battens in as dignified a manner as possible. A man met him at the open entry port.

“Captain, Lieutenant Halpenny of His Majesty’s Ship Reaper. Could I see your ship’s papers, cargo manifests and logs, please?”

“Captain Spearman of the City of Manchester, lieutenant. If you will follow me, I will present everything for your inspection.”

Fifteen minutes later Halpenny’s inspection of the various documents was in the final stages when a knock at the door disturbed them.

“Lieutenant, sir, we have what I believe to be a deserter, sir,” said Guilbault, the master-at-arms.

Halpenny dropped the ship’s documents and headed to the deck. The man in question stood aside near the entry port, guarded by three stout seamen from the boarding party. Although the man was not bound, rope was ready.

Guilbault handed Halpenny a piece of paper. On it was a list of names of deserters and their physical traits.

“If you’ll look at the name Charles Roach, you’ll see listed a heart tattoo on the right forearm saying Rosalee. If you look at the prisoner’s right forearm, you’ll see the same tattoo, sir,” explained Guilbault.

“Captain Spearman, what do you have to say about this man?”

“Able seaman Charlie Jones. Signed on in Boston. Been with us for half a year. Never had a problem with him,” said Spearman.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” asked Halpenny of the prisoner.

“Able seaman Charlie Jones, sir. Never heard of no Charles Roach,” wailed the prisoner.

“I’ll bet. I expect a court-martial will decide otherwise. Good work Mr. Guilbault. Bind him and put him in the boat.”

On that note, the boarding party went over the side. Neither a tight-lipped Halpenny nor an equally fuming Captain Spearman spoke another word as Halpenny turned and descended the battens. Halpenny never noticed the spit that flew over the side as he dexterously worked his way to a seat. The boat cast off and returned to the Reaper. As Halpenny scrambled up the battens, the

prisoner mumbled to the boarding party.

“What’s the name of this barky?”

“HMS Reaper,” replied one member of the boarding party.

“Apt name, as she’ll probably transport me to the gallows or a flogging around the fleet,” mumbled Roach.

“You can thank yourself mate. If it wasn’t for that stupid tattoo, you’d not likely have been caught,” muttered another member of the boarding party.

As the boarding party came aboard, Halpenny reported to the captain.

“Captain, sir, we have apprehended a suspected deserter, one of the men on the lists provided by the Admiralty.”

“Confine him in the hold. He’s in for a long wait, as we won’t be handing him over until we re-provision again in Boston. I don’t believe there will be any need for a guard; leg irons should suffice.”

Halpenny acknowledged the orders and departed to pass them on to the master-at-arms.

As Roach stumbled aboard, the Reaper harvested her first prey in months. He was not to be her last.

\* \* \*

After thirty days of slogging through rough Atlantic seas, the Reaper turned west and headed toward Newport. As soon as the Reaper anchored in Newport harbour, a small boat pulled toward her from shore.

“Boat approaching the Reaper, standoff,” shouted a member of the harbour watch.

“I’m carrying an invitation for Captain Royston,” shouted back the boatman.

“Come alongside,” ordered Midshipman Ferris.

The man hustled aboard and extracted an envelope from his clothing. “I’m to await an answer.”

The envelope disappeared in a runner’s hand down to the captain’s cabin. The

crew working on deck saw the opportunity for a little mischief and humour at the expense of the boatman.

“Whatcha think, Bill? Will the captain press this man to take the place of the man we lost on the foreward gun?”

“I suppose so, Abe. He looks like he can row a boat. Man with a back strong enough to row a boat ought to be able to run out a gun. Captain ain’t too fussy when weeze short of men.”

Seeing the sour, nervous look on the waiting man and knowing their remarks struck home, the two men continued.

“You suppose he’s got any coin on him Bill?”

“We could probably relieve him of it tonight if we got to him before anyone else, Abe.”

“I reckon. Don’t have to worry about him having any mates on board that might help him, do we?”

“Nope. He’d be easy meat.”

Approximately ten minutes later, the runner reappeared with an envelope and transferred it to the boatman without a word. The boatman needed no encouragement to leave, having nervously fidgeted the entire time waiting on deck. No doubt, all the stories about pressed men had run through his head in the previous ten minutes.

The call went out for Lieutenant Halpenny.

“Mr. Halpenny, I’ll be ashore this evening. I’m invited to a soirée being held by a number of Newport’s leading businessmen. You can give the trusted men of the starboard watch the night off, all men to be back on board before the start of the middle watch.”

“Aye, sir. Will we sail tomorrow or can I give the larboard watch some time ashore?”

“Give them the afternoon, all men to return by the second dog watch. There’ll be the regular Sunday observances in the forenoon watch. After that they can head ashore, but I doubt there will be much open.”

“Aye, sir. At what time would you like your gig, sir?”

