

## ***Catalina and the Prickly Nest***

*By Tim Macauley*

Nest:

–noun

1. a pocketlike, usually more or less circular structure of twigs, grass, mud, etc., formed by a bird, often high in a tree, as a place in which to lay and incubate its eggs and rear its young; any protected place used by a bird for these purposes.

2. a place where something bad is fostered or flourishes: a nest of vice; a robber's nest.

3. a horseshoe-shaped floating community; a sprawling, heavily-fortified artificial island, kept afloat by a thousand pontoons, borne by the currents of the Seas, and famed for its incalculable wealth....



Catalina walked carefully with the bread bowl held in both hands. It was filled with a thick, murky white soup, where chunks of tomatoes and cabbage occasionally bobbed to the surface. *Sour coconut*, she had decided. It sounded terribly unpleasant, but the odor was making her hunger and distracting her from the matter at hand. She took baby steps, appearing entirely focused on not letting a single drop overrun. The bowl was a means to two ends. A lithe, nimble woman, she could have balanced the soup in her sleep. Instead, she was using it as a tool of misdirection as she counted the number of planks from the scullery ramp to the cage ahead. Every baby step meticulously spanned the width of one plank. She had counted to 13 when Mousse noticed her.

“Oh, hullo there Miss Loriline. Didn’t anticipate the pleasure of seeing you again so soon.” The loutish guard smiled pleasantly at her. He was slightly above-average in height, with an expansive potbelly and large, rounded shoulders. His hair receded in a v-shape back from his widow’s peak, and his cheeks were rosy-red, as though he had a bit of the taste, although he hadn’t had a drop to drink. His uniform consisted of a chestnut brown doublet with matching breeches. His left breast featured the sigil of the Treasury Guild wrought in silver thread: an owl with exaggerated eyes. It was supposed to suggest that their guards were especially vigilant, eyes always wide open. Catalina thought it silly instead, one which tempted her to poke each eye with a finger.

Mousse was not his real name, of course, but guild policy required that their guards not reveal any personal information to others, so she had thought it up somehow between his blubbery potbelly and his sweet disposition. The other guard she had secretly named Dourly the Hourly, on account of him always acting so sullen the few times she’d passed by. He was a wisp of a man, with a face of sallow skin and a large aquiline nose. He always gave her the most cursory of glances before returning to his thousand-yard stare. Mousse, on the other hand, clearly enjoyed interacting with her, and was drawn to her comely form. He was always well-mannered and reliable, which is what made him an ideal candidate for the job he held. That he was eager for contact with womenfolk, though, is what made him an ideal mark as well. The purpose of her hot soup was twofold, and it was now that it served its second purpose. She not only wanted to be noticed by Mousse, she wanted to set the stage to where he felt

safe to study her, to soak in her beauty without fear of being caught. And so she didn't look up when Mousse greeted her, but instead smiled good-naturedly, as if she feared the attention would cause her to stumble with the bowl. She deliberately wended slowly toward the guard, placing one heel down, then rolling the foot forward, followed by the next.

She wore a low-cut white cotton chemise, with red embroidery around the open collar. A playful girdle of a knotted cord was loosely tied about her waist, ruched with muslin, which pulled the otherwise loose-fitting frock about her frame. The dress ended almost at her ankles, where only her bare feet showed. About her neck, she wore a simple pendant of chalcedony, so modest in size that it barely warranted the chain itself. Mousse had been observant and kind enough to compliment her on it the last time they'd met.

Catalina was of average height for women of Paluvian stock, and she considered herself a 'comfortable' weight; not afraid to look as though she enjoyed a pint or a greasy capon now and then. Her hair was a naturally-streaked blend of butternut and harvest ale, which she kept tied back in a ponytail except for a rogue strand in the front which refused to cooperate. It was useful for seduction, but a bane when swashbuckling. Her face was besmirched with freckles, and her skin coppertoned from a life in the Sun. She had inviting, playful hazel eyes and had donned no makeup, except for an artificial mole, which she presently wore on her left cheekbone.

"I hope you have an appetite. I brought you a bowl of a creamy potage we made this morn." Her face flushed coyly, feigning embarrassment at her act of hospitality. Her eyes remained still focused on the bowl. 22, she counted, just as she drew within range of the guard.

"Oh miss, that's awfully kind of you, but I can't eat while I'm on duty. Not supposed to even be speaking with folk." He made a guilty, how-can-I-help-it face. Dourly the Hourly glanced over, his eyes dripping with unamused disapproval. Catalina made a pretense as though she hadn't considered the possibility of her gift being declined, visibly showing her uncertainty on how to proceed. *Mousse is manageable, but the other is going to require more work. Special measures will have to be taken.*

"Oh, oh I see." A tint of disappointment entered her voice. "No problem at all, I'll just return this to the kitchen then and I'll ask Sergei to set it aside for you, and maybe he can hold it for you til you're off-duty. But no pressure at all if you choose not to eat it anyhow." She smiled politely, still avoiding eye contact. Mousse watched her throughout this exchange, his eyes soaking in her delicious shape.

He quickly piped in, "But I wouldn't want to violate Article 7 of my guild's by-laws, which states that I shall not, under any circumstances, do anything to incite a hostile response from any townsfolk. And by Jove, standing here it's fairly certain to me that a woman who goes to such lengths to cook such a nice dish could practically go hostile to have it left unappreciated!" Catalina blushed as he took the bowl from her.

She looked up now for the first time. As Mousse devoured the soup, his taciturn cohort continued to stare into nothingness with a glum, saturnine look. They stood sentry on separate sides of the single door which led into the caged treasury. It had a half-foot pin tumbler lock built into it, to which neither

of them held the key. She made the most cursory of glances into the large cage, fighting her every compulsion to linger her gaze on the thirteen chests of booty inside. *I mustn't heed them any attention; there'll be time enough for that later.*

Actually, it wasn't technically a cage, she noted. A latticework of long wrought iron bars reached from floor to ceiling and enclosed all five sides, including the backside which was flush with the outside of the Nest's hull. But oddly, they hadn't laid iron on the floor. *Rather shortsighted*, she thought. The treasury sat on the bottom level of a structure that climbed over seven stories high. With the seas often choppy beneath, the powers that be couldn't conceive of an amphibious assault on their gold. *This is our 'out', but they'll think it's our 'in'. Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.*

