



Skies of Equestria

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CHAPTER 1

The light of the Magenta Moon shone brightly upon the empty skies beneath it, as it always did, for the six moons of Equestria did not revolve around the planet. Permanently fixated in the sky, visible only to those who visited the continent over which it hovered. During the day, the sun shared the sky with them, but each and every night, including this windy and cloudy evening, the moons were dominant. Praise be to the moons; forever shall they bless Equestria.

Though it was the Magenta Moon one particular pony this night could stand to escape the light of. A mysterious young pony with a white coat, green eyes, a short blonde mane, and a blue, winged dolphin imprinted upon her flank. Everypony in the world could be classified under one of three categories: Pegasi who had wings, Unicorns who had horns, and Earth Ponies who had neither, but made up for it with their physical prowess. But the filly who fled through the sky that night was different -- she had both wings and a horn, traits nopony else had ever considered possible.

The filly did her best to hide her fear with an expression of wavering confidence. A large, steel airship was gaining on her, clearly hunting her down. The young pony could not let up her speed, for if she ran out of energy to fly, she would fall into the clouds below. The sky floor, or the ocean floor as it was now called, was made up of a thick, impenetrable layer of clouds that would crush everything and anything that fell into it with its gravitational pressure. Even pegasi, who can normally walk on top of clouds, would not be immune to this crushing force. This was a world where all civilization was built upon floating continents, and the only method of travel were airships (or wings if you're a pegasus with lots of energy).

Inside the battleship's cockpit stood the obvious captain, a young earth stallion with a white coat, aqua eyes, an expertly groomed blonde mane, and two crossed knives for a cutie mark (the symbol upon his flank, a metaphor of his unique talents). "Ahahaha..." the colt gallantly chuckled as he brushed back a loose hair in his mane, "we've finally found her..."

"Admiral Alfonso," reported an armored pony at the control panel. "The girl is in range of our net."

“Excellent,” Alfonso replied. “Prepare the unicorns to cast a drowsiness spell, but avoid targeting her directly. We don’t want her falling into Deep Sky. We need her alive so we can ‘question’ her.”

At Alfonso’s command, the unicorns on duty began concentrating a sleep spell in the area surrounding the winged unicorn. The spell didn’t put her immediately to sleep, but it did make her drowsy, slowing her down. This allowed her to easily be ensnared by the ship’s extending net, in which the sleep spell took full effect on the unfortunate runaway. The net retracted and pulled her into a chamber inside the ship.

“Your Excellency, the girl is unconscious, but she remains unharmed. She has been taken aboard our ship.”

Alfonso snickered. “The Empress will be very pleased with me. I’m sure to be rewarded... rather handsomely, I might add.” Alfonso’s gloating was, however, quickly interrupted by the sound of a nearby rumbling. Since they were nowhere near land, the sound must have come from aboard the ship. “What? Where did that come from? Status report, now!”

“The... the lower hull has been hit! Someone is attacking us!”

A look of disgusted confusion came over Alfonso’s face, as if the very idea of such a common thing in this world was alien to him. “Attacking us?! Who would DARE attack a vessel of the Imperial Armada?!”

The guard pony began rapidly adjusting the display of his monitor to get a better look at the situation. “There’s a small ship hiding in the clouds off port side!” The monitor was fuzzy, but after a second or two, it cleared up to reveal an image they were not prepared to see. The flag of the ship -- one of a pony’s skull with two cutlass swords crossed behind it. “Th... that flag... Air Pirates!!!”

The ship was indeed that of Air Pirates, warriors of the skies who attacked other ships and looted their cargo. The air pirates of Equestria consisted primarily of pegasi, as they were best suited for boarding other ships. One such pegasus stood atop the crow’s nest of the wooden pirate ship, a cheesy smirk plastered on his muzzle. He spread his wings and, cutlass between his teeth, flew down to the deck of the Imperial battleship, landing right in front of two armored guards, who immediately bared their weapons.

“Air pirate scum!” one guard shouted. “Don’t you know that we’re Valuan Imperial Soldiers?!”

“Of course I know,” the pegasus retorted. “That’s why we attacked your ship. You guys have the BEST stuff!”

Almost as if to accentuate his grand entrance, the searchlights on the deck turned on, fixated on the blue pegasus who was now mocking them. The pegasus had a navy blue coat, brown eyes, and a neck-long brown mane. He wore a glass eyepatch over his right eye, and had a curved scar under his left. He wore a red scarf, and his cutie mark was a cutlass with a winged pony skull imprinted over its hilt.

The blue pegasus readied his weapon. "I'm Vyse of the Blue Rogues! And in a few minutes, I will be relieving you of all your valuables!"

"Hehe... Attacking us all by yourself?" the guards observed. "You're either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid. We'll be tossing you overboard."

"Wait for me!!" came a female voice from above. A yellow earth pony with red pigtails, brown eyes, and a cutie mark of a cat biting a gold coin (called a bit) leaped down from the pirate ship and onto the deck next to Vyse. She had clenched between her teeth a giant green boomerang, which she immediately bared at the surrounding guards with a smile. "Vyse! You left without me. I'm not going to let you have all the fun!" It was then she realized how rude she was being to her new armored acquaintances. "Oh, hi, I'm Aika! I'm a Blue Rogue like Vyse... and we're robbing you!"

"You dare mock the Valuan Empire with your insolence?!" the guard screamed from frustration. "Kill them! And toss their corpses over the side!"

A couple of measly guards weren't ever going to be a match for Vyse and Aika. They had been a team since they were foals. While Vyse was a close-up physical fighter, Aika was a ranged fighter. Vyse took out the tougher foes, and Aika took out those reserved in the backlines, be they medics or unicorns (spellcasters). Both guards were defeated within the minute, but they did not die. Vyse and Aika weren't without mercy, and they never murdered unless it was absolutely necessary.

Shortly after the skirmish, reinforcements came up from the lower decks and surrounded the two air pirates. Vyse, however, was neither worried nor impressed. "There's no point in resisting," Vyse explained. "Throw down your weapons and hand over your ship."

"Imbeciles!" one guard replied, almost as if required to. "What do the two of you think you can do against the five of us? Take `em down." The guard readied his weapon and was prepared to strike, but was immediately knocked over when a strong force struck his armor from afar. Specifically, a gunshot.

"I think you miscounted," said the gun's firer. "I only see four of you."

"Dad!" Vyse shouted, happy to see his father joining the raid. Vyse's father Dyne looked a lot like his son. A pegasus with a navy blue coat,

brown eyes, and a considerably shorter brown mane, though he was also somewhat rugged around the jaw. His cutie mark matched his pirate ship's flag, as he likely based the flag on his cutie mark a long time ago. The gun he'd fired lay between his teeth, likely triggered by his tongue.

"We'll take care of these guys," Dyne explained. "Make your way to the bridge and shut down the engines." Faced with a full-grown opponent, the remaining guards turned their attention to the new threat. But before fighting them, Dyne had one more thing to say to his son. "And, when we're out here, remember, it's 'Captain'... not 'Dad'. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah... Aye aye, 'Captain'. Heh..." Vyse knew that Dyne was very strict about the rules he'd laid in place. Vyse was not allowed to call him Dad for fear of their relationship being used as leverage should either of them be taken hostage by an enemy. Vyse thought this idea was silly, for he was confident that neither of them could ever be caught. "Aika, shall we go introduce ourselves to the captain of this ship?"

"I'm ready when you are!" Aika eagerly replied.

"Alright, let's go find the bridge!" And with that, Vyse and Aika were given ample opportunity to enter the ship through a nearby hatch.

The inside of the ship was completely metal, just like the outside. It should have been blazing hot as they were right in the engine room, but the luxury of Valua's Imperial airships have powerful cooling components. The alarms and sirens were all going off to warn the ship's crew of the pirate raid, but Vyse managed to find the controls for the alarms and turned them off, if only to reduce the noise. As he and Aika explored the engine room, a gallant voice came from above.

"Well... well... Air Pirates have decided to... infest my ship." Vyse looked up to see a white stallion looking at him from a catwalk. Behind him stood an armored guard pony, with the unconscious winged unicorn draped over his back like a saddlebag. "I am Alfonso," the white stallion continued, smiling, "cherished son of Valua's most distinguished family, and an Admiral of the Imperial Armada. Normally, lowlifes such as yourselves would never have the opportunity to bask in such greatness. Consider yourselves fortunate."

"Yeah... right..." Vyse replied, completely uninterested in what was being said to him. He was more concerned with the apparent prisoner behind Alfonso. "Who's the filly? I never thought somepony of your... stature would resort to foalnapping."

"Hah! You're very observant for a Rogue. However, I cannot waste my time dealing with you. I simply must get going. If you want my ship that

badly... take it. I'll get another." Alfonso turned to exit through a door behind him. "I am very busy. I do not have time to deal with you personally. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Alfonso exited through the door near the catwalk. Vyse and Aika immediately began searching for the ramp leading up to the catwalk so that they might tail Alfonso. He was obviously planning on abandoning the ship, but even if they couldn't capture him, they'd hoped to at least rescue his hostage.

Within the hull of the ship, a large door meant for lifeboats opened up, revealing the morning sky and the sun that had risen during the air pirates' raid. The winged unicorn lay unconscious in the corner as Alfonso and his personal Vice Captain prepared the lifeboat.

"Your Excellency, the sun is up and visibility is good," reported the armored Vice Captain.

"Good work," Alfonso sarcastically praised. "I have finished my preparations as well..... preparations to dispose of a traitor."

"W... what?" asked the confused pony. He turned around and immediately jerked backwards, his front hooves in the air as if they would shield him from Alfonso's rapier, which now pointed at the Vice Captain's throat. "P... please! Your Excellency!!! What are you doing?!"

"I cannot tell the Empress that I lost my ship to the Air Pirates in a fair fight. I am going to need a scapegoat, and you'll do quite nicely. To keep my glorious reputation from being tarnished, you must be sacrificed..."

The Vice Captain was trembling with fear. He had begun backing away from Alfonso. "N... No! You can't do this!" The stallion's fear of Alfonso's grin terrified him more than anything else at that moment, so much so that he did not realize how close he was to the edge of the hull's opening. One more step back caused him to slip, sending him screaming to his undeserved death at the unforgiving hands of Deep Sky.

The white earth pony sheathed his rapier elegantly, still smiling. The proudest thing he'd achieved, he thought, was that he did not have to bloody his beautiful coat. "Even in death, he'll serve me well. I can't wait to tell the Empress." Alfonso began practicing the explanation he'd give upon his return. "'But Empress, my own Vice Captain betrayed us and allowed the Air Pirates on board. I could do naught but dispose of the traitor myself'." Alfonso began humming to the tune of his imminent success.

"So this is how Valua treats its people..." came a vaguely familiar voice from behind.

“What?!” shouted Alfonso as he spun around to meet his guests. The two air pirates from before were now standing between him and the winged unicorn.

“Now that we’ve taken control of your ship,” Vyse began, “we’ll be taking the girl as well. There’s just one more thing I need to do.” Vyse readied his weapon and, with an expression of rage, bared it fiercely at Alfonso. “After seeing you kill an unarmed man in cold blood, I can’t allow you to walk away from this. Draw your blade, Alfonso!”

“Hah... An uncivilized Rogue such as yourself wants to challenge ME? You aren’t worth my time,” Alfonso boasted as he climbed into the lifeboat and powered up its engine. “Well, Vyse of the Blue Rogues... You will rue this day... The day you stood against the Valuan Empire. We shall meet again.”

And with that, Alfonso’s lifeboat lifted off into the sky, swiftly carrying him to safety. Though he knew it was futile, Vyse attempted to chase him anyway, furious that a traitorous scumbag such as he had so easily escaped. He stopped chasing after running only a few meters, having been stopped by the edge of the battleship. Vyse stomped his hoof into the floor out of frustration.

“You coward!” Aika shouted toward Alfonso as she caught up with Vyse. “What kind of commander sacrifices his own men and his ship to run from a fight?!” Vyse and Aika quickly calmed down, realizing there was nothing they could do about Alfonso. “Well, even though he was a coward, he was a coward with gold...”

The talk of their successful raid immediately cheered the both of them up. “True...” Vyse agreed. “I suppose the ship and everything on it officially belongs to us now.”

“We haven’t had a hull this big in quite some time! The ponies back home are going to be impressed!”

Vyse and Aika returned to the side of the winged unicorn they had rescued. “And look at this girl,” Aika examined. “I’ve never seen a pony with wings AND a horn before.”

“You’re right,” Vyse agreed. “She certainly doesn’t seem like she’s from around here. I wonder why Valua was trying to capture this girl in the first place.”

“Hmm... I wonder where she’s from.”

Everything was white and fuzzy. The winged unicorn looked at her surroundings, a feeling of weightlessness abound. She was in a familiar room, with white walls and a teddy bear on the bed. *This place*, she thought to herself. *Am I... Am I home?*

Fina... a voice called out to her mind. With a flash of light, she was now standing in a similar room with bright green lights and blue panels all around her. The voice continued. *Fina... You... replace... Rami... the... moon...* The voice had much interference. Fina felt so tired as she tried to comprehend what was being said. *However, watch... yourself... do not... allow... trust...*

"How is she, Vyse?" an unfamiliar voice said. Fina had just woken up from her dream, but had yet to open her eyes.

"Hmm... Her breathing's more regular now," another unfamiliar voice said. "I think she'll be alright."

Fina slowly, almost fearfully, opened her eyes to the sight of two ponies she'd never met before, a blue pegasus and a yellow earth pony. "Look!" Aika shouted. "She's coming to..."

Fina immediately sat up from the bed in which she now laid. She was confused and disoriented, and looked around at the tiny wooden bedroom she was confined to. Because the room was made of wood and not steel, she soon deduced that she was not on the ship that was chasing her before she fell unconscious, and that made her feel somewhat less nervous.

"Wh... where am I?" Fina timidly asked.

"You're aboard our ship, the Albatross," Vyse explained with a smile. "I'm Vyse. Don't worry, there aren't any Valuan troops around, so you'll be safe here."

"Y... yes. Um... thank you very much." Fina still wasn't quite sure what was going on. She assumed that by Valuan troops, he'd meant the ponies who'd tried to capture her before.

Aika laughed. "You don't need to thank us! The Blue Rogues are always there to help people! My name is Aika. Nice to meet you. Hey, could you tell us your name?"

Aika was a little too energetic for Fina, who found it difficult to respond. "Um... my name... my name is Fina."

"Fina, huh?" Vyse pondered. "That's a great name... It's so... so feminine."

"R... really? You think so?" Fina didn't understand the observation, or know how to respond.

“Geez, you try to compliment somepony... and nothing... no reaction whatsoever.”

Aika couldn't help but laugh at Vyse's poor attempt at a first impression. “Ahahaha! Vyse, that wasn't much of a compliment. Looks like you have a lot to learn about mares.”

Fina chuckled at the two ponies' friendly dispute. She felt as though she could trust the two, and felt less afraid. So she decided to ask them something. “Umm... Excuse me, but I have a question. What exactly is a... Blue Rogue?”

Vyse and Aika had no immediate response. They just looked at each other and blinked. The very idea that there was somepony in the world who didn't know who they were was something that never once crossed their minds.

“What?” Aika asked. “You were out flying all by yourself, and you don't even know what Air Pirates are?”

“Oh... I...” Fina lowered her head. She truly felt like an outsider; like somepony who'd been living under a rock her whole life. “I'm sorry... It's my first time traveling.”

Vyse understood that Fina was obviously very sheltered, so he proceeded to explain. “Basically, Air Pirates are sailors that attack other ships and steal their cargo.”

Fina was shocked by what she'd heard. Vyse and Aika seemed so nice, but the premise of their occupations troubled her greatly. “... A... Attack...?!”