“At the start of the first watch would be satisfactory, Mr. Halpenny.”

Halpenny acknowledged the orders and withdrew somewhat sullenly. The distillery owners of Newport treated Captain Royston well. It seemed every time the Reaper anchored in Newport there was some form of party to which Royston was invited. Royston consistently took advantage of this generosity. There was always plenty of free food and drink present at these functions as well as numerous ladies. Halpenny was never invited. Even if he headed ashore, the food, drink and female companionship paled compared to what Royston would experience.

Halpenny often wondered why Captain Royston continually received invitations to these soirées. The captain of any Royal Navy ship held a certain status in society, and because of his father, Royston was more influential than many captains were. That would account for many of the invitations, but not all. Halpenny wondered if the residents of Newport had other reasons.

At eight o'clock, Captain Royston appeared on deck attired in dress uniform and muffled against the cold winter air. Halpenny saw him over the side. There was nothing much to see in Newport that evening. All the taverns would be full with the Reaper's trusted men, and any lady of potential interest would attend the soirée, to which Halpenny wasn't invited. It was better to remain on board and conserve the little remaining coin in his possession. Such was his lot in life since transferring to the Reaper.

After a long night's sleep, the first sleep over four hour's duration in the last thirty days, Halpenny appeared on deck. It was near the end of the morning watch on Sunday morning. The ship was tranquil. Despite the chill morning air and overcast skies, he felt mellow.

“Boat approaching the Reaper, state your business,” shouted a member of the harbour watch.

“Message for the first lieutenant,” shouted back the boatman.

“Come alongside.”

Halpenny was curious as to who might send a message so early on a Sunday morning. Impatient to determine the sender, he ripped open the envelope after failing to find any return address listed on the exterior. The letter was short and to the point.

*Lieutenant Halpenny,*

*Last evening I slipped on some ice on my way back to the ship and fell badly. According to the doctor who was summoned, I have a fractured pelvis. I have been splinted, and am confined to bed for the next six weeks to two months.*

*You will assume command of the Reaper and sail this evening to our patrol area. You will remain on station for the next thirty days, at which time you will return to Newport. While on patrol, you will remain vigilant for any raiders operating along the coast, as this is our primary mission.*

*You will check on my condition upon return to Newport. Depending on my condition at the time, I will either heal on board, or issue new orders for you. I will be receiving treatment at the Jacobson mansion.*

*Captain W E Royston  
Jacobson Mansion*

Jacobson was one of Newport's distillery owners and a rich man. If a man had to recover in Newport, the Jacobson mansion was possibly the best place to do it. The captain would lack for nothing.

The captain's note hit home like a hammer. First off, no one had informed Halpenny the captain had not returned. While it was not common for the duty watch to inform the first lieutenant of the captain's actions, it was something to straighten out. Secondly, the men would expect church service in less than two hours. The Reaper didn't have a chaplain. The captain had performed church services each week since Halpenny had come aboard. Now Halpenny would be responsible. Having never conducted a church service in his life, Halpenny was at a loss. These dilemmas were bad, but it got worse. Was he supposed to check on Captain Royston before sailing? Was he supposed to enter the captain's fall into the log? Did he report the captain's fall to the Admiral? If so, where was the Admiral? If he didn't report this to the Admiral what were the implications?

The opposite side of the coin was that Halpenny now commanded the Reaper. The correct use of this opportunity might mean earlier promotion if, and only

if, the admiral noticed the Reaper's actions under his command. That was a further dilemma. In order for the admiral to recognize his temporary command of the Reaper, the admiral had to be informed. If informed, it was possible the admiral would relieve him and place someone else in temporary command. That would snatch the Reaper's command from him. If uninformed, the admiral would attribute any action taken by Halpenny to Royston. It appeared to be a no win situation, for no matter what course he followed, someone else would get the glory.

There had to be another way. Even if the Admiral allowed Halpenny to command the Reaper, there was still the matter of proving himself as captain. The Admiral would think highly of a captain that captured a pirate. Perhaps that was the reason Royston had maintained the patrols so far out from the coast. The likelihood of capturing a pirate seemed low to Halpenny. The Royal Navy had hanged the last known pirates in the area ten years previously. To Halpenny's knowledge, there had not been one reported incident in New England involving pirates since then. With the ongoing patrols in the area, it was doubtful any pirate would venture anywhere near New England. A different approach was imperative.

There was a second way to interest an Admiral that every officer in the Royal Navy knew. That was to capture a prize, for the Admiral got one-eighth share of that prize. Prizes were common in war, but not so during peacetime. In peacetime, a prize was the seizure of a contraband runner or smuggler. Seizing a contraband runner was risky. If a navy ship seized a suspected contraband runner and it was proven in court that the cargo carried was legitimate and not contraband, the captain seizing the vessel was responsible to pay all costs for loss of income and legal proceedings.