The treasury sat adjacent to the armory, which was practically identical in every regard, with wrought iron bars encapsulating the Nest's supply of powder, munitions and steel arms. There were on the order of twenty half-barrel kegs stacked inside, and at least ten weapon racks filled with sabers, musketoons, blunderbusses, dirks and daggers, smallswords and crossbows. One select cabinet, barely visible in the lighting, looked to hold a dozen flintlock pistols. Although there were melee weapons abound, there was still a considerably spacious area around the powderkegs. *Twenty kegs is nowhere near enough powder to stock all their guns. They're due to re-up on powder soon. That's our 'in'.*

Mousse had finished draining the soup and was working on the bread bowl itself. Not wanting to raise the ire of suspicion, she excused herself just as promptly as she had arrived. "Well, it seemed to have hit the spot." She smiled again, coyly playing with her rogue strand of hair. Mousse's eyes bulged with contentment, his cheeks puffed out by the bread he was wolfing down. "I really should be getting back before I'm missed, but it was nice to see you again. And you as well," she said toward Dourly the Hourly, who ignored her. Mousse rushed to finish the food in his mouth, but she encouraged him to enjoy it. "Maybe drop the spoon off next door when you're done, okay? Hope your shift goes well," she gave a reserved wave and left, as Mousse made several muted antics to convey his appreciation.

The Nest supported a community of several hundred people, and featured a sprawling tenement of housing, interspersed here and there by tradesman suites and craftsman workshops. The floating community was shaped in a mostly oval design, with only a narrow entrance at its southern side, not unlike a privy seat. Trading vessels that wished to visit the harbor had to first anchor offshore and approach via landing craft to apply for friendly trade status. Once granted, then only a single full-size ship could enter up the narrow channel and dock for one week. The central area of the Nest also provided a sheltered area for fishing and aquaculture.

It was a small city in every essence, and offered nearly every service that a municipality would traditionally have: a sheriff, a courthouse, a church, even a brewery. They boasted an especially large fire brigade. Nearly the entire populace was required to serve in the militia. If the bells were ever wrung, the entire community would arm itself to deal with raiders. As it was more than just their employment, but also their livelihood, the locals all had a vested interest in their duties within the militia. They expected no quarter and fought with a tenacity that could not be rivaled by men motivated by profit alone.

The Nest was surrounded by heavy caliber guns. The official count was a state secret of course, but in the three months that Catalina had been in the community, she'd counted in the vicinity of 200 guns in the northwestern quadrant alone where she spent most of her time. They had long, monstrous barrels that fired 40-lb round shot, their best defense versus ships at ranges as far as 2,000 yards. There were mid-sized cast-iron barrels as well, that fired 24-lb and 32-lb bar and chain shot, purposed to destroy masts and sail riggings. And then there were the shortest guns, which lobbed 6-lb of devastating grape and canister shot, and sangrenel—bags of scrap metal, nails, and bits of chain which would decimate any flesh that crossed its path.

The community had put themselves into a unique position. The glorious wealth of the Nest was so fabled that no pirate would ever risk sinking the entire fortress. And they were so self-sufficient that they could never be laid siege to. This effectively neutralized the cannons of privateers, forcing would-be raiders to close rank swiftly and bring their ships about in parallel with the giant floating mass. If they could survive the three tiers of cannon fire, the best they could hope for was to board with grapnels and rope, and to take the fight down to the melee level. The Nest had been raided before, and yes, some had gotten several score of men aboard, armed with flashing cutlasses and rapiers, boarding axes and harpoons. Some even came with the tools of their trade, belaying pins and marlinespikes and the like. But despite these heroic swashbuckling attempts, they had always ended in disaster. The Nest had proved a remarkably hard nut to crack, and as reports of its cannon defense spread via word-of-mouth, it grew in legend, and soon enough the adjective 'prickly' had been added to it, the image of a nest with lots of sharp brambles protruding outward. *The Cactus would suit it better*, Catalina thought, but of course it was hard to explain away the water and she supposed the nest did suggest some element of hospitable incubation which the community provided.

The artificial island was a veritable labyrinth at its lower levels and it took Catalina a fair amount of time to orient herself properly. She was well out of range of the treasury when she found a more trafficked thoroughfare which led to the surface. There was adequate lighting by oil lampposts and hanging paper lanterns, but it was strange to even need light while at sea during the middle of the day. It was reminiscent of the nighttime boardwalks in countless other port cities she had been in, only those had always been on land; on colonized shores or in deep subterranean caverns. It was easy to forget one's whereabouts, and then every once in a while the seas would get choppy and the giant floating community would jounce ever so slightly. She'd move her feet apart to balance her center of gravity, and be reminded that she was still at sea.

She found herself in a marketplace with eight or so vendors in view, hawking their wares and town gossip. A dozen prospective customers were milling about, and no one paid her the least bit of attention. She stopped before a large wooden support pylon in front of a chandler's shop and surreptitiously withdrew a graphite-stylus and a rolled-up parchment from her bodice, laying the paper flat on the pole. It appeared to be a long shopping list, which read:

"Flint and stone, a pinch of iron-oxide, a bolt of linen, a chute—10ft in length. Tobacco paper, a horsehair brush, a brace-and-bit, a flashpan, 4 bricks and 3 barrels sand. A magnesium ribbon to bring the heat. The play should be like St. Kitts, two year past. We'll need a sapper and a

carpenter, probably Dunthrop and Bangalore are best. Ask Sebastian for the magnesium. The HMS Hutchinson is due in port within a fortnight, with little other traffic expected, so they should be the unwitting skill. Sources say she's berthed at Martinique presently. If Rook's man, Svensen, is still in play there, we need him to dirty up one or two crates of cargo. Also, tell Higgs to bring the governor."

At the very end, she added, "22 steps to the fulcrum of the door, so 44 planks in width altogether." As she finished her notation, she noticed a wanted ad flier nailed to the post beneath her parchment. It had a very unflattering, and terribly inaccurate sketch of herself, offering a bounty of 500 pieces of eight for her capture, dead or alive, on charges of piracy. She glanced about, and then used her stylus to thin her cheeks a bit and darken her lashes. She paused, and then added a mole above her left cheekbone. *Far cuter now*, she thought, stowing her pencil back in her bosom. She moved out from the undercity and back into the hustle and bustle of the floating community. *It was time to do some shopping!*



The Lillycadger was a 50-ton brigantine, with only 7 guns on each side. All of her gunports were shut at the moment, and the sails on her three masts were down. She was berthed at the sole mooring inside the Nest's harbor, and dockworkers were relieving her hold of its goods as fast as they could. She was here ostensibly to resupply the nest with powder and ball, and so barrel after barrel was being rolled onto shore. She had docked just this morning and no sooner had the gangplank been attached than the wharfmaster had given her captain an earful about how late they were in coming, and that they had only half-a-day berth before she was to be on her way again. They were to make space at once for a much larger ship, the HMS Hutchinson, which was anchored presently outside the harbor's entrance.