Aika laughed at Vyse's poor word choice yet again. “Ahaha... You don't have to worry about us. We're ‘Blue Rogues’. See, Air Pirates are divided into two factions: the Blue Rogues and the Black Pirates. The Black Pirates will attack anything in the sky... including merchant vessels and unarmed ships. However, we Blue Rogues only take cargo from armed ships, especially the Imperial Armada.”

Vyse beat his hoof against his chest. “We rob from the rich and keep the gold! But we use the gold to save ponies that need our help. That's why we helped you. Don't worry, we're not trying to foalnap you or anything. Just relax and enjoy the trip.”

“Um... sure,” Fina now had a better understanding of her current situation. Even though her captors were involved in crime, she felt she could trust them, though she was still worried.

The mood was interrupted by a muffled voice from the corner of the room. A long golden pipe was suspended from the ceiling, and was used for quick and easy communications purposes. “Vyse, Aika...” came Dyne's

voice from the pipe. "How long are you going to sit there chitchatting? Come to the bridge now."

"Oh no!" Aika shouted as she threw her front hooves into her head. "I completely lost track of time!"

"Oh well..." Vyse sighed. "I guess that means we have to go." Vyse and Aika turned to leave the room. "Alright Fina, we'll see you later. Try and get some rest, okay?"

Vyse and Aika left the room. Finally alone, Fina leaned back into bed and let out a deep sigh. All she could do now was wait for something to happen. She felt completely helpless.

"You're late, Vyse," Dyne scolded as Vyse arrived on the bridge. "I told you that you need to be on time for your shift. You know the routine. Swab the decks... and they better be clean."

"But... but Dad!!" Vyse whined, as if the sheer annoyance of it could get him to change his father's choice of punishment. "I was only a little late!!"

"On a ship, being a little late can cost lives. And one more thing... when we're on board, it's not 'Dad', it's 'Captain'. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah... I got it."

"I guess I can let you off with a warning this time. We're heading home to Pirate Isle. Go tell Briggs to swab the decks instead. I'm putting you in charge of steering us home."

Vyse's eyes widened. There was nothing he loved more than piloting a ship. He immediately rushed over to Briggs, the Vice Captain, who was currently steering the ship. Vyse relayed the order to Briggs, and took the wheel in his place. "Full speed ahead to Pirate Isle!"

The Albatross flew through the sky, or rather, the Ocean as it was now called. The land of the Magenta Moon was large and spacious, with very few landmarks. Most of the islands were tiny, and the large ones were uninhabited. The land of the Magenta Moon, more casually referred to as Middle Ocean, was surrounded almost entirely by Sky Rifts, walls of clouds that stretched from Deep Sky to higher than anypony could even fly, and they were impassable to almost all ships. Normally, pegasi could control the regulation of clouds. But these cloud walls were constantly erupting upward from Deep Sky, so destroying a sky rift has been deemed impossible. Instead, Vyse simply steered clear of them as he headed for home.

A couple of hours passed. Because of how sparse actual land was in Equestria in this era, even the closest settlements were hundreds of miles apart. Dyne knew that hours at the helm of a ship could be extremely wearing on the driver, so he ordered Briggs to take over and gave Vyse a break. Vyse looked out the window and saw that Fina had gotten out of bed, and was looking over the railing of the ship, enjoying the empty scenery.

Vyse went outside to join her, and almost startled her when he arrived. "Hey Fina," he greeted. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling much better," she answered. "Thank you for your concern."

"Heh... no problem. I'm just glad to see that you're well. Looks like we'll be reaching the island soon."

"... Island?"

Vyse pointed his hoof in the direction the Albatross was headed. "You can see it right over there. That's our base... Pirate Isle."

"Pirate Isle..." Fina looked over the side. Pirate Isle was an extremely small-looking island, having no more than five or six buildings on its surface, depending on whether or not you included the windmill. Several homely looking townsfolk looked up to the sky to see their husbands and fathers returning from the raid. Three young foals ran around in circles, waving to the Albatross. The innocence Fina sensed in them brought a warm smile to her face, and all her fears were washed away.

The Albatross circled the island, and as it did, a large door disguised as the dirt side of the island opened up like a drawbridge. When shut, nopony would ever suspect it was a door. This was where the Albatross docked, so the Valuan Empire would have a harder time finding their hideout.

The inside of the island belied its outer appearance. It looked as though it could be its own village, and featured taverns, cabins, and even shops. The corners were crammed with crates, barrels, cannons, rope, and various other supplies. Dyne's crew was clearly a very organized lot.

The crew had just finished unloading the loot they'd stolen from Alfonso's ship, and hoarded it all into a pile for all to admire. "Weapons, armor, gold..." said the crew's gunner. "Now THIS is a great catch! One of our best yet!"

A female member of the crew raised her hoof into the air. "Tonight, we should celebrate!"

"Yeah!!!" the rest of the crew agreed in unison.

Aika turned to Fina with a proud look on her face. "Well Fina, this is what we do! What do you think?"

"Well..." Fina began. She still didn't totally agree with what they did, but she also did not want to offend them. "It certainly looks challenging."

"Hahaha... challenging, huh... Well, now that you mention it, it isn't easy. But it IS fun!"

"This is the underground port inside of Pirate Isle," Vyse began to explain, as though he were a tour guide. "From the outside, this island looks like a quiet, peaceful village. But the inside of the island is where our headquarters are located."

"There are armories, shops, and even a tavern inside here. Come on, we'll give you a tour."

"Vyse!" Dyne shouted from high above, where his office was located. "Come to my office immediately... and bring that filly with you." He turned around and confined himself back into his office.

"Vyse..." Aika began. "I wonder what that was all about."

"... I'm not sure," Vyse worried, "but we'd better hurry. You know how my dad gets when we're late."

"Well, I'm sure he can wait a LITTLE. I wanna show Fina around! It's on the way up..."

"Do you mind, Fina?"

"Oh, no," she answered. "I don't mind. I'm actually kind of interested."

Vyse, Aika, and Fina began their ascent up the ramps that connected the HQ's various facilities. One of their stops was at the tavern, where three of the crew members, one of which was the female, were sharing a drink. It was a small room, made of dirt of course, though much of it was covered by wooden planks. In the back was a stolen suit of armor worn by Valuan guard ponies, and was defaced from head to hoof.

"Cheers!" the three ponies shouted in unison, before they each guzzled their drinks.

"Haha..." the bald colt laughed. "Berry Punch sure does hit the spot. Captain Dyne really does know how to pick his berries! This stuff is good!"

"Heh..." the eyepatch-wearing colt also laughed. "It's been a while since we've taken over an Armada Flagship. We deserve to take a little break now and then!"

"Hmm?" the female pony pondered while taking another swig. "Should you be sitting here drinking punch with the rest of us when you've got a beautiful, hard-working mare waiting for you at home?"

“Hey!” the bald colt snapped. “There’s nothing wrong with relaxing with friends after a hard day’s work!”

“My, oh my...” Aika nonchalantly observed. “This place sure is full... Fina, this is our tavern... They serve all kinds of dinks here: nectars, juices, punch...”

“Um...” Fina began as she usually does. “Excuse me, but what exactly is ‘punch’?”

Vyse’s jaw dropped, and he quickly turned to face Fina. “WHAT?! Fina... you really don’t know what punch is??”

Fina blushed, but also smiled. She had already gotten used to the fact that there were many, many common things she’d never heard of. “Well... um... I don’t know exactly, but it appears to be a really good tasting drink of some kind. Everypony seems to be drinking it so fervently... it must be delicious.”

The female crew member looked at the winged unicorn. “You want to share a bottle of Mare Punch with us? It’s made from Poison Joke berries and gemstones. It’s just a juice, but it tastes great!”

Aika was about to suggest accepting the offer, but she immediately began shaking her head when she remembered Cap’n Dyne.

“Nononononono! We don’t have time to just sit around right now! We have to go talk to the Cap’n!”

“Why?” Fina asked, somewhat disappointed. “Are we not supposed to be here?”

Aika shrugged. “Well, the Cap’n is always getting on our case for being late and stuff... I really don’t want to get into any more trouble today...”

“Heh... Yeah,” Vyse agreed with a cheesy grin. “My dad can get pretty worked up when he’s mad. We wouldn’t want him to have a heart attack now, would we?”

Aika chuckled at Vyse’s comment. “You’re so mean to your dad, you know that Vyse? C’mon... We should probably get going. Your Dad’s waiting for us.”

Vyse, Aika, and Fina arrived at the top of HQ, and entered Dyne’s office, which was much nicer and cleaner than the other rooms. The dirt walls were completely obscured, and bookshelves, giant paintings, and expensive looking models lined the walls. In the back of the room was a long table used for meetings, and Dyne was seated at the end of it, two of his crew members also standing nearby.

“Vyse and Aika reporting for duty,” Vyse stated as he entered the room. “And we’ve brought Fina like you requested.”

“Hmph...” snorted Dyne. “You’re a little late. I’ll let it slide this time... Come on over.” The three of them approached Dyne. “Young filly, I am Dyne, the Captain of the Blue Rogues. There are a few questions that I want to ask you. Will you answer them for me?”

Fina was hesitant. She had no reason not to comply, yet she knew he’d ask her questions that could not be answered. Nevertheless, she agreed.

“I’ve been sailing for a very long time, but I’ve never come across a pony bearing both wings and a horn. What country are you from, and why were you traveling alone out there?”

Vyse and Aika both felt that Dyne was being far too direct with Fina. He didn’t know how timid she was, nor how little she actually knew about many things. However, Vyse understood Dyne’s technical and organized ways and remained silent, letting his father do his job. Aika, however, was not so understanding.

“Cap’n Dyne,” Aika began, trying to keep herself composed. “You worry too much. Fina is just a normal pony.”

Dyne glared at her. “Silence, Aika. I am the captain here. It is my duty to protect the safety of my family and my crew. If this girl is a danger of any sort to you or any of my colts, I cannot let her live.”

“Huh?! But... but...” Aika didn’t know what to say. She’d never heard the Captain say such things.

“Fina...” Dyne resumed. “It is your turn to speak.”

Fina averted her eyes and remained silent. After a few seconds... “... I... I cannot say.”

“Why is that? Is it because we are Air Pirates? Do you not trust us?”

“No, that has nothing to do with it. I thank you with all my heart for saving my life. But I cannot tell any living soul about the purpose of my quest. Even if it means sacrificing my life. I have no intention of endangering any of your lives. If you believe anything that I say, please believe this.”

The room became silent. Dyne thought the situation over, while everypony else anxiously awaited his response. At last, he smiled, and eased his stern posture. “... Alright then. Heh... Looks like I lost this one. I understand your dilemma. And I can see in your eyes that you are true to your word. Although we’re Air Pirates, we also have a strong sense of honor. You do not need to divulge the details of your quest. Understand that you now have my trust... Be careful that you do not lose it.”

“Captain Dyne...” Fina replied, as she bowed to him. “Thank you kindly. I will not disappoint you.”

“Vyse, Aika... Bring the filly... Fina topside and give her a tour of the village.”

Aika leaped into the air, cheering. “YAAAY!! That’s more like it!”

“Way to go, Dad!” Vyse thanked. “You’re the best!”

“... It’s not ‘Dad’. It’s Captain!” Dyne scolded. “I swear... how many times do I have to remind you? You’re excused. Don’t be late for dinner.”

The door leading up to the village, like the door in which the Albatross docked, was also disguised as a piece of the island. It opened via a night-invisible mechanism and closed on its own shortly after. It is through this door that Vyse, Aika, and Fina exit HQ and are reunited with daylight.

“Vyse, go on ahead,” Aika requested. “I have to stop by my house for a second.”

“Why?” Vyse asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I just want to freshen up. Don’t worry, I’ll catch up with you guys in a few minutes! See you at your house!” And with that, Aika galloped off.

With Aika absent, Vyse was left to give Fina the tour on his own. Apart from the residences, there was a garden, a windmill, and a training dojo. Vyse lived with his parents in the house on the highest point. Aika’s parents had died a very long time ago, so she lived in her house by herself. But she wasn’t lonely; she had Vyse and the rest of the crew, after all.

When Vyse got around to Aika’s house as part of Fina’s tour, he couldn’t help but notice a brightly-colored cloth hanging on one of the outside walls. Curious, he trotted over to it and lifted it up, revealing a small hole that looked into Aika’s bedroom.

Aika was in the middle of brushing her mane. Her pigtails were down, revealing a very long and somewhat luxurious orange mane, something Vyse would never expect to see on a tomcolt like Aika. Unfortunately for him, she noticed Vyse spying on her and immediately threw a nearby pillow at the peephole.

“Ow! My eye!” Vyse yelped.

“Vyse!” Aika whined, blushing angrily. “What are you doing?! Peeking into my room...?! You should be ashamed of yourself! I can’t believe that you would spy on me like that! Get out of here!”

“But... but... I was just looking under this handkerchief! I didn’t know! You probably just put it there to draw people’s attention...”

Fina couldn't help but giggle at Vyse's misfortune. He was glad to see her opening up more, at least. The last stop of their tour was Vyse's very own house, where his mother was patiently waiting for him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Welcome back, Vyse." She turned to Fina. "So, you're Fina. It's very nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine," Fina politely thanked. "I... I hope I am not intruding."

"Oh, don't be silly! It's been a long time since we've had guests. Well, I have to finish cooking dinner. I'll call you when it's ready."

"Hey guys!" Aika exclaimed as she came through the door. "Sorry to have kept you waiting! I was just fixing my hair. Hey... the sunset outside is beautiful. Why don't we go outside and check it out?"

"Well," Vyse considered, "we still have some time before dinner... why not?"

"Okay, great! Come on! We can get a great view from up top on Lookout Island."

Lookout Island was hardly an island. More like a flat boulder. It hovered a couple dozen meters above Pirate Isle, and was connected to it by a long ladder, which had to be climbed in order to reach it. On the small island was an even smaller log used as a bench, preferably to watch the sunset from. Vyse and Aika sat on the log; Fina preferred to stand.

The sun was indeed setting upon the horizon. It's usual mix of orange and purple filled the sky as it seemed to light the cloudy horizon on fire.

"It's so beautiful..." Fina admired, as if she had never seen a sunset before.

"I love it up here," Vyse mused. "It's so peaceful. I come up here to relax and watch the sunsets. When I'm up here, I often wonder what lies beyond the sky... Beyond the sunset..."

"Beyond... the sky...?"

"Some say there're monsters. Others say there's a maelstrom that either blows ships away, or pulls them in... and they're never seen again. And there are others that just say it's... impossible..." The three of them remained silent, each contemplating the idea of something being beyond what could visibly be seen. "I want to know what's out there... Besides, I don't like giving up on anything without giving it my best shot. Someday, I will be the captain of my own ship, I'll go beyond the sunset, and I'll see what's out there."

"Wow..." Aika said. "I bet if you could go beyond the sunset, the sky would look even more beautiful."

“Hey, you remember those old legends? About the goddess pony who supposedly controlled the sun?”

Aika held a hoof to her chin and thought for a moment. “You mean Princess Celestia? She’s just an old mare’s tale. As if the sun actually needs help rising and setting each day!”

Fina suddenly became more interested in the conversation. She felt as though she’d heard of the legends they spoke of, but she couldn’t quite place where.

“Yeah yeah, I know...” Vyse answered. “Those stories didn’t make much sense anyway. Like the other goddess pony, Luna, who supposedly controlled THE moon? We all know that there are SIX moons, and none of them need controlled because they never move.”

“Right!” Aika agreed. “So the stories are inconsistent!”

Fina remained silent. Celestia? Luna? She had heard those names before. Why was it so difficult for her to remember?

Her thoughts were interrupted, however, by a sudden gust of wind that blew across the three of them. Vyse and Aika immediately sprung to their feet and looked to the sky in awe. Small, meteorite-like objects were falling from the sky, specifically from the Magenta Moon.