The challenge was finding a contraband runner and seizing her. That challenge seemed minor to Halpenny. In his opinion, smugglers or contraband runners frequented the area the Reaper patrolled. If so, some of the ships entering Narragansett Bay close inshore had to be contraband runners. If he managed to seize one, he'd be in the Admiral's good graces. Any captain who achieved prize money for the admiral was an officer the Admiral looked after.

All of that was in the future. There were more pressing matters to attend to such as the upcoming church service. The men appreciated a good service and if he fouled up the Sunday observances, Halpenny wouldn't look like much of a

captain. At least it was possible to use Royston's previous church services as a guide for preparation and delivery. Royston's formula was simple - start with a short prayer, followed by a hymn that all the men sang. As the repertoire of hymns known by the crew was limited, the selection of the hymns was easy. The first would be *Rock of Ages*. After the hymn, the captain always gave a short sermon, followed by a second hymn, in this case *Praise to the Lord Almighty*. A final prayer and benediction completed the service. Halpenny sweated the sermon, lacking any idea for a subject. The topic had to be safe, yet mean something to the men. Finally, failing to find anything else, he decided to make the sermon about the captain.

The hour for worship arrived. It was ten o'clock, mid-point in the forenoon watch. The crew assembled in the waist and Halpenny took position on the quarterdeck facing them. As expected, the religious ceremony began with a prayer followed by the hymn. The sermon commenced.

"Men, the reason I'm holding the service this morning and not the captain is that the captain slipped on ice last night on the way back to the ship. He broke his hip and is bedridden for the next few weeks until his bones heal."

"I'd like to say a few words starting with a quote from the Bible. Psalm 30:2 states 'O Lord my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.' Like the quote in the Bible, I'd like each of you to call on the Lord for help and pray for the captain's speedy recovery."

Halpenny continued for a few minutes along the same lines, concluding the sermon. By the sceptical look on the faces of one or two men, it looked like there wouldn't be a unanimous outpouring of prayer for the captain. If the subject of the sermon ever came up, the entire crew could say their thoughts and prayers were with the captain. The second hymn and another prayer finished the worship. The larboard watch was eager to get their run ashore, so the assembly dissolved rapidly.

Halpenny was in a quandary with respect to visiting Captain Royston. If he left the ship, there were no other commissioned officers present to take command. The two midshipmen were too inexperienced compared to others like the bosun. If he didn't visit the captain, what would Royston think? In the end, Halpenny decided to see the captain.

As Halpenny walked through Newport, there were few people on the street and

virtually no shops open on Sunday. The cold wind further limited the number of people walking around. Without knowing the way to the Jacobson mansion and having no one to ask, alternative measures were necessary. An eating establishment appeared open on one street, as there was a line of people inside waiting to be seated. When asked, none of the waiting people could point the way to the Jacobson mansion. He did hear some interesting conversation. One man had a whispered conversation with another man about the drunken navy officer that slipped coming out of a noted house of ill repute and broke his leg. As the second man snickered, Halpenny wondered if they could be speaking about the captain. He sure hoped not, as the captain was a married man. Finally, after gaining the attention of a waitress, he received directions to the Jacobson mansion.

The mansion was nice, but somewhat underwhelming compared to some places Halpenny had seen in London. Newport controlled the commerce of Rhode Island. The majority of Rhode Island's imports from England arrived at Newport for distribution inland from there. All the colonies' inland locations transported their harvests to Newport for export. Add to that the amount of rum distilled in Newport, and you had a significant and growing amount of trade. The mansions could easily have been double the size. Even so, the captain certainly wasn't going to suffer in such accommodations.

An Irish servant responded to the knock at the front door. It took some explanation before receiving permission for admittance to the house and Royston's room. The captain lay in bed, splints from his upper abdomen to his right ankle. It was almost impossible to prop him up in bed with pillows because of the rigidity of the splints. There was no question of him coming on board for some time.

"Captain Royston, sir, it's Lieutenant Halpenny. How do you feel sir? Is there anything I can get you from the ship, sir?"

Royston motioned Halpenny forward for better viewing from the reclined position.

"Mr. Halpenny, you got my note, I see. As you can see, I'm in no condition to take the Reaper to sea. I'm relying on you to do that for me. The Reaper must be on station and maintain a patrol to ward off any raiders. Can I count on you to do that?"

“Aye, sir. Sir, might I inquire about what I should do about informing the Admiral of your accident?”

“The Admiral is either at Kingston or at Antigua, I’m not sure which. I believe he’ll have other more pressing worries than the Reaper. If informed, he would probably dispatch one of his favourite lieutenants to assume command of the Reaper. I believe you can handle that function as well as anyone he might send. If you feel you have to report it, I understand. I’ll leave it to you.”