"Whew, would you look at that? Ain't she a real beaut? Thirty gunports on this side alone, golly," Catalina gushed, her freckly face scrunched up around her left eye as she peered through a spyglass. She and Higgs were lying prone on a pile of leather canvas, on the inside rim of the highest level of the Nest, in front of a dye shop festooned with colorful windsocks. The store had several racks of dyed goods standing outside, drying in the Sun and the wind, and being located at the very end of the boardwalk as it was, it provided an excellent position to reconnoiter the wharf far below. The location offered a commanding view of the single-ship lane that entered and left the Nest, as well as the main thoroughfare which headed into the deep recesses of the floating fortress, and ultimately, the treasury. From this vantage point, they could just make out the Hutchinson waiting offshore, which had started this sudden bout of envy.

She swung the spyglass back to the wharf where her own ship was being unloaded, then to the corridor which led to the undercity, then again to the Hutchinson. She was an impressive ship, no doubt about it, dwarfing her own.

Higgs cleared his throat for a third time, with even more attitude than he had before. Catalina finally relinquished the spyglass to him, resting her head lackadaisically on her wrists as he now sussed the scene below.

“Quite a big day here, by the looks of it. Look at all that snappy heraldry. Svensen had warned that there was a VIP on board, but he wasn’t sure who. It’s like a hundred banners bloomed overnight. They should consider leaving it as such. It brings such color to the place.” Higgs let loose a low whistle. “Damn, I’ll be.”

“What? What?!” Catalina nudged him for the brass tube back, but he ignored her. “Girl, I don’t look anything bloody like him!” Higgs lambasted. He was focused on the deck of their ship, and she squinted to see who it was. “The magistrate! You said you to bring my governor wardrobe, but that man there is as skinny-as-a-rail! There’s no way I can pass as him.” Higgs firmly thrust the spyglass back at her, rolled over on his back and stared in frustration at the clouds above.

Catalina focused on the deck of her ship again. He was right. There was no doubt that the man wearing the royal blue brocade waistcoat, tinsel with golden epilates and a large three-prong hat was the magistrate, the official presiding over the entire Nest. It was rumored that he carried the only key to the treasury, and that it was on his person at all times. He looked absolutely, positively nothing like the man lying next to her. Higgs was a rotund, squat man, with a thinning wreath of smoky-gray hair about the edge of his otherwise smooth pate. He looked in his late-fifties and as though he’d always eaten well; as though he’d always lived the soft life of a bureaucrat. His skin betrayed that he was almost always in shade and was another big tip-off that he wasn’t a resident of the Nest, let alone her presiding official.

*He was ill-chosen for this job*, Catalina realized, though not for want of merit. Higgs was a top-notch thespian with an outstanding ability to improvise. She had never seen him break character once in play. He was naturally skilled with languages, and could invent, adopt, or bastardize any accent or dialogue as needed. He understood that his role required creating confidence more than necessarily always being understood. He had to maintain an air about himself of whatever his role was, such that all around him were convinced. If he were tasked with being the emperor with no clothes, Higgs would have everyone complimenting him on the fine texture of his robe. Involuntarily, the image of a naked pear-shaped Higgs appeared in her mind, and she giggled.

“It isn’t the least bit funny,” he prattled on. “There’s nothing here I can work with, love. The only ones I can possibly convince that I am he,” he pointed down at the wharf for added emphasis, “are those who have never seen him! At most, *maybe* those aboard the Hutchinson.”

Catalina fussed with her lip as she thought on the matter. It was true, there was no way that Higgs could convince any locals, especially the guards of the treasury, that he was the magistrate. Perhaps though, he could pose as the dignitary that was coming ashore with the Hutchinson? *There might be some angle we can work from there.*

“Hold on. Something is going down.” She rotated the latter half of the spyglass clockwise a bit, focusing on some dispute that was occurring on the deck of the Lillycadger. The magistrate was blustering, his

face purple with rage. They were too far away to hear any of the sound of this altercation, but it was easy to get the gist of it. The magistrate pointed violently at the ship's deck and then toward the harbor exit, alternating between the two several times. He was screaming at the wharfmaster and the purported captain of the Lillycadger, Donovan, who was in truth Catalina's trusted first-mate. For today—and today only—he had the distinct honor of being Captain Donovan. He had quickly warmed to the role and especially found great joy in ordering Catalina around in front of smirking crewmates.

Donovan stood at a towering 6'7", and with a girth befitting his height, he made a formidable impression. He had a swarthy face, with an even blacker goatee. Ivory skull-shaped plugs hung from both his earlobes, the backside tapering down and back again like a crescent moon. He had a rather distinctive face, as he was missing his two front teeth. This was most noticeable, of course, when he spoke. What teeth he still had appeared to be in poor condition, especially for a man in only his thirties. This contrasted somewhat with an unblemished complexion of skin, not yet weathered by age or the elements. He wore a beret, and kept his hair short enough that none peeked out. His commanding size and his attention to his own grooming made him an excellent stand-in as captain. Catalina had permitted him to keep the skull earplugs, but insisted that he wear a collared shirt. Donovan was always wont to show off his left breast, where a monstrous tattoo of a kraken wailed five tentacles about. Each magnificent midnight blue appendage ended with the three letter initials of his children: MGR, AJP, OTY, JET, and JAH.

The wharfmaster appeared calm, and from his own hand gestures it was clear he was trying to diffuse the situation. Donovan appeared to be providing just the right amount of attitude as well, wildly gesticulating at his hull, at the stacks of pallets on the pier, at the clouds or the gods above. She smiled. Even from this distance away, she could read the wharfmaster's efforts to find some resolution.

"Look, boss, my roustabouts are working as fast as they can. We'll have this craft out of here in half an hour at this rate and the Hutchinson can berth immediately, even before we've cleared the cargo from the quay." She mumbled in as deep and rumbly a voice as she could; imitating how she imagined the wharfmaster might sound.

"You good-for-nothing failures knew today was a special day with my special friends! How could you muck up the honor of our home, our island, of me!" She chirruped in a shrieking, maniacal voice, while she watched the Magistrate continue his impassioned antics, a conductor without a symphony. "My day! My, my, my, my special day!"

