

Chapter 2: Catalina's Christmas

"Now the next type of derivative we should talk about is naked credit default swaps. These are where one party, say the local banking establishment, makes a series of insurance payments to another party—perhaps the local ruling sovereign's bank backed with overseas credit, wherein they are hedging their risk on a 3rd party business investment...say a local distillery or bordello."

The thin, frail investor pointed with a lecture stick at his chalkboard easel, covered with complex investment diagrams. The entire crew of the Lillycadger was sitting on the oarsmen benches in the hold of the ship for a financial investment seminar which Catalina had decreed as mandatory. She was not going to have her crew get old without having made sound retirement decisions with all the booty they were amassing. The ship was presently in port at the small isle of Cacau, and she had just been ashore at an arranged meet with the local chiefs.

"So, say the Lillycadger Investment Club decided to purchase the rum distillery on Cacau for 2,000 pieces-of-eight. We—"

The room was filled with *oooooooohs* and other guttural sounds of reverence and desire at the mere mention of the word 'rum'.

"I am a bit parched!" someone piped out. There was hearty laughter throughout the hold, all except for the seminar instructor, who looked quite put out.

"With an asset investment of 2,000, we might be able to buy insurance on our investment for only 30 pieces-of-eight." He continued on, uncowed.

"ONLY 30?" a pirate cried out. "That's ten years' wages, that is!"

"Per month," the instructor added. "30 pieces-of-eight per month. But you're missing what we get in return. If the distillery goes defunct...if an act of God like a typhoon wipes out the facility, or our crop of sugarcane comes down with a pestilence of some sort, or political instability...if one of the other great nations takes this isle back from the British...then we're only out the insurance money and our original investment of 2,000 is returned to us." The instructor began furiously pecking at his chalkboard again. Catalina stood at the back of the room with her brow furled. This guy was good. He might be on to something here.

"If the distillery generates 100 pieces-of-eight income per month after operating expenses, and we're out 30 per month for insurance, that leaves us with a profit of..."

He looked desperately around the room. Most of the pirates appeared to be deep in thought. Edgar was using his pegleg to scratch invisible arithmetic on the plank floorboards. Mergel used the hook on his left hand to count back and forth on the three remaining fingers of his right, like some mystical abacus. Faira's one remaining eye rotated back and forth at an upward angle, carrying the numbers over from the columns as he tallied the heavy math. The instructor was looking more and more visibly agitated.

“Instructor, sir?” Dunthrop spoke up. “Meaning no disrespect, but I think this exercise is pointless. I mean, look at the lot of us. Look around. Can you possibly imagine any distillery that we own generating 100 pieces-of-eight per month in revenue?! We’ll drink our own product all away, *haarr!*” A wild cheer went up all around. “You know it, you know we will!” He bumped fists with pirates all around his vicinity, making pointing gestures to those further away. The instructor removed his spectacles and covered his face with his palm.

Catalina smiled and decided her crew needed a break from this. “OK, let’s call it enough for today. I appreciate everyone for having attended. Remember, it’s *your* future. Shore leave is granted until 7pm, but return marginally sober and ready for a mission. Partially drunk is expected; flat-out drunk is a fineable offense.”

“Can I buy insurance on that?” Someone cried out as the pirates shuffled out, which met with some good-natured chortling.

“First-Mate Donovan, Chief Engineer Alashniv, Master Gunner Dunthrop, and Specialist Bangalore, a word please. Also, Higgs, you’d best come too,” Catalina called out. The officers reluctantly pushed upstream through the crew, saddened at their sudden loss of freedom. As the six of them retreated to the cantina one deck above the oarsmen galley, Bangalore remarked, “Master Gunner, Dun-Dun? Since when did you earn such a distinguished title? I thought you were Master Carpenter?”

“I am the Master of Many, *haaar!* A veritable Renaissance man, that’s me!” Dunthrop replied, with a hard clap on his Indian friend’s back. “Don’t worry, you’re in good hands.”

That seemed a curious remark to Bangalore, and he climbed the remaining stairs in silence.

The officers met in their regular spot, a picnic table in the center of the otherwise abandoned cantina. It was a gesture of transparency on Catalina’s part, but it was also a pretty secure location since everyone wanted shore leave when in port. That and the other reason....the food here was atrocious. When they were at sea, most men preferred to eat their own private reserves of salted beef and hardtack. When they were in port, they were like aquatic mammals during the summer months, consuming as many calories as they could for the famine ahead.