“I take your meaning, sir. I’ll keep the Reaper in good shape for you, sir.”

“I’m counting on you Mr. Halpenny.”

“Thank you, sir. By your leave?”

“Thanks for coming Mr. Halpenny. I’ll see you in thirty days or so. Good hunting.”

Halpenny exited the Jacobson mansion with a large smile. Captain Royston had handed him the dream of a lifetime -- command of his own ship.

A less ambitious man might have thought about the manner in which Royston transferred command.

\* \* \*

Reality hit home upon rejoining the ship. The lack of officers meant some difficult choices. Neither midshipman was of sufficient age or skill to handle a watch on his own. Assigning a petty officer over a midshipman was simply not done. Halpenny resolved this by promoting Midshipman Ferris to acting first lieutenant. Midshipman Rainer became an acting second lieutenant. Each would command a watch. The two master’s mates would each stand a separate watch and keep an eye on the recently promoted midshipmen.

Once all men returned to the ship, the Reaper weighed anchor and headed back to patrol. Halpenny wondered if he should occupy the captain’s cabin. It would provide more room, but Halpenny worried what Royston might think.

Although not worried about what the crew would think, doubtless someone in the crew would inform the captain upon his return.

The Reaper resumed her standard north-south patrol but somewhat closer to the

coast. The masthead lookouts could easily see any ship traffic running close along the coast. Being winter-time, the amount of ship traffic was low, and the sea conditions bruising. For five days, they never spotted a single ship. On the sixth day, a sail observed on the far eastern horizon resulted in a short chase. With little hope of catching the ship, Halpenny reluctantly aborted the attempt. It was a letdown for all.

The boring routine continued for days. Two weeks after sighting the last sail, a report echoed down from the masthead lookout.

“Deck there, schooner close inshore headed toward Narragansett Bay.”

“Mr. Rainer, investigate,” ordered Halpenny who was on deck at the time.

“Helmsman, hard a larboard. New course due west. Bosun, get those sails adjusted,” screamed Rainer in a high-pitched voice.

The Reaper leapt to the challenge, as if eager to chase something. The crew appeared enthusiastic as well. As the Reaper headed toward shallower waters, Halpenny thought of one of the Reaper's disadvantages -- her draught. Empty, she drew over a fathom and a half. With men, provisions and powder loaded, that draught increased to two fathoms.

The approaches to Narragansett Bay were deep until very close to shore. The Reaper would have no problems chasing a ship through either the western or eastern passage. If the schooner took the Sakonnet River to land a load further up Narragansett Bay, it might be different. The Reaper might navigate the entire length of the river all the way to Fall River, but the channel was narrow and unmarked. For safety, the ship would have to slow to allow sounding. That might allow the contraband runner to get away. Luckily, the schooner headed up the western passage, thereby indicating the cargo they carried wasn't destined for Newport.

The schooner was no match for the Reaper, as the Reaper carried double the canvas. From her course well out to sea, the Reaper was also able to cut the corner, course-wise, and further reduce the distance between them. Within four hours from first sighting, the Reaper was within cannon shot of the schooner. It was necessary to fire a few shots, as the schooner had no intention of stopping. That made the chase even more exciting, but the conclusion was never in doubt.

The schooner turned toward land and headed for shallow water up near

Greenwich Bay. Rather than risking the Reaper, Halpenny stopped and lowered a boat to continue the chase. Half a league ahead, the schooner's crew lowered her sails and dropped a boat into the water. The crew scrambled aboard and rowed to shore as fast as possible. Given the distance between the schooner and the Reaper's boat there was no hope of catching the fleeing crew.

The crew might have gotten away, but the schooner and cargo didn't. A smiling prize crew sailed the schooner back to the Reaper. The master-at-arms was even wise enough to recover the schooner's boat abandoned on shore. A thorough inspection of the schooner disclosed over a hundred and fifty barrels of molasses as cargo. The captain and crew had abandoned the vessel so fast that they even forgot to destroy the ship's ledgers, which listed the crew names. It was a good 'harvest' for the Reaper.

Jubilant at the success achieved, the Reaper's crew sailed both ships down to Newport and anchored. Unsure of the correct procedure for turning over the ship to a prize court, Halpenny went ashore to speak to the captain.

The reception received ashore was far nastier than expected. The residents of Newport shunned him and the crew. One man went so far as to spit at him. Luckily, Halpenny knew the route to the Jacobson mansion and didn't have to request information, as it was doubtful any townsfolk would provide it. The reception at the Jacobson mansion was equally frosty, although Halpenny eventually reached Royston's room.

Royston looked better than on the previous visit, but still had splints attached.

"May I ask, Mr. Halpenny, why you are here, and not out on station where you belong?"