“... Those are gemstones!” Vyse exclaimed.

“... gemstones?” Fina timidly asked, frightened and confused by this phenomenon.

Far in the distance, one of the falling gemstones crash landed on a small island. Using his glass eyepatch as a magnification lens, Vyse zoomed in on the crash site, and could clearly see where it had landed, several miles away.

“... It landed on that island over there,” Vyse observed. “I think that’s Shrine Island.”

Aika got excited. “It’s been a long time since we’ve seen a gemstone fall!”

“I don’t understand,” Fina explained. “That was a gemstone?”

“That’s right. Fina, you’ve heard of gemstones, right? They’re pieces of rock that fall from the Moons. They usually crash land on the islands. They’re a really powerful energy source, too. We use them for all sorts of things. They power our airships and we can also forge weapons out of them.”

“Oh, yes. I know of gemstones. But, it’s my first time seeing a gemstone actually fall from the sky.”

“Vyse, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Yeah,” Vyse agreed. “We should try to recover the gemstone. Let’s go first thing tomorrow.”

“Vyse! Aika! Fina!” shouted a voice from far below them. It was Vyse’s mother, come to collect the three of them. “Dinner is ready! Come on down!”

“Let’s go, Fina. You’re going to eat with us, right?”

“We’re so lucky!!” Aika exclaimed. “I love your mom’s cooking... Fina, let’s go eat while it’s still hot!”

“Yes,” Fina said. “Thank you for your gracious offer.”

Vyse and Aika quickly began climbing down the ladder, anxious to dig their teeth into the dinner that had been prepared for them. Fina was not quite so excited. She looked up at the Magenta Moon one more time, with deep contemplation. She knew she didn’t understand much of the world, but she also felt as if, somehow, that wasn’t her fault. And with her lack of knowledge severely hampering her ability to think straight, she continually found herself chanting one familiar name to herself, over and over..... Celestia.

The sun rose over the horizon and shone through Vyse’s window. He loved the location of his room, for he could always be woken up early by the morning sunlight. He rolled out of bed and stretched, immediately followed by Aika’s chanting outside.

“Vyse!” Aika shouted. “Vy~se!” Vyse peeked out his window to see Aika looking at him from below. “Good morning! We’re going to Shrine Island today, right?”

“Yeah...” Vyse replied, still somewhat sleepy. “I’ll be right down. Give me a second.” Vyse climbed down the ladder that led to his room, and exited through the front door. Fina, who had slept downstairs, followed him outside through curiosity.

“Good morning, Fina!” Aika greeted. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Thank you.”

Vyse turned to her. “Fina, we’ll be heading over to Shrine Island to get that gemstone in a few minutes. You can stay here and relax at my place if you want.”

“That will be fine. Thank you.”

“Alright, Vyse!” Aika shouted. “Let’s get going. The boat is on the upper dock, and it’s ready to go!”

Aika and Vyse waved goodbye to Fina, who simply bowed to them instead. There was a small lifeboat they could use docked on one of the upper piers (used for guests). Even though Vyse could easily fly to Shrine Island, Aika couldn't. Plus, they'd need a boat to carry back the loot they find.

Vyse and Aika set sail to the northeast, where Shrine Island floated in solitude. It was such a small and abandoned island. The shrine atop was in the shape of a hexagonal pillar, and was covered from floor to roof in moss and vines from centuries of abandonment. It was said to be a relic of the Old World, the era that existed prior to one millennium ago.

The two Air Pirates docked their boat at the side of the island, and examined their surroundings. Aika pointed her hoof at the shrine. "Vyse! Over there! Look at the size of that hole!" A very large hole at the base of the shrine now caused the moat that surrounded it to flood into the building.

"The gemstone must've caused that," Vyse deduced. "It must be huge... And look! Water is flowing into the shrine! In the Old World, this island was a sacred place. These ruins used to be some sort of temple. Nobody's been here for generations."

"Yeah, I've heard stories about this place, too. I've heard that there are monsters crawling around inside. But gemstones that big are rare! We've got to go in and get it! You know how I can't pass up a treasure hunt. Besides, how bad can it possibly be?"

"You're right. We're going treasure-hunting!"

Vyse and Aika entered the ruins. Even though the inside of the shrine was all just one room, it was made up of layers connected by ramps, similar to their HQ. Every so often down the ramp, there were doors that to outside balconies on the bottom of the island, which in turn, were connected to other doors. It was a one-room maze.

"This is just great... The place is flooded." Vyse complained. He then noticed something very shiny at the very bottom of the room, beneath the pool of water. "... Aika! Look! The gemstone is at the bottom!"

"Wow! It's so bright!" Aika beamed. "That gemstone must be huge! So, Vyse... How do you plan on getting it out of there? The water is getting pretty deep..."

Vyse thought about it for a moment. He was perfectly capable of swimming, but an incident from their foalhood had caused Aika to become terrified of water. And he knew he couldn't carry that heavy thing up on his own, so he had to come up with an alternative.

"Let's try and drain the water from this place," Vyse suggested. "That way we can just carry the gemstone out of here."

“Well, considering that I can’t swim, I like that plan...”

“But there’s still one problem... how are we supposed to drain all of this water, anyway?”

“Hey, Vyse. Look over there!” Aika pointed her hoof at one of the underwater doors. “There’s a door over there. Maybe if we can find a way to open it, we can drain the water out of this place.”

“Hmm... you might be right. We’ll use the door as a drain.”

“Alright! Let’s go! Oh, but... wait. How are supposed to get to the door?”

“Um. Duh,” Vyse said as he flared his wings.

“Oh, yeah!”

Vyse stepped outside and used his wings to fly to the bottom of the island, where a series of suspended walkways were found. These walkways were used to travel between doors not accessible to each other inside. This was, obviously, a convenience made only for ponies who couldn’t fly, like Vyse. Vyse quickly found the bottom-most door and opened it, quickly darting out of the way as the flood of water burst from within. It took a couple minutes, but eventually the water subsided. Vyse entered through the door he’d just opened, and he could see Aika happily galloping down the ramps in the room, leaping down from the ones that lead nowhere.

“We made it!” Aika exclaimed. “That wasn’t too bad!”

“Yeah. But look at the size of that jewel! It’ll be an adventure and a half just to get that thing back outside!”

“It’s beautiful... Treasure hunting is definitely my favorite part of being an Air Pirate! Wait til everypony back home sees what we found!”

“Yeah, it was definitely worth going through all that trouble. We won’t have to worry about fuel for a while!”

As a minor form of celebration, Vyse and Aika performed their secret hoofshake. They gave each other brohooves with opposite hooves before spinning to stand back-to-back, shouting “Yeah!” in unison. This was how the two of them celebrated victories, usually while nopony else was around, though they wouldn’t really care if anypony saw. The two of them got it together and began heaving the jewel out of the shrine.

“Ahhh...” sighed Pirate Isle’s lookout pony as he stood atop Lookout Isle. “It looks like it’s going to be another nice day today. Not too windy...”

The bell that signified the beginning of each crew member's shifts rang. "Well, there's the bell... Time to get to work... I gotta loosen up a little."

The lookout pony began performing several stretches and exercises. He'd need to be nice and loose if he was going to stand there all day, but keeping a lookout was his special talent, so it came natural for him. While doing a backwards stretch, he noticed something in the distance. Was it Vyse and Aika returning from their treasure hunt?

No. It was not. It was a fleet. A very large fleet of black, steel ships, heading straight in their direction. "Oh... oh no!" shouted the lookout pony. "Ships!!! Ships approaching! From the North-Northwest... distance: 1.5 leagues! It's the Imperial Armada!!! They've got a full battle squadron! They're in attack formation!!!"

Dyne heard the lookout pony's announcement, and immediately sprung to action. Little foals ran around the island in a panic, unsure what to do, fearing for their lives. And then, the ships began to fire upon them.

"Everyone get underground!" Dyne commanded as he organized everyone. "Mares and foals first! Hurry! Damn... I never thought they'd find us..." It was then that Dyne noticed exactly who was commanding the attack. He'd recognize that ship's flag anywhere. It was the Serpent, the Flagship of the Armada's leader: Lord Galcian.

Standing at the window of his ship, Lord Galcian overlooked the attack on Pirate Isle. Galcian was a large, middle-aged earth stallion with a dark gray coat, and a mane that had begun to gray itself, but still had brown color in his short facial hair. His entire body from the neck down was cloaked in a black cape, held together with gold trim.

Just behind him was his Vice Captain, Ramirez. Ramirez had a blue coat, and shoulder-length white hair, parted down the center where his unicorn horn was. He had green eyes, and his entire body was also covered like Galcian's, only with tight, black leather. Around his neck, he wore a short black cape, and a red scarf over that.

"Lord Galcian," Ramirez reported. "We've blasted the island with cannon fire and our troops have begun the invasion."

"Good..." Galcian replied. "They seem very organized for a small village that is under siege. I don't know who their leader is, but he seems quite capable. Perhaps Alfonso was in over his head."

"... Perhaps."

"No matter, it appears the battle is over. Retrieve the Alicorn and bring her to me. Capture the Air Pirates. We'll need to interrogate them when we return to Valua. And be sure to destroy their ship as well..."

“And if they resist, Lord Galcian? What does your Excellency wish me to do if the situation arises?”

“I don’t think they’re foolish enough to resist. However, if something should happen...” The somber tone of Galcian’s voice became more strict. “Burn the village and kill them all. Let the bodies rot in the sun and leave one of our flags to set an example for others who may defy us.”

Vyse and Aika had finally managed to load the enormous gemstone onto their boat. After stretching their legs and catching their breath, they climbed in and set sail for home. The sight that awaited them however, was not as pleasant as they’d hoped. Far from it. The charred remains of their home billowed smoke into the sky. The garden where their food was grown was trampled upon, and there was nopony in sight.

Vyse and Aika began to fear the worst, but Vyse still retained confidence in his father. He would never allow such a thing to happen so easily, and the first thing they did upon returning was enter the underground HQ, which to his immense relief, remained mostly untouched. That is, except for the unsettling lack of the Albatross. All of the mares and foals from the village were gathered down here, but there wasn’t a single stallion in sight. The female member of Dyne’s crew was also missing. What could’ve happened?

The villagers directed Vyse to Dyne’s office, where his mother was waiting, alone. “Vyse! Aika!” she greeted with tears in her eyes. “Thank the Moons you two are safe!”

“What happened here?” Aika asked.

“It was the Imperial Armada... They came out of nowhere and attacked us.”

“What happened to Dad?” Vyse asked, more frantic than he’d ever sounded. “Where is everypony else?!”

“Your father said that if we fought, too many lives would be lost. So, he... he surrendered. Dyne and his crew were taken prisoner by the Armada and taken to Valua. They even burned his ship right in front of him. Your father... he must’ve been heartbroken...”

“Damn! ... Fina! What happened to Fina?!”

Vyse’s mother closed her eyes. “I’m sorry, Vyse... The Armada took her, too.”

Aika began to worry, greatly. “In Valua, the punishment for Piracy is death! Fina will probably be killed, too! Vyse, what should we do?!”

What should they do? Vyse didn't even have to think about it. He smiled, beat his hoof against his chest, and looked into Aika's eyes. "What so you think, Aika? We have to save our families... and Fina! I know rescuing everyone isn't going to be easy, but it's not impossible! We can't let them get away with this. Don't worry, we'll get them back... somehow."

Aika wiped her forming tears away and smiled. "... Yeah, you're right! It's up to us. We can't give up now! Alright, let's go! Let's show those Valuans what happens when they mess with the Blue Rogues!"

"Wait..." Vyse's mother warned. "You won't be able to do anything against Valua in the shape you're in right now. Don't just rush after them. You'll need a plan first. It's not going to be an easy fight."

"But, but... If we don't hurry, everypony might..."

"My husband always said, 'Acting quickly and rushing are two completely different things'. Especially in times like these, you must calm down and plan every move carefully. Don't worry... everything will be alright. He... your father won't let things end like this, not him."

"Yeah, Mom," Vyse agreed. "You're right. Aika... Let's rest up today. We'll leave for Valua first thing in the morning!"

Aika jumped for joy. "Okay!"

Valua was a very long ways away, even though it was only the next continent over. The fleet that captured Dyne, his crew, and Fina was still on its way there, even over the course of the night. On board the Serpent, a Valuan soldier brought a bound Fina to Galcian's chambers.

"Lord Galcian," the guard pony reported. "As you ordered, I brought the filly to see you."

"Excellent," Galcian thanked. "You may leave."

"As you wish..." The guard pony left the room. Fina and Galcian were now completely alone.

"At last we meet... Fina," Galcian began. Fina was shocked that this strange stallion knew her name. "You cannot imagine how much trouble the Armada has gone through to find you."

"How did you know my name?" Fina asked.

Galcian turned to face her. "I am Galcian, the Sworn Protector of Valua and Supreme Commander of the Imperial Armada. I am under direct orders from Her Royal Highness, Empress Teodora, to find you and bring you back to Valua. As a citizen of the Magenta Civilization, you have information that is useful to us. Will you help us?"

Fina remained silent and glared at Galcian. Anypony who possessed this much knowledge of her could not be trusted. She shut her eyes and turned her head away.

Galcian chuckled. "I see. I did not expect you to help us without the proper motivation. However... I believe we have the same goals. So, wouldn't it be best for us to help each other?"

Fina continued to remain silent. She knew what goals he was referring to, and had no intention of assisting him in any way. She would sooner die.

Galcian realized he wasn't going to get any answers from her. "... We will reach Valua in half a day. Enjoy the comforts of the brig until then." On his command, the guard pony came and escorted Fina back to her chambers.

The next morning, Vyse and Aika packed up their supplies into their small boat, and waved goodbye to the remaining civilians. The foals shouted to the two of them.

"Vy~se!"

"Ai~ka!"

"Good luck!"

"You'd better come back!"

"Promise us, okay?"

"Of course!" Aika shouted back. "Don't worry... We'll come back with everypony else, too!"

"Alright..." Vyse said to his traveling companion. "Aika, let's go!"

"Aye aye! Valua should be on a landmass due north from here."

"I'm setting the course! Alright... Valua, here we come!"

The two young Air Pirates took to the skies at top speed. Vyse's mother watched them vanish into the horizon. She was worried, but she trusted them. Their confidence gave her hope.

CHAPTER 2

The Valuan Armada's kidnapping of Dyne, his crew, and Fina upset Vyse, sure. But he had time to sleep on it, and was now calm and confident. Valua was Equestria's most powerful and technologically advanced nation. Breaking into it, freeing his mates, and escaping from it was an unthinkable task, and Vyse had no absolutely no idea how he was supposed to pull it off. But he didn't care. He would rescue them all, or die trying. Giving up was a skill he was incredibly poor at.

Vyse and Aika sailed northward on their tiny ship, past Shrine Island, which they had visited the prior day. North Ocean was almost completely surrounded by sky rifts, and the only known way out was through a large rock tunnel in the northeast corner, where the two of them were now headed. Nearing it, however, the two were met with an unusually thick smog, which almost completely blinded them.

"Visibility is horrible!" Aika reported, being the lookout pony. "Vyse, the smog's too thick! I can barely see!"

"That's strange..." Vyse deduced. "There's never any smog in this region... What pegasus would be ordered to make this happen? The only way to get to Valua is through here... Slow to half speed."

"Vyse, wait... we're too close to that island over there!"

"What? Where?" Vyse looked around, and beneath them, through the smog, was a very large shadow. However, Vyse had been sailing in this area his entire life. He knew there was no island there.

His doubts were confirmed as the supposed island made a very high-pitched groan, almost like a squeal. A geyser of smoke erupted from it, before it rose above the fog, revealing to the two ponies its true form.