“Oh boy, here he comes,” Donovan remarked under his breath. Chef Babsley Bruno was a fleshy, shapeless eggplant of a man. He wore a gigantic grease-laden apron about his girth, which once upon a time may have been white, but now had a sallow gradient throughout. He had a beastly ungroomed moustache which saddled his puffy lips, extending downward past even his jawline. Black, unkempt hair sprouted outward from an off-white stovepipe chef toque that he wore religiously. The flat top of the toque even looked sad, slouching at a very sharp angle. Babsley Bruno was a chef only by name. A truly repulsive individual with absolutely no cooking skills or sensitivity to sanitation, he was nevertheless the sweetest guy, and Catalina simply had trouble letting him go.

“Good morning Captain! Officers!” The eggplant danced to the table with a tray of six coffee mugs in one hand and a kettle in the other. With remarkable deftness, he placed the tray on the table,

spun it hard, pouring sludge from the kettle continuously. He called it coffee. Half of the 'coffee' found its way into mugs, the rest ended up on the tray in a colossal mess.

"There we go! Now what will you distinguished women and men be having this fine morning? Why, I'll tell you what you'll be having, you'll be having the special! Specials, all around!"

"Babs, we're not—" Catalina tried to interject.

"You're not picky, no I know. That's why you six are some of my most prized customers. Well, five of you anyway. You—I don't really know you," He pointed at Bangalore, whose white eyes widened.

"No, now I've already broken the eggs, and I've got fresh mussels that I picked up at the market today. Course they were discounted, so one never really knows the shelf life on such things and it means they ought to be eaten up sooner rather than later. You just relax, enjoy your cups of joe, talk amongst yourself about important things for our happy community, and your resident chef will feed you good and proper."

"But Babs...really..." Catalina tried half-heartedly again, but it was no use. The large man's body language showed he wouldn't take no for an answer, that they shouldn't feel that they were imposing on him, and he ambled off to the kitchen.

"He does have a big heart." She remarked to the others.

"He has a big everything, *haaar!*" Dunthrop whispered under his breath.

Part of the reason the officers always chose this table was because it was adjacent to the only potted plant on board, a little palm tree. The three foot tall tree had died long ago, and the officers were likely to blame, at least from one perspective of it. They had learned long ago to never drink whatever Babs served. One by one, they handed their mugs over to Dunthrop now, who followed their longstanding tradition of dumping the contents out unto the unlucky plant.

"OK, let's get down to the order of business," Catalina began. "Next week is Christmas—" Dunthrop pumped his fist. "and it's time for our annual charity run." Dunthrop deflated a bit, making somewhat of a pout with his lips. Catalina ignored him.

"I think I've found a good candidate for us this year. The locals here at Cacau need our help. Shall I let you guess? When you think of Christmas, what do you think of first?"

"Rum!" Dunthrop shouted.

"Yes, agreed, rum!" Donovan seconded, his eyes excited.

"No problemo, a dash of rum in the omelets it is!" a distant voice cried out deep from within the kitchen recesses.

"It is unanimous, Catalina, I enjoy rum as well." Bangalore said softly.

“Yes, who doesn’t, but our mission does not involve rum, I’m sorry. It involves the spice trade. Apparently, her Majesty’s naval forces haven’t been so keen on the ‘trade’ portion of ‘spice trade’; it’s been more of a spice take. So I propose that we take it back.”

“But Catalina,” Bangalore replied in his clever voice, “when you say spices with regard to Cacao, you really mean nutmeg specifically.”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“And when you say nutmeg, and it’s Christmas, you are really saying...”

“EGGNOG!” Dunthrop stood up, both hands in the air.

“Yes precisely,” Bangalore continued, undeterred. “And when you say eggnog, Dun-Dun, you really mean—”

“RUM! RUM! RUM!” All of her officers joined in unison. Bangalore smiled joyously, as though he’d just outwitted his captain.

Catalina summoned all the patience she had and grinned. “Oh all right, yes it’s a charity rum drive.”

Her officers pounded the table loudly, hooting and hollering.