Higgs chortled with mirth. Far below, the magistrate stormed off a moment later and the pace of the dockworkers was even more a flurry. The wharfmaster selected two barrels to be randomly searched for contraband. The good news is that the magistrate's temper tantrum would help rush their goods through customs. But there was still some risk as to which barrels they screened. Two roustabouts turned the barrels upright and used iron bars to jimmy off their lids. Donovan, still on deck next to the wharfmaster, casually skimmed the upper stories of the Nest, as if he were looking to see whether the skies would hold for the day, or as though he was taking in the city's colorful revelry that had bloomed overnight. If he saw Catalina and Higgs, he made not the slightest sign. She focused on the two barrels,

and was relieved when upon inspection, one revealed saltpeter and the other only lead balls. Donovan kept a cool, bored demeanor, scratching his goatee. *Ah, so he has seen us. Well done.*

Shortly thereafter, the wharfmaster handed Donovan a receipt acknowledging the goods, shook his hand, and then waddled back over the gangplank, where he directed his dockworkers to begin rolling the munitions down to the armory. It was nearly inaudible, but they could just make out the sounds of men calling out to one other as they swarmed over the riggings and Lillycadger's three sails came alive. She soon pushed free of her mooring and exited south of the Nest's narrow harbor.

"Well, that chapter is done. Here's to hoping Dunthrop and Bangalore are holding up."

"Yes, to Dunthrop and Bangalore," Higgs joined in. "I must say I'm rather glad I haven't the physique to do their role." He smiled gleefully.

They didn't wait long before a wake of water at the harbor's entrance preceded the Hutchinson. Her prow soon glided gently past the harbor's outer defensive crenellations. She was a mighty ship indeed. She had already retracted her sails and there were 20 oars in the bottom gunwales to try and slow her speed even more. The great ship displaced so much water that it caused whitecaps to lap along the edge of the entire harbor, and the fishermen who were present had to retreat temporarily as the water settled.

"Ok, you're up. If you can't be the magistrate, then you've gotta be the tariff customs official. Let the wharfmaster do his thing, then you appear and insist on inspecting one crate. Find the one with the red chalk, bottom corner, got it?"

Higgs pushed his mass onto his knees, and brushed debris off his coat. "Red chalk, bottom corner, yup." He repeated back. "Can I accept any bribes?" He simpered angelically.

"You remember the play, right?"

"Relax, I got this," Higgs said, and then padded off toward the lower levels.



The moment the Hutchinson docked, the community was abuzz with activity. The gangway was pivoted outward to the ship, where at least forty deckhands looked on, smiling and waving. They were taking in the floating fortress as though they'd never seen it. *This is the first visit for most of them*, Catalina thought. They were all well-kept, clean-shaven, cultured. They certainly didn't appear a motley crew. His Eminence, the Magistrate of the Nest, was present of course on the pier, wearing an even more elaborate, garish lavender samite get-up, with a frock and matching breeches. He topped off his presentation with a powdered face and white wig in the fashion that the French kept. Which was puzzling as the Nest was in no other way French. The magistrate was surrounded by five other dignitaries of the local community.

A few moments later, a sloe-eyed woman in an airy, peach-colored dress appeared on the deck of the carrack. The hoop-skirt that she wore underneath made her look even more like a peach than perhaps



intended. As if that alone wasn't ostentatious enough, she complimented it with a monstrously-plumed hat and a pink parasol which she twirled incessantly over one shoulder. She was immediately received by the Magistrate and his party from the shore. It was apparent that she was the reason for the town's festivity and she acknowledged the crowd of smallfolk lining the harbor with a graceful wave as she disembarked.

Soon enough, the visiting luminary and her gaggle of retainers left the wharf, taking the main thoroughfare into the belly of the artificial isle to be feted down below. The pier immediately then roared to life, with deckhands swiftly transferring cargo to their designated lots on the wharf. The wharfmaster appeared again, repeating the same routine that he had earlier with the Lillycadger. He seemed satisfied after inspecting only one crate this time, and then disappeared from the wharf completely. The reputation of the ship or the dignitary itself clearly held some weight, appearing to set the wharfmaster at ease regarding the manifest. Within short order though, Higgs appeared on the quay, holding a leather-bound tome, a small inkwell, and a quill. He was dressed in the full-skirted silhouette of a plum-colored coat, waistcoat and matching breeches. He wore a smoky tricorne hat on his head, and humble, round spectacles on his nose. Even from this great distance, she could read his mannerisms as brusque and blustering. He hobbled across the gangplank and aboard the ship, where deckhands soon flagged their captain to see what the man before them was all about. A minute later, Higgs had the poor lad holding his inkwell for him while he squinted into his ledger. He had transformed into the tariff collector that the Nest never knew it had.



“Now, guvnor, I can only reaffirm how delighted we are to have you and Her Majesty aboard. I can happily say that we will be offering you the very best tariff rate that we can on whatever goods you brought for trade today. And as there can be no question as to the integrity of you and your manifest list, there is no reason for us to make cargo inspection a lengthy process. I think we can limit it to a single container today and call that safe, wouldn't you agree?” Higgs offered.

“The wharfmaster already inspec—”

“Yes, guvnor, but the wharfmaster is charged with upholding the safety and the law of the isle. I am charged with the completely different task of monitoring commerce and enforcing taxes.”

“Yes, well, whatever the protocol is, my good man,” the captain agreed, motioning below deck. “We've nothing to hide.” He was of average height, of the same Caucasian complexion as the rest of his crew, browned by his life at sea.

The two gentlemen left the deck, descending down a square stairwell into the ship's cargo hold. Three oil lanterns hung suspended along the joist in the ceiling, providing barely sufficient lighting. There were on the order of fifty large wooden crates stacked throughout. Higgs made to look as though he were impressed with the sheer volume of goods, and gave several compliments to the captain as they wandered further and further back into the gloom. After taking exactly twelve strides, Higgs then

stopped abruptly and looked to the starboard side. He squinted in vain for the red chalk symbol on the bottom of nearby crates. *It must be here!* He knew he hadn't much time.

Fortunately for him, he happened upon the marked crate without too much delay. "Sir, this one should suffice. Let's see what wonders she holds today. If it's cinnamon, we may need to take a sample," he said with a wink. The captain smiled good-naturedly as he placed an iron against the edge of the crate's lid, and tapped lightly with a mallet. Several hammerings later and the crate was open. Higgs nonchalantly brushed the straw away, as the captain examined the edge of his iron, unconcerned as he was with whatever cargo he had aboard.