"Vyse! Look! It's... it's not an island! Whatever it is... it's alive!"

"What the...?! It's a giant dragon!" The dragon that confronted them was roughly fifty times the size of their small boat, also making it about twenty-five times the size of a normal full-grown dragon. It was purple, with green markings all around it, and green eyes on either side of its enormous head. "I've never seen one this big before!"

"Vyse, we'll get killed if we get too close to it, but we've got to hurry to Valua. What should we do?"

Vyse didn't even have to think about such an obvious solution to their situation. The dragon was far too large to fight, and even if it wasn't hostile,

being near a creature that large was a hazard in itself. "What do you think we're gonna do? We're going to retreat! We don't stand a chance against that thing in this ship! I know we're in a hurry, but if that thing capsizes us, everypony we know will be executed. We'd better play it safe..."

"Okay. I can't argue with that. We'll be okay as long as it doesn't see us!" No sooner than Aika finished this sentence did the giant dragon turn toward them, and screamed in their direction, breathing out a strong cloud of smoke that pushed against them like a blazing hurricane. "Aaaah! Vyse! It saw us!"

The force of the giant dragon's breath was immense. It took every ounce of strength Vyse had to keep all four of his legs wrapped around the ship's railing. "Grab hold of something and brace yourself! And whatever you do, don't let go!"

"But... but..." Aika said as she gripped the mast. "The ship! It's breaking up!"

The ship was quickly torn to pieces by the dragon's breath. Every time it seemed like its exhaling would push them to safety, its inhaling sucked them in closer, all the while spinning the ship, making it increasingly difficult to hold on. The ship was soon ripped to scraps, and the two unfortunate Air Pirates plunged to what would've been their most certain doom, had it not been for...

Everything was black. Vyse felt nothing but soreness covering his whole body. Was he dead? Or just regaining consciousness?

"Hey..." an unfamiliar voice said to him. "... get up." Vyse simply moaned. He was still unsure if he was dead, or dreaming, or hallucinating, or what. "Are you goin' to sleep all day? Get up!"

The sternness and order in the voice triggered a response from Vyse, as if he were taking an order from a military superior. The sunlight was too bright for him to completely open his eyes just yet. He sat up on the floor and rubbed his head with his front hoof.

Another moaning came from nearby, and he could tell it was the voice of Aika. Vyse looked over to see Aika regaining consciousness as well. They were on the deck of a small, green ship, but it definitely wasn't there's. They also had their saddlebags still strapped on, containing their supplies.

"So..." came the voice that woke them. "You finally decided to get up, huh?"

Vyse and Aika looked toward who they assumed was their rescuer, and were met with a very disturbing sight. A very large, very old, and somewhat obese earth stallion stood before them. He had a short white mane tied back into a knot, a fluffy white beard, and an eyepatch over his right eye. His coat was green, and he had a fish being caught as a cutie mark.

But these were not the features that frightened the two Air Pirates. His most defining feature was that his entire right foreleg was missing, and in its place was a large, bronze, mechanical replacement leg. It had a very hulking appearance, seeming to be more muscular than the rest of him. While this would imply that the artificial leg improved his physical strength, one must remember that actually wearing such a thing at all times would surely make any additional force seem minor.

And the stallion with the artificial leg did NOT look happy. "Because of you two, Punta got away! I was so close..."

"Punta...?" Vyse asked. "Now I remember... you mean that huge dragon that blew our ship off course!" Vyse smiled, realizing now that he had in fact been rescued, and what were the chances of that? He considered himself very lucky, and he had this old-timer to thank for it. "I thought we were finished, but you rescued us, right? Thanks!"

"Thanks?!" the old stallion yelled back. "... THANKS, you say?!?! Don't start with me!" And in a seemingly blind rage, the stallion raised his artificial leg and slugged Vyse straight in the muzzle, knocking him onto his back. Aika immediately rushed to his side.

"Owwwww..." Vyse moaned, as he got up and rubbed his muzzle. "I'm not sure why, but I keep getting hurt today..."

"Hey!!!" Aika screamed at the grumpy pony, defending Vyse. "What do you think you're doing you crusty... er, rusty old stallion?! He didn't do anything!"

"Didn't do anything'?!?" the old pony retorted. "I've been chasin' after that dragon for years!!! I was so close to finally capturin' him, but because of you foals, he got away!"

Vyse realized that even though this stallion had rescued them, it came at a great personal loss to him. Vyse felt guilty about it, even though he wasn't really to blame. "I'm really sorry... That you didn't catch him... Really..."

"Hmph... Debris from your ship hit my sails... I'm lucky my ship is still airborne. You foals are even luckier that I was here to grab you. I was workin' all mornin' tossin' what was left of your ship overboard. Now I'm stuck with the two of you."

"What?!" Aika cried. "Our ship... was destroyed?"

"Aye... Now, this ain't a passenger ship. Everypony on board needs to pull their own weight. If you don't like it, you can jump off... I need to keep the load as light as possible anyway."

"Wh... what?!" Aika couldn't believe what she was hearing. She and Vyse were nothing more than cargo to this grumpy stallion! And he had the nerve to force them into labor after what they'd just been through?!

"Oh, great..." Vyse sighed. "What kind of mess have we gotten ourselves into?"

Vyse and Aika were both put to work immediately. The green earth stallion had Vyse with him on the bridge, whilst Aika swabbed the decks outside. The old pony wasted no time giving Vyse his chores. "Go down into the hull and bring the two supply boxes up to the bridge."

"Bring two supply boxes up to the bridge?" Vyse repeated, making sure he heard his orders clearly. "No problem. I'll bring them right away!" Vyse was about to head off to do so, but he realized that the ship's destination may not be so favorable to him and Aika. He decided to ask. "Actually, sir... We were on our way to Valua when we were attacked. Where is this ship heading?"

The grumpy old pony beat his bronze hoof onto the control panel so hard, it shook the whole bridge. "Where this ship is goin' is none of your concern. Now get moving!"

Vyse sighed. *Oh, forget it... he thought. I don't really have time to be doing this! But what other choice do I have?*

Vyse headed down the stairs, and found two crates in a corner. He used his front hooves to heave the bottom edge of the first crate, but quickly realized that its weight was almost unbearable. It must've weighed a hundred pounds! He lifted it as high as he could, positioned his back under it and, using his wings to balance the crate, set it down onto himself. He could almost feel his legs give out from the weight. "Great, this geezer is probably going to work us to death!"

Vyse slowly, but consistently climbed each step and back to the bridge. The crate never once fell. The earth stallion seemed impressed when Vyse brought the crate onto the bridge, and set it down neatly by the wall. As soon as he did, Vyse leaned his head against the crate and caught his breath, before situating himself and straightening his posture.

"Hrmph..." the old stallion grunted. "You look like you've got a little more than lubber on your bones. What's your name, boy?"

"My name is Vyse. I'm a Blue Rogue. I used to do this type of grunt work on the pirate ship."

"An Air Pirate, huh? Well... and what exactly would two Air Pirates be doin' sailin' alone?"

"Well... we have our reasons. ... Sir. We need to get to Valua. I beg of you, please take us there!"

"... Valua, huh? Explain."

Vyse began to tell the old pony about how Valua attacked their home and captured his father and shipmates. If he and Aika don't rescue them in time, the lot of them will surely be executed. "... and that's why we have to get there as soon as possible. We need to save our friends."

"Hmph... tryin' to pick a fight with the Armada? You've got to be out of your little pony mind. I have no time to foalsit you and your friend. And I need to find Punta again. Try your luck with a different ship."

"I see... it would really help if you could bring us, but we can't force you to. By the way, why exactly are you chasing Punta, anyway?"

This question seemed to strike a chord with the old stallion. He was immediately silenced by the thought of his reasons, and became irritable at the idea of explaining them. "..... There is no need to tell you. And there is still one supply box left! Get down into the hull and get movin'!"

Great, Vyse thought as he crossed his legs. I spill my guts, he keeps quiet... and then makes me do more work! What's with this pony?

Reluctantly, Vyse headed back down to the hull to collect the other crate. He assumed that after carrying the first, the second one would be somewhat easier. It was not. After about the same amount of time as before, Vyse succeeded in bringing the second crate to the bridge, again having to catch his breath once finished.

Vyse sighed. "I'm done, sir."

"Alright," the old stallion condoned. "Now onto the next chore. Take the helm."

Vyse immediately regained all of his energy. The green pony may have thought this was a chore, but Vyse thought it more like a reward.

"What? Are you really letting me?"

"I want to see how well you can sail. If you can't sail, then you'll be loadin' boxes the rest of the trip!"

"Wow! Most of my duties revolved around raiding, so I hardly ever got to actually fly our old ship!" A very giddy blue pegasus galloped over to the helm of the ship and gave it a couple spins as he examined the control panel. "Well... They're pretty old, but these gauges are in great shape! And

the wheel is so light! It's really responsive, too! This ship must make really tight turns."

"Heh... For somepony who's hardly ever been at the helm of a ship this size, you seem to know quite a bit, colt."

"Hehe, I spent a lot of time on the bridge of the Albatross, so I picked up a lot."

"Good. Now let's see if you can actually sail. Our destination is Sailor's Island, about 40 leagues northeast from here."

"Wait a minute. You could at least tell me the name of this ship... and yours while you're at it."

"Hrmph. The ship's called the Little Jack. And I'm Drachma. Alright, now stop foalin' around... The sun is going to set soon!"

"Aye aye, Captain Drachma! Little Jack, full speed ahead!"

Vyse felt relieved. Not only was he back to doing what he loved most (sailing), but Sailor's Island was in Valua's direction. In fact, it served as a trading post for the Red, Magenta, and Orange continents, and was thus located directly between all three. Vyse sailed through the rock tunnel that led out of North Ocean, and it wasn't long after exiting out the other side that Sailor's Island floated before them.

Sailor's Island was almost as small as Pirate Isle. However, it was really made up of three very tiny islands, connected by bridges. There were several shops, an inn, a tavern, a sailor's guild, and of course, a lighthouse to guide ships. Earth ponies, pegasi, and unicorns alike, young and old, gossiped in the streets. Their clothing easily revealed that were all from the surrounding nations. Truth be told, of the six continents, everypony really only knew about these three.

"Wow..." Vyse said in awe. He had never actually been to any town other than Pirate Isle, so he wasn't used to more industrial settings. "So this is Sailor's Island..."

"I've never been here before," Aika stated, "but I can already tell that this place is lots of fun! Yup, I think I'm gonna like it here."

"Good," Drachma retorted, with an air of sarcasm. "After I restock my supplies here, I'm leavin' again. You two can stay here."

"Hey, wait a second! We have no ship! Are you planning to just strand us here?!"

Drachma turned away from them. "I've got to find Punta... and in the meantime, I have to find a weapon that is powerful enough to destroy him. I

have no time to waste with you foals. You two can resolve your own problems.” And with that, he entered a nearby tavern, with not even so much as a goodbye.

“This is just great! He’s not listening to anything we’re saying!”

Vyse crossed his legs and looked up in puzzlement. “I wonder if there’s anything that will make the old stallion change his mind... Maybe we can dig up some information that interests him. Let’s go around town and see what we can find.”

A voice came from a nearby alleyway. “You say you need information?”

Vyse and Aika looked to see where the voice was coming from. A pony wearing full garb and goggles was signaling for them to come closer. His heavy outfit made it apparent that he was from the Orange continent of Nasr, a desert kingdom to the East. That, and the fact that he was an earth pony, which most Nasreans tend to be.

“Who are...?” Vyse began, but was quickly interrupted.

“Shh!” the secretive pony shushed. “You said you want information, right? I got what you need. That is, if the price is right.”

“What kind of price?” Vyse whispered. “Treasure?”

“You’re a quick one. Yes, treasure, of course. You see, I happen to be a member of a treasure-hunting organization. You may have heard of us. I am known as a Zivilyn Mane.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard of you. The Zivilyn Manes scour ancient ruins for old relics and such. But I also hear you raid Valuan facilities, as well.”

“Yes, you see? We are on the same side. Now, are we doing business?”

Vyse and Aika looked at each other. They were broke, and lost most of their supplies in the shipwreck. However, they each still carried a fragment of the gemstone they’d excavated from Shrine Island, as souvenirs. They dumped their saddlebags in front of the treasure-hunter who, despite not having a visible expression due to his clothes, seemed quite pleased with what dropped out.

“Oh yes!” he exclaimed, though still quietly. “These will do nicely.”

“And that information?” Vyse pressed, not wanting to get swindled.

“Of course. You see, Valua has been producing a new kind of weapon lately. It’s called a Harpoon Cannon. You know how regular cannons require constant reloads of ammunition? Well, the harpoon is connected to a rope, which is used to reel it back in after its target is struck! And it spins as it fires, ensuring that it drills through any target!”

“Vyse!” Aika shouted, forgetting they were supposed to be quiet. “We might be able to use this info to bribe Drachma!”

“Yeah!” Vyse agreed. “Let’s go talk to him. Oh, and thank you, si--”

The Zivilyn Mane had already left with the two gemstone fragments. He was a sly one alright. The Zivilyn Manes were actually a Black Pirate clan, but they mostly remained in the shadows. They were only interested in treasure, not the run-of-the-mill loot found on most ships, so they usually kept to themselves. Vyse and Aika wondered if they’d ever meet him again.

Vyse and Aika headed to the tavern where Drachma was drinking punch. The bartender waiting on him was a large, pink, and slightly overweight earth mare who had way too much lipstick on. Other ponies sat around a table, being waited on by a very skinny filly who also seemed to have a lipstick problem. Most likely she was the bartender’s daughter.

“Captain Drachma!” Vyse said to him.

“Will you stop callin’ me that?” he retorted, grumpy as usual. You don’t sail with me anymore. Therefore, I am no longer your ‘Captain’.”

“Really?” Aika coyly sung, as she crossed her legs with a grin on her face. “Oh, that’s too bad. I heard about a cannon that might be able to take out Punta, but since you’re no longer sailing with us... I guess it doesn’t matter...”

This talk of a possible method of killing Punta immediately caught Drachma’s full attention. “... What did you say?”

Vyse saw where Aika’s angle leaned and decided to beat around the bush as well. “You know, I was amazed when I saw Punta... I’ve never seen a dragon that big before. I used to think that he was indestructible... Until I knew that there was a cannon that could destroy him, that is... But, you’re not sailing with us anymore... So, I guess it doesn’t really matter, huh? GEE, Aika... I’d do anything for a ride to Valua... I wonder who could get us there...”

Drachma beat his artificial leg onto the counter with enough force to shake the whole building. “ARE YOU TRYING TO BARGAIN WITH ME?!”

The barmare seemed contemplative of the subject. “Now that I think about it,” she began, “I remember hearing about something like that! Some Valuan ponies passing through here were talking about it one day. They said it had enough power to destroy a small island...”

Vyse was relieved that the information he’d received was not only true, but also being backed up by somepony else. Now, Drachma could never think it was simply a trick.

“... Polly,” Drachma said to the barmare, “I hope you aren’t takin’ their side and lyin’ to me...”

Polly looked somewhat offended, but nonetheless smiled back at him. “When, Drachma, have I EVER lied to you, huh? And besides, I can tell these ponies aren’t lying by the looks in their eyes. I’ve been running this tavern for twenty years, Drachma... I know people. I can spot cheats and liars... and these ponies are neither...”

Drachma was deep in thought. He’d known Polly for a very long time, and trusted her word. If taking the two Air Pirates to Valua will net him a cannon strong enough to get his revenge on Punta, then that is what he must do.

“... Alright,” Drachma gave in. “I won’t get my hopes up, but I’ll take you to Valua, anyway.”

“What?!” Aika seemed genuinely shocked that Drachma agreed to their terms. She was almost certain that he’d simply strand them there anyway and go to get the cannon himself.