"Captain, we captured a contraband runner, a schooner full of molasses. Unfortunately, the crew members managed to get away when they abandoned the ship. We brought the schooner into harbour. I'm not sure of the procedure to submit the ship as a prize, so I came here to gain your counsel, sir."

"Exactly where and how did you manage to take the schooner?"

"The Reaper was on station and heading southbound when the masthead lookout spotted the schooner sneaking along the shore toward Narragansett Bay. I investigated, and instead of stopping at our signal, the schooner ran. We gave chase and followed her into Narragansett Bay, closing with her the entire time.

It took about four hours to get within cannon shot, before we fired some warning shots. She still didn't heave-to, so we closed and prepared to board. The schooner altered course into shallow water closer to shore. I hove-to and lowered a boat to give chase. There was nowhere for the schooner to go, so her crew dropped a boat and abandoned her while the boarding party closed. We took possession of her and when inspected, we found a cargo of molasses barrels, sir."

"You have prepared a written report?"

"Aye, sir," said Halpenny, while handing the written report over to Royston. As Royston perused the report, no one said a word. After a minute or so, Royston laid the report on the bed.

"Mr. Halpenny, it would appear from this report, that there should be no dispute about the schooner being a condemnable prize. She failed to stop when signalled, also when warning shots were fired, and was subsequently abandoned. You need to submit her to a prize court. To my knowledge, there is no such court in Newport. The closest is in Boston. You will have to put a prize crew aboard and sail her to Boston. The Reaper will resume station on patrol. When it is time to re-provision, we'll pick up the prize crew in Boston. I suggest that the prize crew also carry the deserter with them, so he will be one less worry for you."

"Aye, sir, but it will leave us short-handed."

"I'm aware of that Mr. Halpenny. Perhaps you should have thought of those consequences before chasing after the schooner. She's an attractive prize, but it will go hard on us if we fail to take any raider or pirate because we were left short-handed by seizing smugglers."

"I'm starting to see, sir."

Halpenny left the Jacobson mansion, perhaps more confused than before. He fully understood the instructions for disposal of the schooner, but was perplexed about why he would abandon the prize crew in Boston for so long.

HMS Reaper headed back out to sea with the schooner in company. Mr. Rainer, although junior, became the prize master on the schooner because of better navigation skills than Mr. Ferris. With him were six men and the deserter. It was the bare minimum to run the ship, but they only had a day or so to sail from the end of the Reaper's patrol station near Nantucket Island to Boston.

Once the schooner departed, the Reaper continued the lonely vigil running north to south off the New England coast.

\* \* \*

For days, the lookouts saw nothing, and then on the southbound leg on the fifth day they spotted another ship heading toward Narragansett Bay. Immediately the Reaper signalled the brig to stop and prepare for boarding. The brig complied, but took some time doing it. Halpenny decided to conduct the inspection himself. The ship's papers and cargo were in order, but that didn't mean they were going to get away scot-free. The Reaper was short of men.

"Captain, please muster your men for inspection." The brig's captain complied.

"Mr. Guilbault, check the brig's crew for deserters." Halpenny had previously indicated to Guilbault that they would press men to make up for their shortages. Guilbault went down the line of men and pulled three reasonable candidates from the ranks.

Each of the selected men howled in protest, but there was little anyone on the brig could do. The brig's captain protested adamantly as well, but those protests fell on deaf ears.

Halpenny turned to the brig's captain. "Captain, as you know, I have every legal right to press these men. I will allow them to collect their kits. If you continue to protest or pose any obstruction, I will press additional men. Do I make myself clear?"

The verbal protests on the brig ceased. The hate seething inside the remainder of the brig's crew was visible in the scowling faces and clenched fists. The impressments were of questionable legality but there wasn't anyone present to question them.

The boarding party, with an additional three unfortunate souls, cast off from the brig and returned to the Reaper. The Reaper had increased her harvest yet again.

The Reaper resumed her patrol station, but with a difference. Where before she had been a bored sentry marching back and forth across the entrance to Narragansett Bay, she was now like a raptor sitting on a perch, waiting patiently

for the next victim to appear.

There was a distinct change onboard as well. The crew members, in general, were happy about seizing the schooner. They had already spent the prize money in their minds. The pressed men, whose resentment smouldered and nibbled at the crew's morale, represented the only fly in the ointment. There was little Halpenny could do about it, even if aware of the problem, which he wasn't.

\* \* \*

The opportunity to pounce upon another victim came earlier than expected. During the middle watch, as the Reaper turned to head back north, the bow lookout reported a sail off the larboard side edging along the coast toward the Narragansett Bay entrance. The Reaper immediately altered course and headed for the strange sail, like a raptor diving on its prey.

Whether the ship ever saw them in the darkness before they fired, Halpenny would never know. The fully rigged ship turned and headed straight for the nearest shore. Anticipating such a move, the Reaper loaded a full larboard broadside and waited patiently as she closed the gap between the two ships.