"Oh dear," Higgs said delicately. "I'm afraid this isn't good at all." The captain's brow furled and he leaned over for a better look. Inside the crate sat neatly-stacked, two-inch high bricks wrapped in wax paper. Even in the dim lighting, Higgs could see the captain's face pale. He reached in, disbelieving, and withdrew one, which he rotated over and over in his hands. The two men made eye contact; the captain looking visibly shaken. He reluctantly pulled back one of the folded corners glued at both ends, and sniffed inside. Desperate to prove his own suspicions false, he dipped the pinky of his right hand into the wrapper. When he removed it, his long fingernail held a pinch of a matte white powder. He held it up to his tongue for a taste, and immediately looked crestfallen. He gave Higgs a small defeated nod of the head. There was no doubt it was opium.

They looked up at the rest of the hold, which was packed with identical crates as the one they had just opened. It gave the unspoken impression that they all held the same goods. Before another crate could be inspected, Higgs made his move.

"Look, as I'm sure you're aware, the penalty for drug trafficking on the Nest is death by hanging. I can't ignore the cargo you have here, but you're a decent enough fellow and I can tell from your disposition that you're just as surprised as I am to find this here. Clearly, someone higher up is pulling the strings. I'd wager even Her Eminence doesn't know about whatever smuggling operation this here is. They probably figured her presence would grease the passage of this cargo. Which it very nearly did..." He let his voice trail off, as though marveling at the genius or the brazenness of it all.

"What if I t'wer to bury this report for a bit, hmm? I could give you, say, a nine-hour head start? If you left after the gloaming, that would give you some good distance before sunrise. But I can't stall beyond sunrise, you understand?"

"You would have my undying gratitude, my good man. Mr..."

"Uh, Mr. Goertzen, sir," Higgs said.

The captain took Higgs's hand with both his own and pumped it vigorously. "I'm extremely obliged. I understand the risk you take doing this and it will not be forgotten," he said, furtively scanning the hold for others.

"This isn't the first time that a captain docks unwittingly with contraband, sir. Wherever you go to after,

though, I hope that there aren't serious consequences for yourself." Higgs glanced down again at the open crate. "Well, no reason to leave one's dirty laundry in the wind, right?"

"We couldn't be more in agreement," the captain replied. The two returned the crate's lid back in place, and then returned to the ship's deck, where they firmly shook hands again, as though they'd been lifelong friends. No one on the wharf paid them the least bit of attention. The only one who happened to notice this exchange at all was a young woman five floors up, lying prone in her wrinkled white chemise, her face scrunched up to a brass tube. And it made her smile. "Well done, Higgs," she whispered to herself, collapsing the spyglass. Now it was her turn.



Mousse was only one hour into his shift, and already he was bored. This wasn't a new affliction, he felt it every night. He had long ago counted everything in sight. He knew the number of knots in the wood plank ceiling (37), and the number of bars around the treasury (142), and the number of chests inside (13). He even knew the number of rude work associates (1). Dourly the Hourly was a terrible companion for this job. He was a stolid, straight arrow, following the guild's policy to the letter, which made for a terrible passage of time. The policy stated that a guard was not to participate in idle chatter while on shift, and Dourly meant to honor that. But there was no justification to that rule in this particular setting. Nothing eventful ever occurred down here. The only distractions he had to look forward to were the infrequent and unannounced visits of his lady friend. Sometimes Mousse had even taken to skipping a meal before his shift, in the oft chance that tonight was the night that she'd return again.

He was presently passing the time by trying to recall how many freckles she had on her neck, when he heard her gay laughter ring out from the kitchens nearby. He glanced at Dourly, who continued staring straight ahead, permitting only his upper lip to sneer slightly, as if to say, 'Oh brother, here she comes again'. Mousse could feel his heart thumping. He pressed his doublet flat on his chest with his palms and fiddled with his collar. His eyes anxiously darted to and fro the scullery ramp.

It seemed minutes before Catalina appeared, wearing a frock the color of turquoise, with matching earrings fashioned as crescent moons; her copper hair drawn back in a ponytail. Her neck looked especially fragile, and the rich complexion of her smooth skin was broken only by the necklace she always wore. She carried a tray this time, with a trencher of roasted gammon, a saucer of honey, and a glass of almond milk.

"Good evening fellas," she greeted them with a smile, handing the tray to Mousse.

"Oh my, what is this now?" Mousse looked thrilled. She took an off-white plumeria blossom from the tray and tucked it behind her left ear. "How do I look?" She asked playfully. "Fairer than the flower itself," he replied, which turned her a shade darker. Dourly shook his head slightly back and forth, as if it were all too much for him to witness.

"Loriline!" A gravelly voice cried out from the scullery. "Where has that fawn gone to now?"

Catalina feigned embarrassment, laughing lightly. "Well that was a short visit. Have a good shift, boys." She said warmly, and then skipped back the way she'd come. "Coming!" she called out, already out of sight.

Poor Mousse set upon the scrumptious meal with a vengeance and it was absolutely delicious. His evening, however, would have fared far better if he hadn't washed it down with the almond milk, which Catalina had tainted with sweetsleep. Almost immediately, the sleeping draught caused Mousse to sit down sluggishly, and a moment after, he lapsed into unconsciousness. Dourly was fit to burst.

"You get up, you hear?! To your post, you lummoxl!" he shouted. Mousse had slumped down rather peacefully as the draught had kicked in, his back against the bars, but now his body keeled over to the side. Dourly landed a solid kick to Mousse's posterior, to no effect. He was in the process of hunching over him to give his face a good clout when an unfamiliar, well-dressed aristocrat entered the room from the southeastern corridor. The man was likely five-and-six in age, or thereabouts, and rather pear-shaped, with spectacles resting on his bulbous nose.

Dourly was beside himself with emotion. Neither of the guards were standing at attention, and worse, a visitor had come tonight, tonight of all nights! The treasury was so far removed from the more popular attractions of the boardwalk that there was no reason for any pedestrian to wander in here.

"Good evening, guvnor," Dourly said, releasing Mousse's lapels and standing himself to attention.

"Oh, is it? Is it a good evening?" Higgs said, bumbling his way across the room. He appeared lost in concentration, counting several pennies on his open hand. He had a drunken swagger to his step, and when he glanced up, his glazed eyes lingered on the crumpled form of Mousse.

"It doesn't look too good an evening for that one there." Higgs motioned at the body with his open hand. The pocket change slipped off and clattered to the floor, where several rolled a bit before falling into the seams of the planks.