“Hrmph... If you want to go, you’ll have to work the ENTIRE way, but I’ll take you there...”

“Alright!” Vyse and Aika shouted in unison. They were so relieved, that they performed their victory hoofshake, right in front of everypony in the tavern. No pony really seemed to take too much notice, though.

“Cap’n, you’re the best!” Aika thanked, almost warming up to him. “And thank you too, Polly! Thank you for believing us...”

“Don’t sweat it,” Polly modestly chuckled. “When you’re done with your adventure, come back and tell everypony about it. This crusty old bunch is dying for some fresh tales.”

“Aye aye, ma’am! It’s the least I can do!”

“Hahaha... alright... but be careful. Valua isn’t known for their hospitality... They usually shoot first and ask questions later.”

“She’s right,” Drachma agreed as he began to seriously consider the situation. “Also, we’ll need an entry passport to get in. Unfortunately, I don’t have one... but I’m positive somepony on Sailor’s Island does!”

“Valuan passport, huh?” Vyse asked. “Alright! Let’s go look for one... Captain Drachma!”

If our Air Pirates were to obtain a passport, the first and best place to ask was at the Sailor’s Guild right across the street. The guild’s walls were lined with many bookshelves. Vyse didn’t read often, but when he did, it was these kinds of books. Books on sailing, navigation, constellations, ship

management, and even fictional stories like the shipwrecked Adventures of Robinson Croupsoe.

Vyse approached the stallion behind the counter, who was passing the time with a book of his own. "Is this the Sailor's Guild?" Vyse asked. "I need some information..."

"Oh!" the stallion jumped from his book and eagerly tended to his customer. "If you have questions about sailing, you're in the right place!"

"I need to get a Valuan Passport sometime... um... soon. Do you know how I can do this?"

"Hmm... A Valuan Passport soon, huh? That might be a little difficult... After the initial application, there's an intensive background check... and that can take up to a full month."

Aika got peeved and impatient. "We can't just sit around for a month!!! You're the guildmaster here, right? Can't you make a fake passport or something?!"

The guildstallion jerked backward at the mere mention of "fake passport" and began waving his forelegs in front of himself. "NO NO NO NO... No way! If anypony is caught making or carrying a fake passport, they're executed on the spot!"

"So, what you're saying is that all we have to do is not get caught, right? And if we do get caught, all we have to do is escape."

"I don't want the Valuans after me! If I make a fake, and you get caught, they might be able to trace it back to me! Then I'm a dead pony!"

"And you call yourself a Guildmaster, huh? You're just a Valuan puppet... Let's go find somepony else!"

"Um..." came a meek voice from behind them. "Excuse me..." Vyse, Aika, and Drachma all turned around to see a short, old stallion dressed in Nasrean garb. "So, you are looking for a Valuan Passport, eh? I was in Valua on business and now I'm on my way home. I don't need this one anymore. I have but one request to ask of you, and the passport is yours."

"Really? You have a passport?!" Aika thought their luck that day would never, ever end. She wasn't far off, either. "What do you want? Anything... ask us anything!"

"I'm a merchant from the Kingdom of Nasr. Nasr is located on a desert far to the

East of here. I've heard rumors that the Black Pirate, Baltor, has been seen in the skies near there... And, what I wanted to ask of you was, well, if you could escort me back to Nasr. If you get me safely to Nasr, then I will give you the passport when we arrive. I think it is an even trade, yes?"

Vyse stepped forward and shook the old pony's hoof. "We accept your offer! It's a deal."

"You accept? You are wise beyond your years, young one."

"Just leave it to us!" Aika assured. "We'll protect you!"

"Hrmph..." snorted Drachma. "Well, if we want to get into Valua, I suppose we have no choice."

The four ponies, Vyse, Aika, Drachma, and the Nasrean merchant, all headed out to the docks. Our Air Pirates boarded the Little Jack, while the merchant boarded his own ship. They both pulled out of the harbor.

The Nasrean merchant yelled to his escorts. "You see that stone reef straight ahead?" A long wall made of floating stones connected Middle Ocean to a mountain far to the East. This wall made it extremely difficult for weak ships to visit the southern half of Nasr. "You must fly alongside of it and go straight for a while. Eventually, you will see the Southern Dannel Strait, a valley-like area between two mountains."

"So just fly alongside the reef, huh?" Vyse repeated, again, to make sure his instructions were heard clearly. "Alright, let's move!"

Far to the east, a large wooden ship with black sails flew through the wind. It was the Blackmane, the ship of the very Black Pirate rumored to be in the area. His Vice Captain reported to him.

"Captain Baltor! There's a Nasr merchant ship coming into view off portside! But, there's a strange ship following it very closely... I don't recognize its markings."

Baltor was a large green pegasus with a black mane and facial hair. He wore a black captain's hat with a pony skull and crossbones on it, and had a large diagonal scar across his entire face, a feature his ship's flag was even modeled after.

Baltor looked at the two approaching ships with his telescope. He recognized the Little Jack as an old fishing boat, and felt unthreatened by it. "Gahahahaha! You have nothing to fear from a ship THAT old! Let's introduce these foals to the true meaning of fear! They will know that I, The Great And Powerful Baltor, sent them plummeting to their deaths! Alright colts! Battlestations!!! Don't let them escape! And take everything on board that isn't nailed down!"

The Blackmane turned and approached the Little Jack. Aika, as the assigned lookout pony, quickly reported it to her crewmates. "Vyse, there's

a ship straight ahead, heading right for us! I see a black pony skull, and... They're Black Pirates!"

"So that's Baltor, huh?" Vyse asked, unimpressed. Baltor's ship was as stereotypically "Black Pirate" as it could get. "What should we do, Captain?"

"We're vastly outnumbered," Drachma observed. Even if the number of ships was actually tilted in their favor, the number of crew members was not. If Baltor's ponies boarded them, they wouldn't stand a chance. "We'll fight it out from a distance."

"Aye aye, Captain! Let's rip `em to shreds... Sir!"

The Blackmane came to a stop. Each of the windows lining its hull opened up at once, and its many cannons emerged from them, fully loaded. "Gahahahaha!" Baltor bellowed. "Now, I shall teach you to tremble in fear before The Great And Powerful Baltor! Gahahahaha!!!"

The Little Jack only had a few cannons of its own. The ship was only meant for one person in the first place, and all of those cannons were meant for Punta. Vyse carefully sailed the Little Jack alongside of the Blackmane, lifting into the air and tilting whenever it tried to fire. When he did so, he'd tilt toward them and have Aika fire their own cannons, lightly damaging the enemy ship a little at a time. And if the Blackmane ever tried to tilt up to fire at them, Vyse would simply maneuver above them. The ships couldn't turn completely to the side, else everything on them would fall off. So being above the enemy ship was a decent escape method, but he couldn't stay there long, or the pegasus pirates would fly up to them, so he backed off every time he got the chance.

"Hrumph!" Baltor snorted. "He's good... Turn hard to starboard! Let's try and maneuver behind him!" The Blackmane began a circular course around the battlefield.

"... Something's not right, Cap'n," Aika noticed, yelling to Drachma from the deck. "It looks like he's preparing for something. I'm getting a bad feeling about this..."

Drachma had many years on him, and he'd seen this strategy a million times. "He looks like he's goin' to try to get behind us. Most ships have their engines in the back and that makes them more vulnerable from behind. But, if he tries to get behind us, in the meantime, he'll be wide open. What do you want to do, Vyse?"

Vyse thought quickly. If he took this opportunity to damage their ship, they may win the battle. However, it would mean allowing Baltor to get behind the Little Jack, dooming them. Vyse noticed that the Blackmane

was on a fixed, circular course, and taking the Little Jack's mobility into account, came up with a plan.

"Now's our chance!" Vyse exclaimed. "He won't be expecting us to try and maneuver around to HIS backside!" Vyse turned the Little Jack sharply, bringing himself onto the very course the Blackmane was following, just as it had passed them up. The Little Jack was now behind them.

"Good job, boy!" Drachma congratulated, in an almost proud tone to his voice. "His ship doesn't have any cannons in the back... We've got a wide open shot at his engines."

The Little Jack's cannons were not limited to windows in the ship's hull, like the Blackmane's. Its cannons were all on the deck, and could be easily adjusted to face any direction. With one fell swoop, Aika fired every cannon on board, decimating the Blackmane's engine in a horrible explosion! It wobbled and toppled, until it eventually crash-landed on a nearby desert island. Vyse was victorious.

"Blast!" Baltor screamed as he jumped up and down. "You were lucky this time! But I, The Great and Powerful Baltor, will hunt you down and have my revenge! This I swear on the code of the Black Pirates! You will rue the day you ever crossed paths with me! And SOME PONY PUT OUT THAT FIRE!!!"

Aika ran back up to bridge so that she and Vyse could congratulate each other. "Vyse, we did it!"

Vyse and Aika, once again, decided the best way to celebrate was to perform their victory hoofshake. But Drachma decided this was also the perfect time to smack Vyse upside the head. CLANG.

"Ow!" Vyse groaned as he rubbed his head. "What'd you do that for, Captain?"

"We're not there yet, you idiot!" Drachma scolded. "Never take your hooves off the wheel until we've come to a complete stop!"

"Yeah, you idiot!" Aika joined, teasing him. "Why don't you watch what you're doing? It's a good thing Cap'n Drachma's here to keep you in line."

Vyse glared at Aika. "Aika... why you little..."

"Hahaha... I'm sorry! I just couldn't resist... You just defeated 'The Great and Powerful Baltor', so why don't you lighten up a bit?"

The Little Jack continued its escort of the merchant until they eventually came to a canyon that led to an extremely large city. Nasr was one of the most powerful nations in Equestria, so much so that the war

between them and Valua twenty years back ended in a stalemate. They've been rival nations ever since.

The canyon was guarded by a fleet of orange ships, and the pilot of one offered to escort the merchant the rest of the way. But before taking his leave, he pulled up next to the Little Jack and stepped onto its bridge, where Vyse and Aika awaited him.

"Thank you very much," the merchant thanked. "It would appear that you have safely brought me home. As I promised, here is the Valuan passport." The merchant handed over an old-looking sheet of parchment. Sure enough, it was a genuine passport alright. Even Wanted Air Pirates could get into Valua if they had one of these. "May the Orange Moon watch over you and light your path." And with that, the merchant sailed away with the guards.

"Off to Valua!" Drachma ordered. "Let's not waste any more time!"

"Aye aye!" Vyse agreed as he took the helm. "Little Jack, full rudder! Turning 180 degrees... to Valua! Full speed ahead!"

Valua wasn't far from where they were now; just about a hundred leagues north of where Sailor's Island was. The Valuan Capital lied on the Southern corner of its enormous continent, which was forever shrouded in eternal darkness. This is because of the Red Moon that hovered over it, which for some reason gathered black clouds into a singular area over the continent. It is truly incredible that a nation could survive for a thousand years in total darkness. The amount of power needed to keep their cities lit must be incredibly immense, but it is no problem for the Valuan citizens, as roughly half of them were unicorns. Unicorns could learn a special gem-finding spell, which Valua utilized to find hundreds of thousands of jewels, the secret to their incredible advancements in technology.

The Little Jack approached the Valuan continent, and found that several guard ships were posted along its borders. The Little Jack pulled up to one, and Vyse presented his passport to the guard. The guard confirmed its authenticity, and let them pass.

"Looks like we made it through," Aika observed. "We just passed a Valuan Security Checkpoint. That's quite an accomplishment in itself, don't you think?"

"Yeah..." Vyse agreed. "I thought getting into Valua would be a lot tougher. Now all we have to do is sneak into--"

Vyse was interrupted as the bright light from a nearby searchlight blinded them. When the light cleared, they found themselves sailing before

the entrance to Valua... A massive green door that stretched from the top of the sky to the bottom. It must've been roughly one to two miles in height.

"What's that?!" Aika asked, intimidated by the door's incredible size.

"It's the only entrance into the city of Valua..." Drachma explained.

"The Grand Fortress. Valua is surrounded by impassable mountains... so that door is the only way in or out."

Vyse was in complete awe. "Wow... I can't believe they actually built something that big..."

"During the Valua-Nasr war, over a hundred warships bombarded this fortress for days. However, all the shells were repelled by these walls. The Fortress may be the strongest structure of the New World."

The wall began to rumble and shake. And then, it opened, hinged in the center, rotating for several minutes until it was ajar enough to allow the many ships gathered on either side to pass through.

Drachma continued explaining the workings of the Fortress. "The door of the fortress opens only once a day to allow ships to pass through. The backside of that wall is completely lined with giant cannons. It was those cannons that nearly wiped out the entire Nasr fleet. And what's worse, the wall of the fortress also serves as Valua's prison, so if anypony tries to fire upon it, they also run the risk of killing any prisoners they may be trying to save."

Vyse couldn't believe the things we was hearing. "Defense and offense all in one... It's an invincible fortress."

"And that's where they're holding Captain Dyne..." Aika deduced. "And Fina!"

"No pony has ever escaped from that fortress," Drachma continued. "Although, I've heard that there's one way out."

"Really?" Vyse asked. "Then it's possible?"

"Yeah. After they execute the prisoners, their corpses are thrown off of the island."

Vyse and Aika looked at each other. It almost sounded as if Drachma was telling a joke. They didn't know what to make of it.

"Hah!" Vyse laughed, after a while. "No pony's ever escaped, because I'VE never tried! I love a challenge! Don't worry. I will rescue our friends and escape from that fortress. Just watch me!"

Lord Galcian stood in a room high within the Grand Fortress, overseeing the opening and closing of the door from a window. He did not

know Vyse or Aika, so even if he saw them, he would think nothing of them. Galcian's Vice Captain, Ramirez, stood by his side as expected.

"Lord Galcian," Ramirez reported. "Your Admirals have assembled... As you have commanded."

"Excellent," Galcian responded. He turned from the window and faced a long meeting table, at which sat the five Admirals of the Imperial Armada, which included Alfonso of course. "Admirals of the Valuan Armada... Let me first offer my gratitude to each of you for assembling on such short notice... Let it be known that we have successfully captured a citizen of the Magenta Civilization, as Empress Teodora requested."

All of the Admirals seem both shocked and pleased at the news. "So, we've finally captured one..." the largest pony mused. "Who accomplished this?"

"Hah hah hah..." Alfonso laughed, eager to take the credit for it before anypony else could. "Of course, I was the one to find her first... My unicorns put her to sleep and captured her. But I was betrayed by my own Vice Captain and she was taken from me..."

Ever since Alfonso's return to Valua, he had been making absolute certain that everypony heard his clever little lie. He was formally known as the Armada's "1st Admiral", however, this had nothing to do with his age or experience. It was the Rank his spoiling, rich parents attained for him through their own string-pulling. Alfonso had no more skill than that of a grunt pony.

"I'm sure Empress Teodora is very pleased that she was recovered," the eldest pony stated. The 2nd Admiral, Gregorio, was a very old earth stallion who'd served the Armada for most of his life. He had a salmon-colored coat, a very short white mane, and facial hair. He wore a large, iron breastplate around his torso, and his cutie mark was a shield. "Now, if we can persuade her to give us the information we need, it would be worth all of the effort we spent tracking her down."

The largest pony spoke next. "You said that the citizen of the Magenta Civilization that you found was female?! Now THAT'S something worth getting excited over." The 3rd Admiral, Vigoro, was a very tall, blue earth stallion with incredible muscle who thought himself something of a ladies' colt. His brown mane was pointed straight forward to a tip, almost as if it were shaped like a unicorn horn. Much to his delight, his cutie mark was a red, kiss-shaped lipstick mark (leading some to question whether or not it's actually a cutie mark). "How old is she? Is she good looking? Does she wear leather? I like my mares wild and crazy!"