Babsley Bruno appeared to have interpreted all this commotion as unrest over the meal he was making, so he came rushing out in a tizzy. He slammed a large chowder cauldron down in the center of the table, two loaves of jalapeno bread, and bowls with utensils.

“Bon appetit!” He exclaimed, resting his hands on his hips as he watched expectantly. Everyone made a good show of filling their bowls and raising a spoonful to their lips, heads always down to mask this mummer’s farce.

“Delicious, no?” Babs helped them find the words, to which they all agreed readily. Fortunately, the familiar sizzle of a grease fire back in his kitchen could be heard and he shuffled off to carry on the good fight. As soon as he left, the potted plant received six servings of the mussel-and-rum omelet.

“Right, so here’s the plan. At the start of the new year, just one week’s time, a 400-ton galleon will set sail to England full of the nutmeg stolen from Cacao. Presently, they have the galleon docked in a harbor at the isle of Borobodur, a painless half-day’s journey from here. The harbor has a minimum amount of cannons, but its real defense is a fierce warship anchored just outside the bay, named the HMS Dreadnought. She is rumored to have 300 guns.”

Rather than sober her officers up with such grim news, they started to laugh incredulously.

“We haven’t a chance in hell!” Dunthrop slapped the table, howling at the folly of such a feat.

Catalina ignored him, having just noticed a well-dressed dusky-colored man entering the room. She

gave a welcoming smile and flagged him over, rising to greet him.

“Mr. Kantawamba, thank you very much for coming. I take it you accept my commission?”

“I do indeed, Miss Catalina. I am appreciative of your offer, and hope my work meets your expectations.” He was wearing a beige-and-yellow tweed button-down suit with large mahogany buttons on the front, and a bowler hat on his head. In one hand, he held a dun-colored reptile-skinned suitcase. He must have undoubtedly been a particularly unusual sight on an island as small as Cacaou.

“Mr. Kantawamba is a haberdasher—a tailor of sorts, and he’s here to take some measurements and to provide us with some articles for our mission,” Catalina explained.

Mr. Kantawamba got immediately to work, pulling a measuring tape from amongst his myriad of pockets. He began by measuring the breadth of Bangalore’s shoulders, who looked rather surprised.

“Mr. K can be trusted, so let’s continue. We will beat the HMS Dreadnought without ever firing a shot. Well, with just one shot, and it’d better be a good one, right Master Gunner Dunthrop?”

“Aye, it had.” Dunthrop said now for the first time in a somber voice.

“On the other side of Borobodur, opposite the side with the harbor, is a very small adjacent island called Tikriti by the locals. Tikriti has a lighthouse and an armory, but it is extremely undermanned. Intel from indigenous locals suggests maybe only three guards. We think this is plausible because there are no munitions kept at this armory. It is merely an old warehouse now relegated to secondary status, since the harbor has become the main place of storage and trade.”

“So let me guess, the spice is being temporarily held there?” Donovan piped in the first time, while the tailor meticulously measured the circumference of Bangalore’s head. Poor Bangalore just stared upward with large doe eyes.

“No, unfortunately it’s not that simple. The armory on Tikriti has a stockpile of British uniforms. Gentlemen, we will get those uniforms, and I propose we do it tonight while the Imperialists celebrate Christmas.”

“Second course is nearly done!” Babs’ voice called out distantly from behind the kitchen’s bamboo façade.

“This brings us to our next point of discussion. Chief Engineer Alashniv has proposed an excellent solution to dealing with the large warship, and I’ve invited him here today to take some final measurements.”

Alashniv was a very thin, very tall Caucasian man. He had the palest complexion, especially for a man who lived at sea. Rumor was that despite being brilliant in various engineering fields, he had an inexplicable phobia of the sun. He wore his dark brown hair pulled back in a short ponytail, dressed in unassuming clothes, and was never seen without clutching his clapboard-covered journal. While being well-versed in many European languages, Catalina still struggled to understand his English at times.

Alashniv had the habit of standing whenever he addressed others, and he did so now.