"Oh damn," Higgs got down on his hands and knees and began to hunt around for his coins. There was clearly no threat in the rotund man chasing his pennies before him, and Dourly quickly scurried to help. The sooner he had his pennies, the sooner this witness was out of the room, and the sooner he could deal with Mousse. Perhaps he could holler to someone in the scullery to come and take Mousse away, perhaps he could charge this man to find that girl? Dourly had already collected up five coins and was reaching for a sixth, when Higgs struck him hard on the back of the head with a blackjack. He instantly collapsed, resting against his unconscious colleague.

"Sorry, old chap, but it had to be done." Higgs said with a sympathetic face. He placed Dourly's arm around Mousse's shoulder, flashing a smug look. "I tell you, Higgs, you are an artist through and through," he said to himself. Ignoring the treasury, he next wandered over to the armory portion of the room. Taking a small iron spike from his coat pocket, he banged several times between the long iron bars of the cage, as though he were striking a triangle for chowtime. It took several iterations, but soon

enough, the lid of one of the powderkegs inside suddenly creaked open. It tilted, giving only a two-inch gap, from which out of the blackness came a soft voice, "Is it time?"

"No, you're early! Of course it's time, you bloody oaf." He whispered loudly.

The lid came completely off and a short man stood up. He had a full fiery beard, except for the very tip of his chin, which was clean-shaven. His matching shoulder-length hair was drawn back in three crude braids. He was rather heavy-set for his short stature. He leaned forward on the rim of the barrel, tensed his face, and flatulated loudly. Dunthrop looked immediately relieved.

"Awwww, I've been waiting eternity for that one, there." He said.

"Oi," Higgs hissed back, "keep your head in the game now, chop-chop! We've too much to do."

Dunthrop eyeballed the barrels in closest proximity, and after having decided which one held his sapper colleague, rapped on it with his fist. It took three barrels before he found Bangalore, who wasn't even in the barrel he was rapping on. Bangalore had had it worst. He appeared to have been stacked upside-down, and so he kicked out the lid from the top, and it took all of Dunthrop to help decant him. Higgs made no attempt to stifle his mirth with the scene.

Bangalore was a dark East Indian man, with midnight blue lips, and a black moustache. Obsidian-lensed goggles were strapped on his forehead, pushing his wiry hair up at an expansive angle, as though he'd just survived an explosion. He, too, was a short man, and this made them both particularly well-qualified for this job. Short sappers had considerable more worth than tall ones.

Higgs disappeared up the adjacent scullery ramp while the two collected themselves. He returned shortly thereafter, with Catalina in tow and a wide sundry of items between them. She handed a flashpan, a pouch of dry orange iron-oxide powder, and a set of flint-and-steel through the bars. Then, more gingerly, she passed on a three-inch strip of brittle magnesium ribbon from her pocket. Bangalore took this handful of goods and worked his way to the far back wall of the munitions cage, at the corner where the outside hull intersected with the wall of iron bars that partitioned the treasury from the armory. He tapped the last four bars, gripped them each in kind and gave them slight tugs, as if gauging their strength. He rocked on his haunches for a moment while he considered his choices, and then began a flurry of activity. He placed the flashpan flush against the base of two of the vertical, parallel bars. Using the brush, he pasted the iron-oxide powder around the entire circumference of both bars at roughly the same height from the floor. Then he took the brittle magnesium ribbon and wrapped it round both. He affixed his goggles down around his eyes, then turned and gave a thumbs-up to Dunthrop, who could only see Bangalore's bright white teeth grinning in the darkness.

It took six strikes of the flint on the steel before a spark hit the ribbon, but when it did, it immediately burned a bright white. It was a fierce heat, and Bangalore turned quickly away, shielding his head with his arm. He hated working with thermite compounds in such close proximity. The magnesium only burned briefly, but that was all that was needed, for it burned hot—hot enough to ignite the thermite compound beneath it, which sizzled with orange magma-like qualities. The compound made quick work

of the old iron wrought bars, liquefying just a thin film of metal through its entire diameter, but it was enough. A moment later, Bangalore removed both the two smaller pieces from the base. They looked as good as new, but for their shorter size, like two-foot long batons. He raised his goggles and inspected his work. He knew he probably should have taken off another half foot in height, but it would do. He waddled out of the back corner and gave a dozing Dunthrop three hard claps to the shoulder. "Your sapper has done his job, now it is time for you to do yours," he said in a loud heavily-accented voice, enunciating in such a way as to suggest that he thought he was whispering.

Dunthrop grunted, more at himself than his partner, and went to the back corner. He lay on his back, and began to shuffle headfirst through the hole, inching his way over to the treasury side. When his sternum was directly beneath the two suspended broken bars, he could fight the temptation no more, and reached up with a finger to touch what was now the new base of the bar above him.

"Blimey, it's still hot! It's still hot!" He hissed out, putting his finger in his mouth and murmuring like an infant. Bangalore gave him a solid kick on the base of his boot, to which he scowled back in return. "You think you could have given me any less height here to wiggle? I'm clearing this by no more than an inch, look at this?!" He pointed at the suspended bars, which were indeed quite close. But he reached the treasury without further ado. He stood up, brushed himself off, and wended his way to the front of this side of the cage, directly behind the locked door which Mousse and Dourly had so recently guarded. Catalina flashed him a smile, and then passed several items through the bars: her stylus, an old nail, a two-foot long string, and a brace-and-bit hand drill; its handle protruding outward at a perpendicular angle. "Tip-top so far," she whispered.

Dunthrop huffed. "The real work is now just beginning. Cutting iron with heat is one thing, but cutting wood is another. It requires a real man, *harr*" he said, jerking his thumb at himself.

"Then lucky for us, we've got one," she bantered back. "Be that man."

He batted away her encouragement and trudged to the last row of chests in the back of the treasury. He paced off the distance between the two columns of chests, and split the difference, hammering the old nail in the floorboard. They'd agreed to make the epicenter of the cut directly between the chests, deliberately in full view of the front gate. The audacity of it made him grin. He tied one end of the string to the nail, and the other to the pencil. Stretching the string taut, he then rotated it one full revolution, drawing a circle on the wooden planks as it pivoted around. Once done, he picked up his brace-and-bit, and began grinding away at an arbitrary point that he had picked on the circle.

"We should have had a lantern on the list." He called out, not too softly.

"Quiet you," Higgs retorted from outside the bars. He agreed though, a lantern clearly would have been a good idea.