The only female Admiral at the table chuckled at the blue stallion's rant. "I'm afraid you're out of luck, Vigoro. The filly is the exact opposite. She's very shy and demure." The 4th Admiral, Belleza, was a pink unicorn with a long, curly auburn mane. She herself wore a red, leather saddle as a pseudo-uniform, and her cutie mark was a fixed die, one with a five on each visible side. "Her name is Fina. She is currently being escorted to see Empress Teodora in the Imperial Palace."

The shortest pony, who was the last of the five Admirals to speak, took his turn. "Hehehehehe... Very good, Admiral Belleza. I see that you are our espionage expert for good reasons." The 5th Admiral, De Loco, was an extremely short unicorn, so much so that he was often mistaken for a foal. He had a green coat, a purple bowl-cut for a mane, and a flamethrower for a cutie mark. Other than his diminutive height, his most defining feature was the bubble-shaped glass helmet he wore around his head at all times. Was it a life support system, or was he just germophobic? No pony may ever know. He always had a tight pair of black-lens goggles strapped over his eyes, and to say he was somewhat loco in the coco would be an infinitesimal understatement. "Of course, being the head of weapons development, I have a deeply vested interest in the technology of the Magenta Civilization! Hehehe!"

The Five Admirals had finished discussing Fina, so Galcian prepared to conclude the meeting. He just had one final thing to take care of. "I will head to the Imperial Palace and await Teodora's orders to commence the search for the Elements of Harmony. Fina, our new... ally, shall aid us in gathering all six of the Elements from around the world." Galcian's stare eased to a glare, as he turned toward the 1st Admiral. "... As for YOU... Alfonso. You LIED in your report. And as punishment, you are now relieved of your position as Commander of the Mid Ocean Fleet. And for an indefinite period of time, you shall be confined to the country of Ixa'taka."

Alfonso didn't even realize what was being said to him. The perfect lie that he'd spent the entire day spreading was being shoved right back into his face, and his delayed response to this was only appropriate. He grinned a guilty grin, trying to look innocent, as he foalishly continued his charade. "Y... you think that I lied in my report, sire? Ha... haha... w... what are you talking about?"

"You were attacked by Air Pirates and you deserted your crew and your ship to save yourself. Your ship and your crew were released by the Air Pirates and returned recently. They filed a full... and ACCURATE... report."

Alfonso grimaced and scoffed. He was certain those “lowly” Air Pirates would kill his crew and sink his ship. Being the self-centered douche he was, his first and only assumption was that the Pirates released his crew for the sole purpose of humiliating him.

“Our Armada is invincible,” Galcian continued. “Showing any signs of weakness is unforgivable. I trust that you will not forget that. This meeting is over. I want all of you to be ready to depart at a moment’s notice.”

The Admirals stood straight and saluted, except for Alfonso, who was still sulking. “Yes, Lord Galcian!”

The Little Jack had passed through the Grand Fortress door, which soon closed behind them. No turning back now. Our Air Pirates flew their ship through a long, steel tunnel that served as passage through the mountain, until they came to a very large valley, in which sat the beautifully lit city of Valua. At least the western half was; the eastern half seemed quite dark and filthy. The gorgeous, jewel-encrusted Palace sat atop a small island in the middle of the valley.

“So this is the capital of Valua, huh?” Vyse asked, taking in the sight. “It’s impressive...”

“It’s beautiful...” Aika added. “But the skies are so gloomy...”

“Valua is a beautiful city,” Drachma began, “but because of the fierce thunderstorms caused by the Red Moon, the city is shrouded in eternal darkness. That’s the Imperial Palace straight ahead of us. The area on the left shore is called Upper City.”

“Upper City?”

“The ponies of Valua are either very rich, or very poor, and they detest each other. Only the richest ponies in Valua can live in Upper City. The less fortunate are confined to Lower City. It’s on the right shore.”

“It doesn’t seem right to force them to live in poverty like that!”

“Hey, Captain...” Vyse interrupted. “Where should we land?”

“In Lower City,” Drachma ordered. “There is a dock that repairs and remodels ships.”

“Aye aye. I’ll bring us into the Lower City Port.”

Lower City looked even worse up close. There was little light, and it was very windy and cold, but all the ponies had to keep them warm were filthy, torn rags. The gray, steel buildings were worn from decades of rust, and rats scampered about the streets, looking for food in the overflowing

garbage bins. The whole place reeked something fierce, and our Air Pirates couldn't help but feel sorry for everypony.

"We still need to check the place out," Vyse stated. "We need to find a way to save Dad and the others. Captain, what do you think we should do?"

"I'm returnin' to the docks..." Drachma informed, uninterested. "I'll be overseein' the installation of the Harpoon Cannon."

Vyse sighed, realizing his new captain wasn't eager to participate. The Harpoon Cannon was the whole reason he'd come here after all. Vyse just hoped Drachma wasn't planning on abandoning them in Valua. "Let's split up, then. Aika and I will check out the city, while you get your cannon. When we're done, let's meet up the Inn."

"Sure. I'll see you two later, then."

Vyse and Aika looked around Lower City for only a few minutes before coming across more unwelcome sights than they had ever wanted to see. Foals, lost in the streets, crying for their parents. Stray dogs that growled at anything that passed. Shady ponies hiding in the alleys, sharpening their knives and reloading their guns. Elder ponies passed out on the street from intoxicating themselves with salt. Vyse was even sure he'd seen a corpse in the corner of his eyes, but quickly averted them. It was all a miserably horrifying experience for the two.

"Hm? Who're you?" A young, nasal voice asked from an alley. Vyse and Aika were confronted by a small, green earth foal with a messy red mane, a band-aid on his muzzle, and no cutie mark. Ponies who had not learned their special talents yet had no cutie marks, and were sometimes referred to as "blank flanks", though it is considered derogatory to do so. "You guys look like sailors... Stupid ones, at that. Why else would you come all this way to see a dump like Lower City?"

"Well, well..." Aika responded, annoyed with the little nose-picker. "Aren't WE a little obnoxious...? Kind of reminds me of a particular somepony when they were little."

"Hey!" Vyse retorted, knowing exactly who she was talking about. "I wasn't THIS annoying when I was little! Give me some credit here!"

"What did you say?!" The foal shouted, realizing he'd been insulted. "Are you trying to start a fight with me?! The name is Marco! Everypony who's anypony in this town knows who I am!"

"Haha... For such a short foal, you sure know how to talk big! Sorry Marco, but we don't have time to play with little foals right now."

“How dare you!! I’ll remember this!” And Marco darted off into the shadows.

Our two Air Pirates eventually came to the Inn, which was located at the entrance of the Industrial District, where all the tar, oil, and gasoline was kept. Aika couldn’t decide if the smell was an improvement or not. The innkeeper glared at the two as they entered her establishment, which was surprisingly cleaner than the other buildings. The two paid for their room, and headed upstairs.

“... I’m so tired...” Aika moaned, as she entered the room. “I can barely stand. It’s been a long time since I’ve laid down in a nice, warm bed... with pillows... and... blankets...” She plopped down onto the closest bed and took a nice, deep sigh of relief.

“I’m tired too, Aika,” Vyse added. “And it’s not like we’ve had time to relax since we left Pirate Isle...”

“True... but I don’t think I’ll even be ABLE to sleep right now, even in a real bed. I can’t stop thinking about Captain Dyne and the others.”

“... I’m sure they’re okay. Let’s at least try and get some rest while we can. Who knows when we’ll be able to sleep in real beds again?”

“That’s right... you’ve been cramped on a hammock in the engine room of the Little Jack for quite a few nights now...”

“I don’t mind the lack of space... it’s just that the engine is so old... and it’s so loud...”

“Well, excuse ME for having an old ship,” Drachma retorted as he entered the room with impeccable timing.

“Captain! I... didn’t expect you here so soon!”

“If you don’t like my ship, you can find yourself another one. My ship wasn’t meant for anypony but me in the first place.”

“I didn’t mean anything by that! I’m really grateful! Honest!”

“Hmph. You two seem to be takin’ things well tonight... especially considerin’ that your friends are going to be executed tomorrow...”

“What?!” Vyse was met with both shock and confusion. He knew that the Valuans would eventually execute his crewmates, but the DAY after he’d arrived to save them? He’d hoped he’d have more time to formulate a rescue plan.

“Tomorrow at dawn, at the Coliseum between Lower and Upper City, they will be executed... I heard it from a bartender in town. He and some other ponies were actually talking about it being ‘entertainment’ for the lot of `em.”

"That's horrible!" Aika shouted. "Vyse! What should we do?! If we don't do something, they'll all be killed!"

Vyse thought for a moment. There was no time to waste, and his first impulse was to try and save everypony right there and then. But he had absolutely no idea where they were being held, and they would surely be caught in the process of searching. But then he realized, that there would in fact be a time where he'd know exactly where they all were.

"Tomorrow," Vyse began. "We'll sneak into the Coliseum. Dad and the others will definitely be taken there tomorrow morning... we'll rescue them then."

"What?" Aika asked, confused. "You mean you're not going to try and save them right now?!"

"If we start frantically searching everywhere, we'll probably get caught by the Valuan Guards. And if that happens, we're all dead."

"Vyse is right," Drachma agreed. "It may get ugly at the Coliseum tomorrow... but it's our best chance to save them."

"Alright!" Aika beamed. "Tomorrow at the Coliseum it is! Now that we sort of have a plan, I feel a little better! I think it will work... besides, we have the element of surprise on our side."

A noise was heard from the corner of the room. Everypony looked to the window and saw a shadowy figure frantically climbing to the roof to get away from them.

"Somepony was spyin' on us!" Drachma exclaimed. "Don't let him get away!!!"

Vyse leaped out the window and chased the figure across the rooftops. The spy was clearly an earth pony, so he wasn't as fast as Vyse, who flew into the air and prepared to drop down onto him. The spy jumped down to the streets and lifted up large hatch. He was about to dive in, but Vyse swooped down and bit onto the back of his neck, lifting him into the air and leaving the spy to squirm around.

"Put me down, you glass-eyed freak!" the spy shouted.

"What the...?" Vyse asked as he recognized the voice. "You're that kid from this afternoon!"

"So, what's it to you? PUT ME DOWN NOW!" Vyse did as he was told, and dropped Marco onto the concrete. "Ow! You didn't have to drop me!"

"Vyse! Did you catch him?" Aika shouted as she and Drachma caught up. Now having a better look at the spy, she too realized who it was. "Oh no... it's that annoying brat again."

“Who are you calling annoying?! At least I don’t have a mane like a scarecrow! Heh, I heard EVERYTHING you three said in that room. Now, if was to rat on you to the guards... you’d all be executed!”

Drachma pointed his mechanical hoof at Marco. “Well... that really leaves us no choice. We’re goin’ to have to kill you now, colt.”

“W... wait!!!” Aika shouted, wanting a more peaceful solution.

Marco crossed his legs and snorted. “If you’re going to kill me, then kill me! It’s not like anypony would care! I don’t even think the rats would miss me. I’ve pretty much given up on life in this dump! If I’m dead, at least I won’t have to search the garbage bins for food every night.”

“Really...” Drachma hummed. “Good. Then you have no regrets...”

“Cap’n!!!” Aika pleaded. “He’s just a foal!”

Vyse wasn’t interested in the bickering. He noticed the escape route Marco had planned to take, and wondered if there were somehow the foal could redeem himself. “Hey, Marco. That hole in the ground next to you... What is it?”

“Oh... this?” Marco answered. “There’s catacombs under the city... I’ve heard that they’ve been around since the Old World. Now they’re just sewers... This is... where I live.”

“Sewers, huh? Can you use them to get to the Coliseum?”

“Yeah, it reaches the Coliseum. W... wait a second. You were serious?!”

“Yup. If we take the catacombs to the Coliseum, we can sneak in without worrying about the guards.”

Marco rolled over onto his back and began laughing hysterically. “What’re you, stupid or something? You’re going to get caught! There’s no way! Why don’t you just give up and go home?”

“Can’t do that. Blue Rogues never give up! Especially when their friends are counting on them. Marco, if you ever went sailing and ran into a storm, with the way you’re talking, you’d probably just give up. ‘It’s too rough! I shouldn’t have gotten on this ship! I want my mommy!’, is what you’d probably say.”

“W... what?! Take that back!”

Vyse became more stern. It was obvious Marco wasn’t taking him seriously. “Even if you run into a storm, there’s always a way out. No matter how bleak things seem. I’ve been in really bad situations before and I always look for a way out. I’m in that kind of situation right now, and I’m not giving up!”

Marco felt embarrassed by the things he was hearing. It was corny, but he couldn’t help but feel jealous of Vyse’s outlook on life. He

understood what Vyse meant, but his pride made him pretend otherwise. "... So, so what are you trying to say?"

Vyse turned to his crewmates. "Captain... Aika... tomorrow, we're taking the catacombs to the Coliseum. Since we don't have to get there until tomorrow, we should rest tonight."

"Hey!" Marco shouted as they all left. "Aren't you supposed to kill me now?"

"You're going to be at the Coliseum tomorrow, too. You said that you've grown tired of living, right? In that case, you should come and see something interesting before you die."

Marco had a blank look on his face. "What? You can't be serious..."

Now our Air Pirates had a plan. With their objective in mind, they galloped back to the inn, crawled into their soft, warm beds, and were fast asleep. Morning came much too soon. The skies were so dark that it felt like the sun had deserted them. Quietly, they all hoped that this wasn't an omen.

The ponies gathered around outside the inn. "It all comes down to today..." Aika said. "I hope we can save them..."

Vyse stepped forward. "... Let's get to the catacombs, and then to the Coliseum. Either we all go home, or none of us go..."

The Air Pirates climbed the ladder down into the sewers. It smelled not worse, but just as bad as the city above. The caverns were cracked and damp, and some parts did indeed look like ruins from the Old World. After what felt like a mile of tunnels, they reached a ladder that led into the Coliseum.

Vyse climbed up and lifted the hatch slightly to get a look. They were directly in the center of the arena, which had apparently been built around the catacomb entrance. It was probably used to dispose of executed pony corpses. Vyse shuddered at the thought of such cruelty. There was a stage on one end of the arena, where a large, armored stallion stood -- the executioner. Surrounding the stage were the bound members of Dyne's crew, as well as Dyne himself.

The executioner addressed the screaming crowd that filled the stands surrounding the arena. "And now we present the executions of the notorious Air Pirate Dyne and his treacherous band of Blue Rogues! Their crimes include attacking Imperial Airships and stealing precious cargo. The

price of stealing from Valua is high! And Dyne and his pitiful band will pay... with their heads!"

The crowd rose in uproar. They had absolutely no idea who Dyne and his crew even were. They were just there to satisfy their twisted bloodlust. From between the ponies in the crowd, Marco pushed his way to the front to get a better look. Dyne was being escorted to the executioner's block first.

"Heh..." Marco snorted. "Looks like he gave up after all..."

But Marco was quickly forced to eat his words as the hatch in the center of the arena shot from the ground, and a blue pegasus flew high into the air for all to see! Dyne was genuinely surprised to see his son come to his rescue, and he and his crew used this distraction to escape from their bindings and overpower the guards.

"Hi, everypony!" Aika shouted to her long lost crewmates. "I missed you guys! We're here to rescue you! Come on, let's go!" she guided Dyne and the rest of the crew down the hole in the arena. One would think the crowd would be disappointed, but the action and suspense of a rescue was pleasantly surprising to them, and they cheered even louder!

Vyse landed on the stage and confronted the executioner. "Well..." the executioner calmly congratulated. "How very bold of you... You have deprived these ponies from witnessing the deaths of a notorious band of Air Pirates! Now they will witness YOUR execution!"