When reasonably close to shore, the chased ship's crew let fly her sails and dropped a boat into the water as fast as possible. It wasn't fast enough, as the Reaper closed.

"Let fly the sails." The Reaper rapidly lost momentum and turned broadside to the target vessel.

"Boat in the water, cease rowing and turn toward us or we will fire upon you," shouted Halpenny. That order seemed to cause the occupants of the boat to increase their rowing efforts rather than to comply with the order.

"At the boat in the water, in succession, fire on the uproll," shouted Halpenny.

Starting with the number one gun, each of the ten guns on the larboard side fired at the boat heading toward shore. There were at least three direct hits and numerous near misses. The boat disintegrated into matchsticks.

"Get a boat into the water, Mr. Ferris and get control of that ship."

"What about survivors, sir?"

“Once you get the ship under control, the boat’s crew can check for survivors, although in this cold water, I doubt you’ll find many.”

A line fouled when lowering the boat, adding extra time to the process. It took ten minutes to reach the deserted ship and for the boarding party to climb aboard. A token number of men stayed in the Reaper’s boat and combed the dark waters looking for survivors. They found bodies, but no living souls. The Reaper’s harvest continued.

The boat party returned to the prize ship, not to the Reaper, since the prize needed as many bodies as possible to sail her. Mr. Ferris had eighteen men. It left the Reaper even further short of men.

They sailed the two ships out to sea over the horizon from land and lowered the sails at first light. The prize ship towed the Reaper’s boat. As the prize wallowed in the swell, men dropped into that boat and rowed back to the Reaper. Mr. Ferris was the first to return on board and report.

“Sir, according to the ship’s log, she is the Lady of Newport operating out of Newport. From what I can decipher, she is owned by a Rhode Island based company called Narragansett and Rhode Island Traders.”

“What about survivors, Mr. Ferris? Can they shed any light on things?”

“We didn’t find any survivors, sir. We have six bodies sewn up on board and ready for a funeral. I assume you’ll hold a service, sir.”

“Yes. What was her cargo? Why was she running?”

“She’s fully loaded with molasses, sir.”

“So based on what you’ve seen, she is a legitimate smuggler?”

“Aye, sir.”

“Good. We’ll head back over to her in a minute. You’ll take command of the prize. Have your men collect their ditty bags and return to the boat. I’ll be with you shortly.”

“Mr. Guilbault, you’ll remain aboard the Reaper. I’m heading over to the prize to conduct a burial service for those bodies that Mr. Ferris recovered. After I return we’ll sail.”

A sombre sight greeted Halpenny when passing through the entry port on the

Lady of Newport. Six motionless sacks of canvas lay on deck. The ship's books indicated a crew of twenty-three. The six on deck were all that remained of them. Their disposition left Halpenny at a loss. The men expected a ceremony before committing the bodies to the sea, but Halpenny had no idea how to conduct such a ritual. In his entire service he had attended only one burial service and that had been years before when a sailor had fallen from a yardarm. That service had been very short because of bad weather.

Although Halpenny attended church services every Sunday, he was not a student of the Bible. Finding appropriate passages did not come easily -- it took some time. Satisfied that suitable quotes were ready, he ordered the prize crew to muster near the bulwarks.

Halpenny read some Bible passages before nodding to the acting bosun. The acting bosun ordered, "Ship's company... Off hats."

Halpenny read Psalm 30 from the Bible and nodded to the bosun at the end of the text. The six canvas bags slid over the side and splashed into the water.

"Ship's company dismissed."

It took little time to conclude other matters on the Lady of Newport. The prize crew collected and inventoried all the personal effects of the captain and crew. That would hopefully prevent pilfering and protect Halpenny or the prize crew from any blame over missing items. With this done Halpenny left the Lady of Newport.

The situation that faced Halpenny on his return to the Reaper was of his own making. A third of the crew was gone. The Reaper was low on provisions, so heading to Boston to obtain new provisions and to reclaim the two prize crews was appropriate.

That posed a quandary for Halpenny. If the Reaper showed up in Boston without the captain, difficult questions might arise, such as why the captain wasn't aboard. It would also beg the question as to why Halpenny hadn't informed the admiral about the captain's injury.

Halpenny considered the options available. Sending the Lady of Newport to Boston immediately, would allow the Reaper to remain on station for a longer period although in a short-handed state. Another week or two on station would allow additional time for the captain's recovery. The Reaper could then return to

Newport, collect the captain and head to Boston to re-provision. It had an added benefit, allowing Halpenny to remain in command longer. As soon as the captain returned on board, command would revert to Royston.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, the Reaper glided into Newport harbour and anchored. For the previous two weeks she had remained on station well out to sea after escorting the Lady of Newport northward. Given the size of her crew, there had been no attempts to hunt down other contraband runners.