“Hello my fellow officers,” he pronounced in a heavily-Slavic voice. “It is a privilege to play a pivotal role in the mission we are about to undertake. And now, I must some measurements make. Thank you for your patience.” He walked over to a storage closet and returned pushing a wheeled cart, while Mr. Kantawamba measured the in-seam on Bangalore’s trousers, who was looking more and more alarmed. He finished with Bangalore, returned his tools and notes back to his suitcase, and said, “My work here is finished, Miss Catalina. I go now and your order will be ready by our agreed time.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Kantawamba. I know you’ll give it your utmost attention. We’ll see you at dawn,” Catalina replied.

Bangalore’s creeping sense of dread, piqued by the fact that he was the only person measured from amongst everyone present, shot even higher when Alashniv stopped his cart directly in front of him.

“Mr. Bangalore, would you kindly please step onto my scale.”

“If it is my weight you are concerned about, I am forty-eight kilos, I know beyond a certainty. Maybe less with how often I eat in this cantina,” Bangalore remarked sharply.

“For the matters at hand, it is critical that we are very precise. Please, don’t make waves, just step onto my contraption.”

Bangalore stepped reluctantly onto the large scale, but he shifted his attention from Alashniv to Catalina. “Catalina, I am not getting a good feeling about this. I think it is time you tell me what this is all about. What are you thinking of having your most humble and loyal servant do?”

Higgs, who this whole time had been quietly stewing on his thoughts, piped in now. “You, esteemed colleague, get to play the hero. A local fisherman named Um’chuuk and his friends are going to guide you and Dunthrop in a small skiff to the Armory on Tikriti. You are going to seize control of the facility while honoring our code.”

“I think it is very unlikely we can take that facility alone,” Bangalore replied.

“I think you’re right,” Catalina said. “That’s why we’re not sending you alone. I’ll be joining you, as well as Alashniv. And....well, I was going to save this as a surprise, but we’ll be joined by the Marines from Me-hi-co!”

Imaginary brass horns suddenly went off in his head! The Marines from Me-hi-co <brass horns!> were three Mexican brothers named Aciano, Acilino and Adalberto. They were extremely short, extremely strong, and always jovial. They would have gotten along smashingly with Dunthrop if they could speak a common language, but neither knew the others native tongue. They had joined the crew two years ago and had handled every task they were given with excellent marks. It was suspected they had come from a circus or travelling show of some sort prior to joining the Lillycadger, as they were

natural born tumblers and were constantly doing shoulder and breast claps, accompanied by vocal expulsions of “Hup!”

Bangalore felt suddenly wary. A mission involving the Marines of Me-hi-co <*brass horns!*>, his recently-promoted-to-Master Gunner friend, and excessive measurements of his person by both a tailor and an engineer did not bode well at all. Not one iota. Christmas already sounded apt to go off with a bang!



Xavier del Toro gazed upon the thin line of the horizon, resting his weight against a two-foot long grapeshot cannon while he formulated a plan for the week ahead. Despite the heat of the afternoon’s sun, he raised a cigar to his lips and took a long drag, intentionally letting an inch of smoldering ash cling to the end. His foot rested on a breech rope coiled on the pier and he glanced down now absently at it. It had once held fast the cannon to ring bolts in the bulwark, stopping the recoil when it fired, but the rope had been frayed by the elements and now remained affixed only to the cannon itself. *Negligence*. He made a sniffing sound and turned to face the magistrate for the first time. Without saying a word, he took another monstrous drag on his cigar, the embers inside flaring a bright hellish red. The magistrate expected to see his eyes smolder as well, but they looked unmoved by recent events. The Spaniard looked calm and removed. Smoke billowed slowly out from both his nostrils and the corners of his lips.

“Tell me again, Magistrate Phillip, precisely how was it that she got the treasure out of the hold?” Xavier asked in his deliberately-slow, Castilian voice; the cigar held elegantly in one hand. He spoke at a volume intended only for the magistrate, but he was aware that the crowd gathered around them was hanging on his every word.

“As I said, her crew subdued our men on guard outside the treasury and then seemed to have cut upward from beneath the Nest. A most daring feat if ever there was. We never anticipated an amphibious attack of this sort. Never.”

The Spaniard raised both eyebrows and extinguished the cigar in his palm, flicking the remains into the water.

“And tell me....how do you imagine they accomplished such a heist? Did they tie a skiff along the outside and then take turns swimming underneath? I cannot imagine how long such an operation as this would take. Even with a bladder of air, it would be exhausting working upside-down, needing both hands to operate a drill-bit, never mind the shifting tide, the water constantly pushing and pulling....”