"I don't know why you're all upset," Vyse sarcastically responded. "The audience already got to watch us free our friends and trash your guards! Now they get to watch me beat the snot out of you. What more could they want? By the way, THE NAME'S VYSE!"

The blue pegasus quickly leaped toward the executioner, spun around, and BUCKED him off the stage with his two hind legs! The armored stallion lost his balance, and fell flat on his back, unable to get back up. Vyse bowed before the audience, and the crowd was now throwing flowers and confetti toward him. A cheesy smug of accomplishment on his face, Vyse leaped into the hole to catch up with his crewmates.

At the base of the ladder, Marco was waiting for him, and standing next to a tunnel that hadn't been there before. "Hey..." said Marco. "You really did it. You rescued your friends. I can't believe it. You really are something..."

"Marco!" Vyse greeted. "What are you doing here?"

"I told you before, right? I live here. I know everything about these sewers. This wall was built with a hidden door. I took your friends into the secret room just behind me."

Vyse followed Marco into the secret room, and the wall closed behind them. No pony would ever find them now. Waiting for him in the room were all of his crewmates, Aika, Drachma... and his Dad.

"You were a little late, Vyse..." Dyne joked. "If you were any later, I'd be a whole head shorter right now. I always knew you were tough, but breaking into a public execution and freeing all of us...? Now, I think you're crazy too!"

Vyse chuckled. "What can I say? I'm not ready to take over as head of the Dyne family just yet." Vyse was certain the rescue mission was complete, but as he looked around the room, he couldn't help but notice a missing face. "Wait a minute... Where's Fina?"

"Fina? When they captured us from Pirate Isle, they took her somewhere else. I overheard some soldier ponies talking about her... sounded like she was taken to the Valuan Imperial Palace."

"What?! Why was she taken to the palace?"

"It appears that the Empress herself wanted to meet Fina. I've got a feeling that there's more to that filly than meets the eye. She knows something important enough to have Valua after her."

"Fina..."

"... Vyse, what are you going to do?"

Vyse thought for a moment. The lot of them were safe now, even after escaping from so many soldiers, so normally, one would think they should lie low. But this was Valua. They'd be discovered sooner or later, whether or not they remained in hiding. If there was ever a better time to act, it was now.

"Of course we have to go save Fina!" Vyse answered. "The guards are scattered... The whole island is in chaos. With their forces disorganized, we can rescue Fina in all the confusion."

"Hmm..." Dyne thought. "It'll be dangerous, but it looks like now is our best chance to strike."

Drachma stepped forward. "I will take all of the Air Pirates back to the Little Jack. We'll be waitin' for you. You need to be at the Little Jack when they open the gates!"

"I know..." Vyse understood. "When the gate opens, it's our only chance to escape."

"First, you'll want to go to Upper City. You might be able to sneak aboard a rail car that's on its way to the Palace."

"I see... Upper City, huh? Marco, how do I get to Upper City from here?"

"Um..." Marco responded. He seemed almost hesitant to give Vyse directions. "If you go down that tunnel over there, you'll reach Upper City. But there are tons of guards in Upper City! You shouldn't go! It's too dangerous!"

"I'm ready for anything, Marco. In the midst of the storm, I can see the one path that will get us out of Valua. I've got to try. Let's go, Aika! We gotta save Fina!"

Drachma guided Dyne and his crew back through the catacombs, whilst Vyse and Aika took the opposite path. After a few minutes of trekking through the sewers, they reached the ladder that led into Upper City. But before they could climb it, a voice called to them from behind.

"Wait, Vyse!"

"Marco... you followed us?" Vyse asked. "What's wrong?"

Marco's confident front was no longer apparent. He looked sad, and worried, as if he were about to cry. "Vyse... Don't go... please... My... my mother... and father... were both killed by Valuan soldiers while they were trying to escape from this city! There's no way out! Trying to get through the Grand Fortress... It's impossible! No pony has ever escaped from Valua! You're gonna die this time! I just know it!"

"Your parents... I'm... I'm sorry to hear that, Marco. But, I have to go... I don't have a choice. And every time I hear the word 'impossible'... it just makes me want to prove everypony wrong... A long time ago, a handful of sailors took a small boat out into uncharted skies. They had no idea what they would find... Monsters... a maelstrom... the end of the world... It was because these brave ponies challenged the unknown, that new lands were discovered. If we challenge ourselves, and never give up, our own horizons will broaden... in our hearts, and in our minds... I need to push myself every day. I have to know what I can accomplish... I never give up, and so far, nothing has ever stopped me."

"But... but... Vyse..." Marco was on the verge of tears. He wished he could believe the things Vyse said.

"Don't worry about me. I believe that we'll make it out... I will find a way... that's what's keeping me going. I'm going to prove that it's not impossible to escape.

"Impossible is just a word to let ponies feel good about themselves when they quit."

Marco wiped the tears from his eyes. "Vyse... Do you think I could ever be a sailor? If I could ever... sail the skies?"

"Heh. Of course! You've got what it takes... I'll be waiting for you... out there!"

Marco smiled, and gave Vyse a brohoof. "Thank you..."

Inside the Imperial Palace's throne room, Galcian and Fina approached the Empress. The room was gigantic, with white walls and columns, and a long red carpet that stretched from the throne to the room's exit. Empress Teodora sat on her throne, whilst her son, Prince Enrique, stood by her side. Fina was bound in ropes, and forced to stand before the Empress.

"Lord Galcian brings good news, Your Majesty," reported one of the room's many guards.

"Indeed I do... Your Highness..." Galcian added. "As you have requested, my forces have captured an Alicorn."

"Excellent work, Galcian," Teodora congratulated. "You have yet to fail me." Teodora was a very old unicorn, with purple coat, white mane done up in a bun, and an extravagant jewel-encrusted dress that concealed her aging body. "So, this is what an Alicorn looks like. Hmm... Such a beautiful pony. That she has both wings and a horn is very interesting... A nice specimen. Today, we have taken another step closer to our main objective. Soon, the Valuan Empire will rule Equestria."

Fina remained silent. She was in the enemy's grasp, and had no method of escaping. She had given up all hope.

"You seem... sad, young one," Teodora said to Fina. "Why do you not rejoice with us? You shall witness our finest hour. You have the knowledge that we seek. You can assist us. Hahaha... All who oppose us shall fall... Their islands will be reduced to ash and dust. Anypony who stands in our way will be destroyed! And you, young one, shall help us."

"Mother..." Prince Enrique interrupted. "Ruling the world by force is not something I am sure I approve of." Enrique was a young, thin, gray unicorn with a short blonde mane, and blue eyes. He wore a purple feathered cap, and his cutie mark was that of a fencing foil. "An empire that does not listen to the plight of its ponies is destined to fall..."

"Enrique, you still have much to learn. You cannot walk the path of an emperor and concern yourself with the petty needs of the 'ponies'."

"But, mother!"

“Now now, Enrique... I am building an empire for you... Since you shall inherit the throne when I pass on, you should pay more attention.” Teodora turned her sights back on Fina. “Well then, young filly! I know that there are six Elements of Harmony and that they have been scattered all over Equestria. I also know that he who controls the Elements of Harmony can also control six powerful monsters... I believe your people refer to them as... the Gigas! When the Gigas are ours, we shall rule the world!!! Now, young filly... You will tell me where to find the Elements of Harmony.”

Fina broke her silence and glared at the old hag. “I will die before I tell you.”

“What did you say?!”

“You do not understand how powerful the Gigas really are. The Gigas were terrible monsters that were biologically enhanced and altered by the ponies of the Old World... they are more powerful than you can imagine.”

“And that is precisely why Valua must obtain these creatures. Since we are the most powerful empire, we should have full control over them. And once we have them, we shall rule the world!”

“No! Ponies must never control the Elements of Harmony and the Gigas ever again! And power-hungry dictators like you are the reason for that!”

“Grrr...!!! You dare insult me?! The Empress of the great Valuan Empire?! In my own palace?!? Kill her! Kill her! Kill the little wench! Off with her head!”

“Mother!” Enrique tried to restrain his crazy parent. “Think about what you are saying! You cannot kill her, she’s done nothing wrong!”

“Are you saying this girl is innocent, Enrique... even after she insulted me so?! Kill her! Kill her now!”

“Please!” Fina pleaded. She cared not if she died -- she simply wished to changed the Empress’s mind about her goals. “You must believe me! The power of the Gigas is not to be underestimated!”

“Silence, wench!” shouted a guard as he struck the back of her neck with his staff, knocking her to the floor. “You shall pay for your insolence!”

The chaos was interrupted by a messenger pony who’d just broken into the room. “Lord Galcian, I bring urgent news! Somepony has broken into the Coliseum and freed the Blue Rogues!”

“What?!” Galcian responded. “I am on my way. Take the Alicorn to the ship and bring her to the Grand Fortress immediately.”

“Yes, Lord Galcian!”

Galcian turned toward his Empress, and bowed his head. "Your Majesty, I request permission to deploy the Armada. I will take the filly with me and she will guide me to the Elements of Harmony."

"Very well, then!" Teodora permitted. "Use the power of the Armada and bring the Elements to me!"

"Of course, Your Majesty. However, I have but one humble request. I would like to request that a new addition be made to our highest ranking officers... I would like to recommend my Vice Captain, Ramirez, for the position of 6th Admiral."

The mention of Ramirez's name caught Fina's attention. She gasped and her eyes widened. Was it the same Ramirez she knew?

"Do as you wish," said Teodora. "In return, I want you to give me your word that you will bring me those Elements!"

"As you wish, Your Majesty," Galcian bowed.

"You heard him..." the guard yelled at Fina. "Get up!"

Fina got back onto her legs, but was still confused by what she had just heard. *Ramirez?*

Vyse and Aika emerged from the catacombs and found themselves in glorious Upper City Valua. As was expected, its appearance was in perfect opposition to Lower City's. The buildings and streets were expertly constructed, true works of architecture, and they were all lined with gold. The ponies were much cleaner, had their manes done up in fancy shapes, and wore very extravagant outfits the likes of which would normally only be seen at formal gatherings. They gossiped about how to spend their vast fortunes, or how to further spoil their foals.

It made Vyse sick to his stomach. To think that these ponies had so very much, yet weren't willing to give even an ounce of it to the poor souls in Lower City. It was no wonder the Valuans were the way they were, no matter which half of the city they grew up in. Eventually, the two Air Pirates spotted the rail car station.

"Vyse," said Aika. "That huge vehicle over there must be the rail car."

"I think you're right, Aika. Looks like it can only ride on those rails. I guess it would be pretty hard to steal... Let me get a closer look!" From his position, Vyse used his glass eyepatch to magnify his view of the monorail. A group of guards were preparing to board one, but Vyse was not expecting to see the pony that they were escorting. "Fina!"

“What are you talking about?! I thought Fina was supposed to be at the palace!”

“That’s what I thought, but it looks like that rail car is going to the Grand Fortress. If she gets taken into the fortress, we’ll never be able to get her out! We have to move... now!”

But the monorail had already started to head out. It was passing the bridge upon which they stood at that very moment.

“We’ve got to jump onto the roof!”

“What?!” Aika shrieked. “Isn’t there a Plan B?”

“Come on, Aika!”

“This shouldn’t be TOO tough.”

Vyse flew onto the monorail, but since Aika was an earth pony, the height of the jump was too much for her, and she landed flat on her face. Vyse helped her up, and the two of them began galloping on the roof of the train to the front.

Galcian was examining the scene of the Air Pirates’ escape at the Coliseum, with several guards as his assistants. A messenger came to relay some news to him.

“Lord Galcian! We’ve just received a message from Central Station in Upper City... they’ve spotted some Air Pirates snooping around the rail cars.”

Galcian turned toward the messenger. “And the Air Pirates who escaped the execution... Are they still free?”

“Yes, Lord Galcian. My humblest apologies...”

“It matters not...”

“I’ll summon the City Guards and sweep all of the rail cars. We’ll find them.”

“That won’t be necessary. We know where they are heading... they are going to try and rescue the Alicorn.” There was a reason Galcian was the leader of the Armada. He had a wonderful talent for strategizing, and could read ponies as if they were books. “What’s the status of the Grand Fortress gates?”

“They’re currently open, sire. They aren’t scheduled to close for a while.”

“Close the gates immediately! Place all ships in the bay on full alert. Dispatch the Imperial Rail Car at once. I shall deal with these pirates myself.”

Vyse and Aika continued galloping toward the front of the extremely long rail car. After a while, however, something rammed the cars from behind. Another rail car had caught up with them, and a large earth stallion in a black cloak leaped from it and onto the roof of the other. Vyse used his eyeglass to get a better look at his pursuer. Galcian threw his cloak off, revealing the armored breastplate he wore underneath, and a cutie mark of an iron hoof. He bared between his teeth a very large, and triangular sword, and was staring straight into Vyse's eyes.

"Who's that?!" Aika asked. "Vyse, there's something about this pony... I'm not sure what it is, but I don't think we can take him."

"Yeah..." Vyse agreed. "And he looks really mad, too! Aika, here's the plan... Run!!! We have to get to Fina before he catches us!"

Vyse and Aika continued galloping down the roof of the rail cars. Galcian, however, simply trotted. He knew there was no way for the two of them to escape from him. No matter how fast they ran, he would soon catch them.

The two Air Pirates reached the foremost car and busted the door down. Fina could not believe who she was looking at. "Vyse?!"

"Sorry we took so long, Fina!" Aika greeted. "We're here to get you out!"

Vyse and Aika rushed at the two guard ponies and bucked them both into the wall, knocking them unconscious. They then tended to Fina, whose restraints they undid.

"I'm so glad you're safe, Fina!" Aika beamed. "We were worried about you."

Fina didn't know what to say. She had completely given up hope, but here she was, being rescued! "Vyse... Aika... How did you... Why?"

"Why do you think?" Vyse asked. "We're here to save you!"

"You mean... you did all this... just for... me?"

"Aww, Fina..." Aika sung as she hugged her. "We're friends! We weren't going to let them take you away from us!"

Fina had never felt more relieved in her entire life. She was on the verge of tears. "Thank you both so much! Honestly, I... I was so scared... I was all alone... I was afraid that they were going to hurt me. Oh, thank you... I'm... I'm so grateful!"

Vyse put his hoof on Fina's shoulder. "Everything is okay now, Fina. Now, let's get out of here!"

"I can't allow that," came a deep voice from behind. Vyse, Aika, and Fina turned to see that the stallion had caught up with them. He stepped closer to the trio. "I am Galcian, Lord of the Imperial Armada. You have caused us a great deal of trouble, colt. What is your name?"

"I'm Vyse of the Blue Rogues," he answered with a grin. "I just thought you were the hayseed that cleaned the rail cars."

"Ah... so you are the one who made a foal out of Alfonso. Not that he needed your help to begin with. That filly is worth nothing to you Air Pirates. Give her over to me. I guarantee that your lives, as well as that of the filly, will be spared. Is it a deal?"

"Never!!" Vyse answered. Fina smiled warmly at Vyse's fierce devotion to her safety. "I don't know what you want with her... But you're Valuans. Whatever it is, it can't be good."

"Do you honestly think that after attacking the Valuan Armada, you'll be able to fly the skies freely?"

"We're Air Pirates. We don't need your permission for anything. If we see something we want, we take it!"

"That's very disappointing. I'm afraid you leave me no choice... I must destroy you."

The trio prepared to do battle against the Armada's Lord, said to be the most powerful warrior in Equestria, having been completely undefeated. But before they could, they were interrupted by an enormous harpoon that tore through their rail car, severing it in half! It was the Little Jack, come to their rescue! And testing out its new weapon at that. Vyse picked up Aika, and he and Fina flew up to the deck of the ship, leaving Galcian stranded on the broken rail cars.

"You were late, Vyse," Dyne joked aboard the Little Jack. "We decided to come get you, and from the looks of it, we were just in time. Fina, are you alright?"