As the captain's gig nudged the landing, Halpenny hoped the captain was fit enough to sail. Whether he was still bed-ridden was of little consequence, so long as he could come aboard the Reaper. Halpenny climbed the landing steps followed by five men to assist the captain if necessary.

If the previous reception in Newport had been somewhat frosty, this reception was glacial. As they walked down the streets toward the Jacobson mansion, people either turned away or crossed to the other side of the street to avoid them. In contrast, the party was most welcome at the Jacobson mansion.

"Mr. Halpenny, I expected your return earlier."

"I'm sorry, Captain. After our last conversation, it was my impression that you wished the Reaper to remain on our patrol station as long as possible."

"Yes, well, things have changed somewhat since you were last here, and from what I'm led to believe, you're the cause. There were reports that the Reaper pressed men off a Newport bound brig. Did you?"

"Yes, Captain, we're very short of men, so I took the opportunity to press some men."

"That has turned the local population against us."

"Captain, they were already turned against us the last time I visited you. It was even worse on the way here today. I imagine that it's unlikely to get any better. Are you fit enough to return on board, sir?"

"I can barely stand, but Mr. Jacobson has asked that I leave. He is worried that people may take action against me and harm him or his property in the process."

“I have brought some men with me to assist you back to the ship. If necessary, we can carry you, sir.”

“Thank you, Mr. Halpenny. I'll accept that kind offer, as I'm not sure I can travel all that distance by myself. The sooner I'm aboard the Reaper, the better for all. We can discuss everything else once I'm aboard.”

“Aye, sir. If you'll excuse me, I'll bring the men up right away.” Halpenny turned and scurried away, not explaining about capturing the second ship. If the captain were dissatisfied at the present, after he found out about the second prize there was no telling what he would say or do.

Halpenny beckoned the men up to the bedroom the captain occupied. They prepared a litter for the captain and carried him back through the now empty streets to the waiting gig. The residents of Newport were as happy to see the last of the Reaper as the Reaper's crew was to see the last of them.

The real problems began once the captain had returned to the ship. Although confined to his bunk in the great cabin, Royston resumed command of the ship. It was an adjustment for Halpenny after enjoying command for the previous two months.

“Mr. Halpenny, weigh anchor and let's get back to sea,” ordered Royston, once comfortably ensconced in the cabin bunk.

“Aye, Captain. I'll assign Jenkins to look after you sir.” Jenkins was a cook's mate and probably the only available man on the ship, in that he was not required for sail handling duties.

“God, not Jenkins. I'll starve to death. Report back to me once we clear the harbour.”

“Aye, Captain. With your leave, I'll weigh anchor, get to sea, and then return to provide a detailed report.” Royston nodded and Halpenny escaped the cabin as fast as possible.

“Bosun, weigh anchor. Mr. Stricklin, once we get way on her, head directly out to sea. Once we clear the entrance head northeast to pass seaward of Nantucket Island.”

“Aye, Captain,” replied Stricklin.

“No, Mr. Stricklin, Captain Royston's back on board. I have reverted to first

lieutenant.”

“Sorry, sir.” Halpenny would like to find out whether Stricklin, the master’s mate was truly sorry, but felt a truthful answer was questionable.

Halpenny remained on deck until the Reaper was well out at sea. Given the captain’s disposition, Halpenny was in no hurry to report. As daylight faded, Halpenny knocked at the captain’s door.

“Enter.”

“Sir, I’m here to make my report.”

“I’m very interested to hear it Mr. Halpenny.”

“Sir, after leaving you the last time in the Jacobson mansion, the Reaper headed back to sea with the schooner prize. Mr. Rainer was in command with six men and the deserter. We escorted the schooner to the northern end of our patrol station and saw it off toward Boston. We turned south and resumed our patrol station. We saw little traffic for two weeks. On the southern end of the patrol station, we spotted a brig and closed to investigate. The brig stopped and we sent a boarding party across to inspect. The brig had no contraband. We pressed three suspected deserters and sent the brig on her way into Narragansett Bay. We headed back north on our patrol line. Two days later, we spotted a vessel to the east but were unable to catch her. We headed south on our patrol line spotting nothing. We had turned north again when the masthead lookout spotted a ship coming up from the south in the dark. We turned and investigated. We closed to within cannon shot before the vessel spotted us. It was a fully rigged ship. Once her crew spotted us, the ship immediately turned and ran for it. We fired a warning shot, but it had no effect. She headed straight for shore with us in close pursuit. Close to shore, the crew let fly the sails and abandoned ship by dropping a long boat into the water, scrambling in and heading for shore. I ordered the long boat to stop. They failed to comply. We fired on the smuggler’s long boat, hitting it. We lowered a boat and took after them, Mr. Ferris in command. We fished out six bodies from the water, but that is the only evidence of the crew we could find. Mr. Ferris took command of the prize and we rendezvoused at sea at first light. I went across, conducted a funeral for those bodies we recovered. The prize was the Lady of Newport with a hold full of molasses barrels. I sent the prize under Mr. Ferris’s command into Boston about two weeks ago. Since then the Reaper remained on station in accordance

with your instructions.”