“I know...I, I, I know...it sounds impossible, but they seem to have done this very thing.” A tinge of nervousness had entered the magistrate’s voice.

The Spaniard made a look of surprised resignation—as if to say that he too was at a loss for a better explanation. “I agree, how else could it have happened? And then, I suppose they fastened the barrels of treasure on to their persons, jumped back into the water and carefully worked their way back

to their skiff?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

The Spaniard nodded thoughtfully. He stooped and picked up the loose end of rope. "They must have found a way to rig a rope around the barrel and lash it to their backs, and then, once in the water, they would have had to climb along the rope, submerged in water to reach the skiff. I cannot imagine doing this on a single breath, with the weight of that much treasure on their backs tugging them downward. I don't even know how they could have lashed a barrel with that much weight securely to themselves. Do you?"

"Me? No, I haven't the foggiest clue on such matters," said the magistrate.

"They would have had to have...let's see...turn around for a second..." The Spaniard motioned for the magistrate to turn. "Go on, let's figure this out."

Reluctantly, the magistrate turned around. The Spaniard fed the end of the rope over the magistrate's left shoulder and then brought it back around again under his right arm, at his hip level. "They must have done it just so, I'd imagine." He spoke as he worked, looping the rope once again around the magistrate's torso before tying it snug on the back. "I suppose at this point they then secured hooks into the barrels and fastened them here," he said, pulling slightly near the middle of the back.

"I suppose..." the magistrate said awkwardly, his samite overcoat crushed and looking more pompous by the moment.

"And tell me, what was the consolation prize you said she flung at you? What did she insult you with? Was it a talisman? A pendant, by chance?"

"No...a gem. A sapphire." The magistrate anxiously padded his overcoat through the makeshift rope harness. "This is the one," he said, pulling forth the beautiful blue gem that Catalina had given to him as a gift of 'charity'.

"Ah, a magnificent specimen." The Spaniard took the gem and held it up to the sun. "Look at how it catches the sun!" As he held the sapphire up, he kicked out the block that rested before the cannon's wheels. "Look at how the facets break down the light into a hundred sundrops!" He put a foot on the back of the cannon. "Look at the radiance of God's beauty cast about on sinners such as us!" He gave a great heave. The small cast-iron barrel rolled effortlessly off the pier, disappearing immediately beneath the water's surface with a loud *kerplushhh*. The coiled rope that was affixed to it gave a great whirring sound as it went chasing after the cannon. The magistrate had just enough time to flash a look of stark terror before he was wretched violently off of the pier and into the depths below.

A gasp went up from the crowd on the pier. The Spaniard watched the fleeting bubbles rise to the surface for a few seconds before turning to address the others.

“Now then, who is the magistrate deputy?” he calmly asked. The crowd stood frozen, their eyes like huge saucers, as though he hadn’t spoken in English. The Spaniard let loose a soft sigh, drew a fresh cigar from the folds of his coat, and ran the length of it beneath his nose, inhaling the sweet fragrance of tobacco. *Patience, amigo, you will find her*, he thought to himself. “I ask you again, fine people, who is your magistrate deputy?”

A small nebbish man with sharp features and silver round spectacles meekly raised his hand. The crowd immediately distanced themselves from him.

“Right. You are now the magistrate of the Nest. You’re familiar with who my employer is, yes?”

The new magistrate nodded timidly.

“Good. I’ll need your entire cooperation. All of you.” He gestured to the crowd. “I’ll need ship provisions for two months. I’ll need an accurate heading that the Lillycadger was last seen heading in. I’ll need your most accurate charts for these waters. And I’ll need a real account of how the treasure was stolen. No one here believes it was moved underwater.” The Spaniard looked upon the crowd. “And that wasn’t a question.”

“Of course, of course, sir. Everything we can do to help you reclaim our stolen goods,” the new magistrate said with open hands.

“This isn’t about 300 kilos of sparkling jewels and gold-plated pistols,” the Spaniard sneered, tossing the sapphire at the new magistrate. “It’s about catching *her!*”

“I understand, sir,” the new magistrate said, with an intonation that suggested he clearly did not. He struck a match and leaned forward to light the Spaniard’s cigar. His hand trembled to such degree that the Spaniard gripped his wrist to hold it steady and puffed until the flame took hold. He grunted his gratitude, licked his lips and looked out again at the horizon. *It’s possible she doesn’t even know she has it*, he told himself, but he didn’t believe it.