Before long, Dunthrop had completed a short series of drill holes adjacent to one another, finally gaining enough space to insert a proper saw. He began cutting now in earnest, on the faintly-visible circle he had sketched on the hull floor. It reminded him of happy memories of ice-fishing, from another life and

far from here. While he labored away, Bangalore used a crowbar to open the remaining munitions barrels. Catalina and Higgs handed him a ten foot-long eaves trough, which they had liberated from the Parched Pelican tavern. They had wrapped a bolt of linen around the length of it, in an effort to suppress any noise the trough might make as it passed through the iron bars, and in its capacity as a chute. It took some elbow grease, but Bangalore finally negotiated the trough past the powderkegs and weapon racks, back to the two-foot high hole he'd cut. He fed almost all of it through the gap in the bars, retaining only a foot on the armory side. The far end of the eaves trough came to rest right at the lip of Dunthrop's two-foot wide manhole.

"Is this perfect shaft not perfectly positioned? I ask you, Dun-Dun, is it not perfect?" Bangalore rasped through the darkness. He had the tendency of abbreviating names for people he was affectionate for.

"But what good would a perfect shaft be without a perfect sheath, *harr*," Dunthrop said, while moving his hips in a ribald manner.

Bangalore stacked the four bricks beneath his end of the trough, which gave the chute as steep an incline as the gap at the base of the bars would permit. There was a loud *kaploop* when Dunthrop completed cutting the manhole, as the thick round wooden disc fell into the sea. The sound in the room immediately rose in volume, and it gave Dunthrop pause. He cast a nervous look at the others. They hadn't considered how loud the sea might sound once the floor had been cut. Several feet below, the waves burbled and lapped loudly at the giant support pylons and pontoons of the floating isle, despite the sea being relatively calm. The temperature changed quite drastically in the room as well, and seaspray misted into the room with the heavy scent of brine and the rhythm of the sea.

Dunthrop held the eaves trough in place, its end barely dangling over the manhole. He squinted through the darkness at Bangalore on the armory side of the partitioned cage, and gave a firm nod. With surprising haste, Bangalore began loading cannonballs. Each ball rolled swiftly down the trough, crossing from the armory to the treasury and just as quickly into the sea. *Kaploop, kaploop, kaploop*. It reminded him vaguely of a skee-ball game he'd played once at a winesink, and Bangalore decided he liked this gig afterall. When they had finished, Dunthrop hulled the rest of the eaves trough over to his side and let it go into the sea as well, although it made more of a *whoosh* than he intended. Higgs cringed.

Higgs and Catalina next handed a queer wheeled contraption vertically through the bars. It was a kiln bat on wheels, a dolly low in stature with a rope on both ends, which if used for its purpose, was meant to push and pull ore into hot furnaces. But they intended it for an entirely different purpose. With equally impressive speed, Dunthrop loaded the kiln bat over and over again, with burlap bags bulging with coin, steel lockboxes that clanked with jewels, ornamental vases and even long ivory tusks. As soon as the dolly was full, he'd signal Bangalore with a light tap on the iron bars, who in turn would pull it over to his side. He packed the loot as tightly as he could in the munitions barrels, checked that the lid would fit, and then poured sand in, which sifted amongst the treasure, so that the barrels would clatter less while moved. Left alone, the treasure would have clanked and clattered for certain, but the sand did the trick. After resealing a munitions barrel, he would tilt it on the edge of its rim and swish it back

and forth a bit, listening for any jingling. Few of the barrels had to be corrected, and before two hours had passed, he had thirteen barrels sealed and looking as dull and ordinary as ever.

Intentionally leaving the lids of all thirteen chests in the treasury wide open, Dunthrop cast about a final look, chuckled, and then retreated on his back to the armory side. As soon as he was through, Bangalore placed the two broken iron ends that he'd cut back to their original location. Of course they didn't fit as snugly as before they'd been cut, as an eighth of an inch of iron had been burned off, but it wasn't terribly loose, and Bangalore shoved two short shims beneath each bar, making the fit tight again. Catalina had told him it needn't survive careful inspection, just not be glaringly obvious during the most cursory of glances. *This'll do*, he thought, pleased with his craft.

Catalina frisked Dourly down, removed some tobacco from his pocket, and then planted a red ruby in its place. She cupped his face roughly a couple times. "Aww, poor baby," she purred.

The sapper and the carpenter had returned to their original barrels, the last of which she could hear was Bangalore in his East Indian accent, "I really, really, really do not wish to return to this barrel. Catalina, I mean it. It is a round coffin, a claustrophobic cocoon of nightmare proportions, a cyl—" He was interrupted midsentence as Dunthrop hammered the lid back in place with a mallet.

"Ahhh, the sound of silence....unsurpassed by any other pleasure. *Harr!*" Dunthrop pontificated as he squat inside his own barrel, pulling the lid back down upon himself.

Satisfied with how the scene looked, Catalina nodded for Higgs to leave, who retreated up the scullery ramp. She smiled to herself, and then gripped Mousse by the lapels of his doublet and shook him firmly.

"Sir, sir!" She cried. "Are you okay?"

Mousse was still very groggy, but her persistence soon brought him around. "What's this all about now?"

Catalina gestured to Dourly the Hourly spread out cold on the floor. "I don't know, sir. I came in to collect the serving tray and I found the two of you both out like this. And that isn't the worst of it, begging your pardons. Look in there!" She said, pointing at the two columns of empty treasury coffer.

Poor Mousse turned a whiter shade of pale, swallowing hard several times. A sound emitted from his throat that reminded her of a sea lion pup, a moaning most unbecoming of a man. He sat up to inspect Dourly, shaking him by his doublet, but to no avail. His clenched fist felt a hard, sharp lump in the folds of the cloth, and patting him down, he found what had to have been the most precious stone that he'd ever laid eyes upon, let alone held. It was a blood-rich red ruby, and even in the dark confines of his post, it still seemed to catch and cast more light about the room than it possibly could have received. His gaze went from the priceless stone to Dourly, back and forth again.

"Oh he shouldn't have, oh they'll hang him for certain." Aghast, he squinted into the dark recesses of the Treasury and blanched again when he saw what appeared to be a gaping hole in the floorboards at



the back. That was it, then. His colleague was on the take. They'd given him a red ruby for his troubles, which involved assaulting or drugging his own person, so some party of twenty rascalions could drill up beneath the hull of the treasury and steal the wealth of the entire community? His disbelief began to turn to rage as he pieced it together. He had to alert the authorities. Abandoning his post at this point was acceptable, as there was nothing left to guard! The brigands who did this would have needed to use a very low skiff indeed, but they couldn't have travelled far. They inevitably had a larger ship anchored offshore. He had to reach the militia-general immediately.