Halpenny watched Royston's face closely during the delivery of the report, judging the captain's mood by the facial expressions exhibited. Royston's face was a picture of shock, not anger or happiness, which was what Halpenny expected.

It was all Royston could manage to ask, “Are we back on station?”

“Yes, sir, but we have only limited provisions aboard. I remained on station as long as possible to get you the longest amount of time to heal that I could, sir. We need to head to Boston for resupply and to collect our prize crews, sir.”

“That will be all, Mr. Halpenny.”

Halpenny turned to flee the cabin.

“Mr. Halpenny, did you seize any documentation on the Lady of Newport?”

“Aye, sir. The captain and crew fled so fast they failed to destroy anything. I had all of that documentation inventoried and secured. I ordered Mr. Ferris to turn it over to the authorities in Boston. If I recall correctly, a Rhode Island based company called Narragansett and Rhode Island Traders owned the ship. She apparently operated from Newport according to the ship's logs.”

“Was there any indication of who owned this Rhode Island company?”

“Nothing in any documents I saw, Captain. I only had a limited amount of time to check. It's possible that there might be some indication, but since the ship carried contraband I doubt anyone would be foolish enough to leave anything identifying the owners lying around.”

“Do you know what this means?”

“That you'll be somewhat richer, Captain.”

“These prizes will be contested, and if we lose I'll be responsible for compensation to the owners. You've gotten me into a complicated mess, Mr. Halpenny.”

“I disagree, sir. I would argue it's the opposite. Once the Admiral gets his eighth share of two prizes, he will be eager to reward you with better patrol areas, where the pickings might be even better.”

“Mr. Halpenny, set course for Boston. I want your written report first thing in

the morning. Dismissed.”

The abruptness and tone of Royston’s dismissal took Halpenny by surprise. The Reaper was already on course for Boston, so there was no requirement to head to the deck. Stricklin had the watch until midnight. Halpenny had long since written detailed reports covering the capture of each prize.

HMS Reaper ghosted up the harbour in Boston seeking an anchorage location at last light the next day. The captain was on deck, using sticks, but capable of standing. Jenkins hovered nearby. As they anchored, only one large warship was visible in the harbour -- HMS Larke, a forty-two gun fourth rate up from the West Indies.

Halpenny anchored the ship and set the harbour watch for the evening. There was no run ashore for the men. That could wait until after stores had been loaded. The Reaper settled down for a tranquil evening, as the captain had not relaxed discipline. Bum boats attempting to gain some business were warned off and heeded the message.

At the start of the morning watch, Captain Royston, escorted by Jenkins and another hefty man assigned by the bosun, headed over to the Larke. Halpenny headed ashore and arranged for provisions. These started to arrive in the middle of the forenoon watch.

Before the captain returned, both Mr. Ferris’s and Mr. Rainer’s prize crews were again on board. For some reason, both parties were glad to be back. Halpenny listened to each of their reports. In both cases, the midshipmen reported the Boston authorities condemned their prize. The documents turned over to the prize authorities had been conclusive. Back at full strength, the crew seemed content and relaxed. Perhaps it was the thought of prize money that kept their spirits up.

Captain Royston returned with the captain of the Larke, Captain Kellar, shortly before noon.

“Lieutenant Halpenny, you are being re-assigned to the Larke as the third lieutenant. Gather your kit and report to Captain Kellar at the start of the forenoon watch tomorrow. Between now and then, prepare all books for handover to the incoming first lieutenant,” ordered Captain Royston with Captain Kellar sternly looking on.

“Aye, aye, sir,” replied a surprised and confused Halpenny. An order was an order, regardless of how stupid it appeared. Halpenny turned and retired to his cubby below decks.

Why was Royston sacking him? He had covered for Royston, and managed to take two smugglers. Those two prizes would put money in Royston's pocket and bring the ship to the admiral's attention. Possibly, Royston's actions were a further attempt at covering his absence from the ship.

It just didn't make sense. He had executed every order given him to the best of his ability. He hadn't even occupied Royston's cabin during his prolonged absence, which was the right of every captain, including acting captains. Halpenny could think of nothing that would prompt this type of treatment.

Perhaps staying out of the captain's cabin might have been the mistake. If he had used the captain's desk to write reports he might have noticed the incorporation documents for Narragansett and Rhode Island Traders with Captain Royston's name on them.

The Reaper, ever an equal opportunity harvester, collected yet one more victim.