It was only half nine when the ragtag raiding party pushed off from the Lillycadger. They left her anchored in a narrow inlet on the southeast side of the island of Borobodur. There was near a full moon and no clouds for as far as the eye could see, so it was easy to spy their destination during the long hours ahead. There were seven of them in the skiff, with the three Marines of Me-hi-co and Dunthrop each manning an oar. Bangalore had offered to lend a hand but Dunthrop had politely declined, encouraging him to save his strength. Comments such as these only further heightened Bangalore’s dread over the coming events. *What on earth did they have in store for him?* He sat at the bow and fretted while the little vessel gradually worked its way across the narrow expanse of sea to the smaller isle of Tikriki.



“Papa, you’ve got a new one here,” the girl said sleepily. Her finger lightly traced around the

crimson pigment, still fresh on her father's arm. "Does it hurt much?"

Her father looked down at it as though it were the first time he'd seen it.

"No, not much. Part of the territory, I'm afraid. Everyone gets kissed by fire once in a while." He took her hand in his and kissed the backside.

"You promised to be more careful. You promised."

"That's true. I did. I'll be even more careful from here onward." He meant it in his heart, but his track record said otherwise. His arms were covered by various shades of elliptical marks where the fire had nipped him before.

"Cat, my sweet thing, the work that I do...It's very important. Not just to our family...not just to our village, but to the entire Empire. It has the power to make and unmake kings...do you understand me? The metallurgical process I have discovered...it has far-reaching ramifications. It can make cannons stronger than the world has ever seen...it can make muskets able to withstand five times the powder than they can now. It can lead to stronger bridges and structures as well. Every facet of life will be impacted by it."

Catalina nodded like she followed it all, but she did not and she was fighting to stay awake. She had very few moments in a day where she saw her papa, but he never missed a night of tucking her in.

"Remember, dear, the secret is in the Foundry." He leaned in and planted a loving kiss on her forehead. "Soon, our lives are going to change and you'll have to leave your friends behind, but you'll make new ones."

He was so right...and yet so wrong.



Catalina awoke sharply when the skiff ran ashore. She had been lulled to sleep by the rhythmic waves and the cathartic creaking of the pull of the oars. She had been there again. In bed, with her father watching lovingly over her. She had this same damn dream with increasing frequency of late. It was a dual-edged sword. She loved seeing her father again...all the details that her brain filled in. The complete conviction that it was reality. But it was merely a portrait of time, pinched from two decades ago. She wasn't even sure how many of the details were true and how many her brain had improvised. Was the fresh scar on his left forearm or his right tricep? He was always burning himself, that part was certain. She supposed she should be grateful for such a dream filled with love and not night terrors, but it was still a dream of ghosts. A reminder of what she'd had and lost. Invariably, it left her melancholy for the first moments afterward.

The rest of her crew had disembarked and were already unloading supplies on the beach. The Marine from Me-hi-co <horns blaring!> each had coils of rope about their arms. Higgs offered her a hand out of the skiff.

“Another dream?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm,” she conceded but stopped the conversation there. Before them stood a fifteen-foot sandy berm with a steep face. The boat was dragged in-land enough to prevent the tide from reaching it and the crew headed toward the berm.

“Marines, *atacar!*” Catalina called out, using one of the only Spanish words she knew.

“Hup!” the Marines from Me-hi-co all said in unison, their hands proudly placed on their hips.

“Hup!” they loudly clapped their left shoulders with their right hand, turning their heads to the left.

“Hup!” they did the same with the opposite limb, turning their heads to the right.

Aciano broke formation and made an odd crouching position, akin to a lawn bowler having just rolled, with his hand pointing up the berm. “Noooooww UP!” he cried out.

Acilino, the marine next to him, jumped to it, hunching over on his knees immediately next to the vertical wall. “Hup!” he said, once he was in position. His brother, Adalberto, then faced him and took a staggering leap, landing upon Acilino’s shoulders. He found his balance, crouched a bit, and then he too cried, “Hup!” Lastly, Aciano turned and climbed up his brothers, finding a foothold here and a handhold there until he reached the pinnacle of the human tower. Once safely on top, the trio slowly turned around to face the crew and all three brothers put their hands out, waving jazz hands and crying “Hup! Huzzah!” in unison.