Dawn was breaking just as Mousse reached the open wharf of the community. The pier was empty, and he could barely make out a sail on the horizon. There was a ship at port last night, he was certain of it, and it looked to have silently slunk off in the middle of the night...no surer sign of guilt. He ran to the bell tower and yanked hard on the cord. Peals clanged out loudly across the harbor, waking most of the community.

Regular folk reached him far before any figures of authority, and he gave witness to what had happened. The community was outraged, with everyone eager to give chase. But there were no boats berthed in the Nest's enclosed harbor, and the only ship capable of hunting the Hutchinson was the Lillycadger, anchored half a mile off-shore. Catalina and her crew had been certain to arrive with the initial crowd so they would be well-positioned to being charged to give chase.

"My Lillycadger is a fast ship, I'll give you that, but she's woefully supplied. We brought all the munitions and cannon balls that we could to restock your community, but in doing so, we forsook carrying our own supplies for our guns," Donovan said.

The crowd's response was deafening. The magistrate, purple in face, decreed that the Lillycadger would have all the ball and powder she could carry, and the city would even load them, quick-spittle. "We will spare no expense to apprehend these hooligans and return our wealth!"

"Then as fast as you can, let the Nest arm us, and we'll make swiss cheese of the Hutchinson!" The enraged mob cried out in support. They signaled to the Lillycadger off-shore, who immediately lifted anchor and rowed to harbor. While she berthed, two dozen men raced down to the armory and rolled every powder and munitions barrel that they had up to the wharf. They rushed them across the gangplank and loaded them on the hold of the ship with such astonishing speed that Catalina knew it wouldn't sit well with the wharfmaster, who'd probably never seen this type of energy from his dockworkers.

Her entire crew scrambled across the riggings, raising the sails, the ship alive in a flurry of activity. The magistrate insisted on accompanying them on the hunt, and he was given a very prominent position at the perch of the bow, with a spyglass in hand, where he struck a leading, regal pose, as though leading the charge. It was such a bustle of activity in a place that had been dormant only an hour ago, it was really rather exciting. The magistrate was immensely pleased that he would play such a pivotal role in apprehending the miscreants. Mousse marveled at his fortune. He even spotted Miss Loriline, the pleasant girl from the kitchens, boarding the ship with a huge basket of bread. It was gratifying to know

that everyone was lending a hand as best they could, including making sure the sailors were well fed. Clearly, they knew the hunt could last for several days. The ship departed in a cornucopia of well-wishing and beseeches to succeed, punctuated with curses directed at the Hutchinson. Failure was not an option.

They were a good two miles on their way, when Catalina set aside her basket of bread, and said in as polite a voice as she could muster, "Your Eminence, would you now be so kind as to board the skiff on the port side please." The magistrate looked completely befuddled. "I beg your pardon! This scullion wench just asked me..." His sentence trailed off as he looked incredulously about. He was surrounded by a ring of at least twenty deckhands, all with drawn muskets and sabers, their eyes gleaming with mischief and their mouths skewed into devilish grins.

"What...what is the meaning of this?!" He cried with growing alarm. Catalina reached up to her brow and flipped down an eyepatch. The entire crew all did likewise in unison.

"I did ask please, your Eminence. But I only use that word the first time I have to ask. This is my ship, and I'm just a harmless scullion wench named Catalina. That's C-A-T-A—" As the name registered with the Magistrate, his face blanched white. "-L-I-N-A. And this is our flag." She pointed to a deckhand, who swiftly and with much gusto, raised the Jolly Rogers up the main mast of the ship. It was the familiar white skull on a black field, only this one had an off-white plumeria blossom tucked where the right ear would be and a mole on its left cheek. The Magistrate got physically sick, bringing up the softboiled egg and honeycakes he'd consumed earlier in the morning.

"Not on the ship, please...over the side, here." Catalina guided him gently to the rails, and gave him a firm but well-intended whack on the back. "There you go, there you go. Much better, yeah?"

"Now I must insist that you take our skiff here, and return to your city. She's a grand city, and we thought you were all lovely. Just lovely people. Well, except for Dourly the Hourly. But we are pirates, and it is our nature to do skullduggery and the like. Remember though, no one was harmed in this adventure. And we did take credit for this escapade; we shan't soil the reputation of the Hutchinson."

She gingerly guided the shell-shocked Magistrate over to the railing, where he cooperated in boarding the skiff. A crewmate handed him a wineskin of water and a papaya. "You'll be back home within the hour. You do still remember how to row for yourself, your Eminence? Well regardless, as a gesture of our generosity, heck our general good-naturedness—in the field of piracy at least, let me send you back with a token of goodwill. Dunthrop?" She turned to her carpenter, who pried open the nearest munitions barrel that the militia of the Nest had loaded onto the ship. He pulled out a dazzling ten-karat sapphire, its sea-blue colors catching the sun and showering the deck in an explosion of light and wonderment. Many of the crew *oooooed* in sync, as they often did when they beheld beautiful treasure. The magistrate's mouth hung unhinged, a thin line of spittle stretching between his parted lips, and his face bore a catatonic look, as though it couldn't comprehend this turn of events.

Catalina faced the sapphire directly, as though it were a person, and said, "Farewell sweetheart." She

gave it a moist kiss and sent it flying into the rowboat. It bounced harmlessly against the Magistrate and fell into his lap. "Oh, and you can keep the skiff too," she added with a judicial look. The magistrate's eyes glanced about at the faces he saw, but other than that, he showed no sensory response. Catalina pursed her lips, as though there was nothing left to say, and nodded toward two crewmates, who lowered the skiff to the water far below.

No sooner was the skiff away, than a loud, rabbled cry went up on deck. "Three cheers for the captain! Hoo-ray! Hoo-ray! Hoo-ray!" They all cried out in joyful unison. Catalina beamed with pride. "Hoist your steins and drink with me," she sang out jubilantly. And the crew of the Lillycadger returned the challenge, "For tomorrow we dine beneath the sea!" Bangalore leaned out from the mast now, with one arm wrapped about it. He had his dark obsidian goggles on, and a pint of grog in his free hand. "But boss, I really did not like the barrel!" The crew laughed loudly, and another round of cheers went up in salute to his service. Catalina flipped open the lid of the nearest barrel, shoved her hand inside and let it visibly wash over with gems. "But you will now... you will now!" Her eyes caught the sun's rays and danced with delight, like the precious stones all around.