The four remaining crewmates on the beach clapped enthusiastically.

“That was really special!” marveled Dunthrop.

“Just splendid!” said Bangalore in his soft-spoken manner.

After the appropriate amount of applause, Catalina herded the crew up the human ladder, with the bottom marine coming up last with the assistance of a rope. On the surface, they saw what they’d espied from their ship with a looking glass. They were standing on the top of a squat Martello tower which had an enormous flat surface. It was designed really only to harry passing ships and not to defend a land invasion, as the isle held no real value. A single five-story Spanish colonial-style structure occupied most of the real estate, serving a dual-purpose as both a garrison and a warehouse. It was windowless, save for its top floor, which was graced with a wide open veranda and ostentatious white columns. On the ground level, the front was a solid wall of stone, broken only by a massive iron door that had some color, probably from years of exposure to the salty elements. Other than the building, there was nothing else of note, save for three cannons set on wooden carriages, each pointing out to sea at various angles.

Alashniv walked over to the nearest cannon and kneeled down, inspecting the carriage trucks beneath it. He squinted up at the veranda and nodded to himself. He then stood rigidly, and, eyes

downcast and a stoic face, he walked mechanically with even, purposeful strides. He made a bee-line straight toward the garrison, counting out loud in his Slavic mother tongue.

“Trinášť, štrnášť, pätnášť...” he marched with a snappy cadence, until he reached the building’s foundation. He whipped back around and stood for a moment stroking his chin.

“What’s wrong with him?” Bangalore whispered.

They could barely hear him mumbling to himself under his breath. “The cosine of the theta multiplied by the—“

“Shh, nothing. He’s doing that thing that I said we’d be happiest if we never did again.” Dunthrop replied.

“Black magic?” Dunthrop asked, his eyes growing as large as saucers.

“Nooo!” he said, dismissively, before leaning in and adding, “Much worse.... math!”

Dunthrop shuddered and looked away with an uneasy stare.

“My friends, it brings me great pleasure to tell you that it will work!” Alashniv said, in a tone that sounded more of a question than statement.

The crew looked to Catalina for a lead, and she rushed to applaud, with everyone following suit. Say what you would about their outfit, they at least made for polite company. Alashniv looked proud, even though nothing had yet been accomplished.

“And now, I will need some assistance. Aciano, Acilino, Adalberto and Dunthrop, would you four gentlemen please pick up the handspikes there...and there...” he pointed to tools that defending gunners had carelessly left strewn about. “Our hosts so thoughtfully left us these tools so, please, use them to turn the cannon carriage about. It must be in the direction—how do you say it—that ‘o way?” He pointed directly to the open terrace fifty feet above. Suddenly, the full scope of the mission was before him and Bangalore looked as though to faint. He knew without a doubt what his role was to be.

“And now, my friend, we must prepare you.” Alashniv addressed Bangalore with a revered tone. “You must, at all times, keep your legs together. I cannot impress upon you enough, keep your legs together! Ankle, knees, thighs...all together, yes?”

“Ehhhhhh” was all that Bangalore could manage to squeak out. Alashniv placed a swab bucket over Bangalore’s head and made a half-ass effort to affix the handle as a chin-strap.

“You’ll be traveling at 35 meters per second, and it’s only 34 paces from here to the wall, so it’ll be over before you know it!” A solemn Alashniv held one hand behind his rigid back and extended the other before him, soliciting a somber handshake. Bangalore meekly shook it, his eyes never leaving the balcony above.

“Gentlemen, we must now pull the quoin out to raise the angle of the muzzle. On the count of

three. One...two...three.” The cannon carriage made an awful squeaking sound as the center of mass shifted slightly. Alashniv squatted behind the cannon, squeezed one eye shut and squinted with the other down the path of the barrel. “My friends, that will do!”

Bangalore gave neither consent nor resistance, but rather stood meekly as the others tied a lengthy rope about his ankle, and then gingerly picked him up and lowered him, feet-first down the barrel of the cannon. Once he was in, it was narrow enough that he could not tilt his head back to speak to the others, so they did their well-wishing through the thin wood slats of the swab bucket.

“You take care of yourself, you hear me,” said Dunthrop, speaking loudly into the underside of the bucket. “And take a moment to enjoy yourself up there. You’ll be the only one of us who has ever flown!” The swab bucket rocked a little back and forth, and they heard muffled sounds, like someone screaming underwater. It was too incoherent to understand, so instead they decided as a gesture of support to act as though they had, indeed, understood him. “You bet, buddy, you bet.” Dunthrop said, rapping lightly on the bottom of the swab bucket.

“Captain, would you do us the honor?” Alashniv offered the slowmatch to Catalina.

“We should let Dunthrop do it. He is, after all, our master gunner.” She said, relieved to not have Bangalore’s blood on her hands.

“Damn right it should be me. How else am I gonna learn if I don’t get experience?” he said in an irritated tone. He plucked the slowmatch away from Alashniv and with nary a countdown, he lit the fuse. The crew scrambled for cover. Once the fuse dropped from sight within the touchhole, time seemed to suspend—and just when the master gunner feared that Bangalore’s first flight would be a dud, a massive crack split the air, with flame and smoke roaring fiercely outward from the cannon’s maw. The projectile himself was so speedy that he would have been hard to spot were it not for the swab bucket safety helmet and the lengthy tether of rope that trailed behind him.

By all accounts, Alashniv’s calculations appeared to have been spot-on, with Bangalore sailing into the ‘sweet spot’, midway between the floor and the ceiling of the terrace. There was no sign of life yet from on-high. The spool of rope that had followed him in flight had been just barely enough, with only ten feet of slack remaining at the base of the wall. Dunthrop gingerly tugged on the rope, calling up, “Buddy, are you ok? Yoo-hoo! Buddy?”

They could now hear a commotion behind the solid iron door as the few defenders of the garrison were suddenly made aware they had visitors. A thin slat slid back at eye level and two sets of beady eyes squinted out. “What are you doing? Who are you? What do you want?” a voice demanded.

“Right, now that’s an interesting question, isn’t it?” Dunthrop asked. “For starters, I’d like for you and your friends to come out here and have a little sit down. Share a wineskin with us perhaps. But...I know that’s unlikely. I’d like your queen to pick up all her little minions and take them on back home to where you lot all belong. I’d like for your queen to quit fleecing the native peoples of these islands for the God-given resources that they have. I’d like—”

While Dunthrop continued his long tirade, the Marines from Me-hi-co, Catalina, and even Alashniv shimmied up the rope that Bangalore had affixed atop of the terrace. They found their little companion passed out at the top, his task accomplished. They left him there while they quickly descended inside the garrison, finding the three residents of the garrison pressed against the iron gate. They appeared spellbound by the strange character who was rambling outside.

“1466...no, 1465...a bottle of the 1465 Lagavulin, with a nice pipe of dark tobacco. I’d like that as well. I’d like to be home by summer. Aye, that I would, but it’s not like to be with the way my captain TAKES HER TIME. Yes, my captain, she sure is SLOW.” They could barely hear Dunthrop’s voice through the door.

Securing the three guards took all of a single minute. The startled look of surprise on their face actually made Catalina feel sorry for them. The Marines from Me-hi-co *<horns blaring!>* behaved like champions, picking up muskets from the guards’ own armory and confronting them all at once. The guards immediately surrendered, and a good thing they did, as not a single musket was loaded.

Catalina thought of leaving Dunthrop outside a bit longer, to wear him out a bit, but then thought better of it. Someone should go check on Bangalore and it wasn’t going to be her making that ascent again. She leaned toward the slat and said, “All right, old man. That’s enough for now.”

“Just a second,” said Dunthrop. “There’s one more thing I be wanting.”

“Well, get it off your hairy chest so we get some peace and quiet in here. You’re beginning to make me feel for the guards!”

Dunthrop turned to the sea and raised his voice to the heavens. “Mostly, I want my own hammock below deck with a tidy little nightstand and a modest glass bowl filled with potpourri and—“

Catalina rolled her eyes and closed the slat. “He can climb the rope like the rest of us. Boys, the garrison is ours! Now let’s find those uniforms!”