"Yes," Fina thanked with a genuine smile. She bowed her head to him. "Thank you very much... I'm very grateful that you've gone through so much trouble to rescue me..."

"Relax, Fina..." Aika calmed. "We're all okay. Save for the mushy stuff for later..."

"She's right," Drachma agreed. "We can all be thankful AFTER we've gotten out of Valua."

"Captain, emergency!" shouted Dyne's gunner. "They're closing the gates!!!"

The gunner pony had reported correctly. The Grand Fortress was closing early, and faster than usual.

"If the gate closes, we're all dead!" Drachma shouted. "We've got to act fast!"

Vyse quickly flew up to the bridge of the Little Jack, and set the rudders to full speed. The Little Jack sped for the shrinking gap in the door, trying to aim its angle to fit through it. *Come on!!!* he thought to himself. *Come on, Little Jack!!!!*

The Little Jack sped toward the gate, and just when it seemed like there wouldn't be enough room, the edges of their ship scraped against the door and the wall, lightly damaging it, but getting through it nonetheless! The Blue Rogues had escaped from Valua, and were the first in Equestria history to do so!!

"Woohoo!!!" Vyse yelled as he flew around the bridge. "We did it!!!"

"Alright!!!" Aika joined. "I knew you could do it, Vyse! You're the greatest!"

Dyne sighed, and then smiled at his son. "You got us through there by the hairs of our flanks. You had me worried for a second there."

Drachma remained quiet, but for the first time in years, he smiled. It had been too long since he had been on such an adventure, he'd forgotten what he was missing. The happiness that filled that tiny ship slowly began to fill a hole that had been burning away at his heart for a long, long time. He truly felt proud of Vyse.

Vyse took the helm again, and gave it a strong spin towards Pirate Isle. "We can finally say goodbye to Valua!" And with that, Vyse, Aika, Fina, Drachma, Dyne, and the rest of the crew headed for home.

But not everypony could celebrate this event. Galcian still stood within the broken rail cars, silently, staring in the direction the Air Pirates had escaped to. It was the first time in his life that he had ever failed at anything. Vyse was a force to be reckoned with, and his was a name that Galcian would not soon forget.

CHAPTER 3

Our Air Pirates had just escaped from Valua, and finally returned to their home on Pirate Isle. It had been at least a week since they departed, and the mares and foals who'd been left behind had succeeded in cleaning up and rebuilding the island. Vyse and the others were all greeted with a warm welcome from everypony upon their return. Wanting to get away from the celebratory excitement, Vyse, Aika, Fina, and Drachma climbed up to Lookout Isle to be alone. Once there, Fina turned to her new friends and smiled.

"Vyse... Aika... Captain Drachma..." Fina stuttered slightly, overwhelmed with happiness. "I... just wanted to tell you how much I... I..."

"Heh... don't worry about it," Vyse calmed. "The Valuans went through a lot of trouble to capture you. We just like making them mad."

"Vyse is just kidding Fina," Aika winked. "You're our friend now. But while we were there, I DID want to grab some more loot..."

"What?! Aika! You wanted to stay in Valua?! We barely made it out of there!"

"Hey! It's an Air Pirate's duty to liberate any treasure that can help the needy."

Everypony on that tiny little island laughed. They still hadn't gotten over their success, and felt it necessary to continue teasing both Valua and each other. After a few seconds though, Vyse became more serious. He turned to Fina, eager to finally get some answers.

"Um... Fina..." Vyse began. "There's something I want to ask you... What is this mission you're on? What are you looking for? And why is the Valuan Empire after you? We might be able to help..."

All eyes were on Fina. Reflexively, she lowered her eyes and turned her head, reluctant to give them answers. But it was her initial refusal to confess that got her and Vyse's friends captured in the first place. Had she simply trusted them and told them the truth, none of what just happened to them may have occurred. She was determined to make sure that never happened again, and finally, she placed her faith in the Blue Rogues.

"... Alright," Fina gave in. "I'll tell you. I am an Alicorn, a descendant of the Magenta Civilization."

"Magenta Civilization?" Aika asked.

“Hundreds of generations ago, Equestria’s population was divided into six civilizations. One existed under each of the Moons in the sky... Pink, Orange, Blue, Purple, Red, and Magenta. The moons were governed by six legendary ponies known as the Mane Six, each of whom possessed artifacts called Elements of Harmony. They were quite powerful, so the Mane Six decided to hide them all across the world, and assigned powerful monsters to guard them. These monsters were called ‘Gigas’, and were powerful enough to destroy large fragments of the entire planet.”

“I’ve heard about these Gigas before,” Aika remembered. “There’s a bird, and a bear... But, I thought those were all tales parents told their foals... I never thought that they were real.”

“Oh Aika, they are very real. The Gigas were permanently linked to each of the Elements of Harmony, allowing whosoever held the Elements to control them. Power-hungry ponies the world over began hunting for them, but were unsuccessful in locating them.

“However, something curious happened... The Rains of Destruction fell... Thousands upon thousands of gemstones fell from the moons and onto Equestria like a rainstorm, destroying much of the land and killing millions of innocent ponies. No one knows exactly what caused it, and I’m unsure if it happened before or after the creation of the Gigas. Myths state that the moons themselves made the Rains occur in order to stop the ponies from finding the Elements, depending on when the Rains occurred. Only a few survivors remained, and they were forced to rebuild their world, what we today call the ‘New World’. Now there are ponies who are trying to reawaken the Gigas.”

“You mean the Valuan Empire?” Vyse guessed.

“Yes. But to command the Gigas, as I’ve mentioned, it is necessary to possess the Elements of Harmony. An Element is a highly concentrated form of a gemstone, and during much of the Old World’s existence, they were powerless. But it was the Mane Six who managed to restore them, using fragments of their own spirits to do so. The Elements of Harmony used to control the Gigas are scattered throughout Equestria, and now, Valua is seeking the Elements so that they can reawaken them!”

“And that’s why the Valuan Empire kidnapped you...” Aika deduced. “To find out where they were hidden!”

“Yes. I was sent here to gather the Elements before the Valuans could find them and put them somewhere where they can never be used again... Vyse... Aika... I know I have caused you enough trouble, but I have another favor to ask of you. I would like you to go with me. Help me travel the world in search of the Elements. Please... I am not a very good

flyer, and I'm not very powerful, either... and if Valua gets the Elements... I don't even want to think about what would happen..."

Vyse was amazed by everything he had heard. Legends of powerful artifacts and ancient monsters intrigued him immensely. It sounded like the adventure he'd longed for his whole life. And his new friend Fina was desperate for him to join. How could he possibly refuse?

"Heh... leave everything to us!" Vyse exclaimed as he beat a hoof to his chest. "We'll go with you and find those Elements!"

"Yeah!" Aika agreed. "Vyse... I guess this is your chance to see what lies beyond the sunset!"

"You're right, Aika..."

"Thank you so much!" Fina thanked. "If you two were to come with me, I would be so honored!"

The conversation was cut short, as everypony became distracted by a noise they'd heard. What sounded like a high-pitched purr coming from nearby.

"Huh?" Aika asked. "Vyse, what was that noise? Was that your stomach?"

"Oh... I'm sorry," Fina apologized. She turned her eyes to the side, as if trying to look at the back of her mane (the crest). "It's okay little guy, you can come out now."

From Fina's crest came a small, round, gray insect with large black eyes, four legs, and four wings. It fluttered around, and landed gently on Fina's head.

"Fina!" Aika shouted, recognizing the creature. "Is that what I think it is?!"

"Yes, Aika," Fina answered. "It is a Parasprite."

Are you crazy?! You can't bring a Parasprite into civilization! Don't you know what they're capable of?!"

Parasprites were deceptively cute locusts with insatiable appetites who ate anything and everything in sight, starting with the food. They would eat something, digest it, and then regurgitate it into a new, already fully-grown Parasprite. This would continue until a village is overrun by a swarm of them. All of the food would quickly disappear, starving the ponies to death, and eventually the Parasprites as well, leaving naught but a ghost town. Ponies are strictly taught to handle Parasprite encounters with the utmost caution, that being to lure them back into the wild with music (... or kill them).

"Oh, you don't have to worry about this one," Fina explained. "The Alicorn Elders have cast a spell that prevents him from reproducing. And he's quite tame, so he only eats what I personally command him to."

"Wow..." Aika hummed. "I wish all Parasprites were that tame. They WOULD make adorable pets. What's his name?"

"His name is Cupil. Come, Cupil... say hello to everypony."

"Priiit~!" Cupil purred.

"It's SO CU~TE!" Aika beamed. "His sweetness just may give me diabetes!"

"Well, Fina," Vyse interrupted. "We've got a long journey ahead of us. We'll do our best to help you get those Elements."

"Now, the only problem left is Cap'n Dyne... I wonder if he'll let us go."

"What are you worried about? Even if he DOES say no, we'll just go anyway!"

Cupil returned to the safety of Fina's mane, and the lot of them climbed down from Lookout Isle.

Beneath the ground, in the headquarters of the Dyne clan, the Little Jack was docked and being tended to. Almost as if they knew exactly what was coming, Vyse's parents were already waiting for him in front of the ship. Vyse approached his stern father, almost half-heartedly.

"What's wrong, Vyse?" Dyne asked. "You're looking uncharacteristically grim."

"Dad..." Vyse began, rubbing the back of his head with his hoof. "Actually, there's something that I have to tell you."

Dyne chuckled and placed a hoof to his chin. "Don't worry... I have a feeling that I already know what you're going to say. I remember when I was your age... The feeling that I had to get away from my own little island and see the rest of the world. But when a stallion decides to step out onto his own path, he doesn't need to ask for his parents' permission. From now on, you are my equal, son. A stallion who lives by the skies. There is nothing more honorable than that... Heh... You're late on almost every other occasion, but you sure aren't wasting any time to try and get out on your own..."

"Dad..."

Vyse's mother approached him. "So, you've decided to leave?"

"Mom, I..."

"No. It's okay, dear. Everypony ultimately has to fly away from their parent's nest. I knew this day would come. It's just... that it came a lot sooner than I expected... or hoped... So stand tall, son. Go chase after those dreams you've always talked about. And make sure you take care of Aika too, okay?"

"Go on and get outta here, Vyse," Dyne urged. "Go make your mark in the world."

"I will!" Vyse assured. "Thanks, Dad... Mom..."

Fina interrupted their goodbyes, concerned about how quickly this decision was being made. "Vyse... Aika... are you sure you want to do this?"

"Fina, there's no way we can turn this down. After what you told us about the Gigas, I don't even want to think about what the Valuan Empire would do if they got their hooves on them. We're the only ones that can stop them. And... well, to be completely honest... I've always wanted to sail the world, and this is my chance... Elements of Harmony, lost cities, strange lands... I want to see them all with my own eyes! This is my chance to find out what's really out there."

"Fina," Aika began, "you couldn't stop us from going, even if you tried. This is the kind of adventure that Air Pirates dream of. If we passed this up, we'd regret it for the rest of our lives."

"... I understand," Fina said, now certain she wasn't the only reason they were coming. The last thing she wanted was to be a liability. "Thank you! Thank you all!"

"So," Vyse began, "do you have any idea where the Elements are?"

"Well, according to the legends, there should be an Element of Harmony hidden in the lands under each of the moons. The closest ones from here are... hmm... the Red Moon of Valua... and the Orange Moon of Nasr."

Dyne whistled. "Well, there's no chance of getting back into Valua right now. You should probably wait a while before going back there... So I recommend Nasr. Normal ships can't pass the stone reef to the south of Sailor's Island, but with the Harpoon Cannon grafted onto the ship, you might just be able to pierce your way through."

"Sounds like a plan," Vyse agreed. "So we're heading East to Nasr, and we're going to get that, um... Orange Element?"

"Element of Honesty," Fina corrected.

"They have names??"

"Oh, did I forget to mention? Yes, the Elements of Harmony have names. They include Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, Honesty, Loyalty,

and Magic. It was these personality traits that allowed the Mane Six to restore the Elements over 1000 years ago.”

Aika seemed somewhat nervous about their names. “Um, tell you what... I think it’s best if I never touch one of those things. Alrighty?” Aika was paranoid that her greedy personality would cause trouble, since the Elements sounded like artifacts that would harm those who were impure.

Fina giggled. “As you wish, Aika.”

Drachma was getting impatient. “We’ve been standing around here long enough. Let’s get going.”

Vyse nodded, and turned to his father one last time. “Well, Dad... I guess it’s time to say goodbye.”

Dyne placed a hoof on Vyse’s shoulder. “Remember everything I’ve taught you... Make us proud, son.”

Vyse, Aika, Fina, and Drachma boarded the Little Jack. Vyse immediately took the helm, ready to start his grand adventure. The hatch of the island opened up, and the citizens of Pirate Isle waved goodbye to the Little Jack as it sailed swiftly toward the cloudy horizon. They could never predict the events that would soon unfold around these four unlikely Air Pirates.

After a day or two of sailing, the Little Jack finally reached the stone reef separating Sailor’s Island from Southern Nasr. With the Harpoon Cannon mounted onto the bowsprit, it dove through the rocks and pushed them in all directions, making a clear path for the Little Jack to sail through. After about one more day of sailing, the Air Pirates reached sand. Er, land.

“Wow!” Aika exclaimed. “There’s nothing but sand!”

“So this is a desert...” Vyse mused. “I’ve heard sailors talk about them before, but it’s my first time actually seeing one.”

“Now that you mention it, I have too... They say that Nasrean deserts are SO hot, if you trot around in the sun for too long, your mane catches on fire! Everypony carries buckets of water around so they can put their friends’ manes out. And then--”

“Oh come ON, Aika... You don’t actually believe those crazy stories, do you? Sometimes I wonder what goes on in that head of yours.”

“Well, don’t come crying to me when your head bursts into flames. That glass eyepatch you wear will intensify the sun’s rays and fry your brain!” Aika suddenly realized how ridiculous she actually sounded now,

and quickly thought of a cover-up. "... Kidding, of course! I don't really believe those stories, either... Hehe... But, you can't be too careful."

Fina spoke up to give a history lesson of where they were headed. "The continent of Nasr has always been covered in desert and badlands, even in the Old World. Back then, a great apple orchard was formed by settlers, and over time, with the help of a nearby Buffalo tribe, it expanded far and wide. I seem to recall Nasr's original capital even being named after apples, but I forget the exact title. But after the Valua-Nasr war twenty years ago, most of the trees were destroyed. Now, it's just a barren wasteland."

"I see..." Vyse contemplated. "There isn't much down there besides sand and rock now, huh? But the Element of Honesty should be hidden somewhere in the desert, right?"

"That's right, Vyse. It is buried deep within the ancient Temple of Pyrynn."

"An ancient temple?!" Aika beamed, excited about the promise of loot. "I'll bet there's all kinds of treasure in there! Maybe some gems and magic stuff and nice clothes and millions of bits and... and... stuff. If we find a bunch of treasure, we'll be rich! We could go buy whatever we wanted!! What's the first thing you'd buy, Fina?"

Fina looked confused. "B... buy? Ummm... Um... What does that mean... exactly?"

"What?! Fina... you don't know what that means?!"

Fina lowered her head. The tone in Aika's voice suggested that this was the most confusing thing Fina had ever said. "I... I'm terribly sorry. I've never seen the rest of the world before, and..."

"You don't need to look very far to find a shop... Everypony buys stuff... It's... it's normal. Wow Fina, you really don't get out much, do you?"

Later that day, a small village on a large desert island came into view. It was the town of Maramba, where they had planned to stop and rest before continuing their journey. The entire trip, however, was surprisingly lax. One would normally expect Drachma to work them all to the bone the entire way there. But he hadn't said a word. Vyse and Aika were too excited about their adventure to notice anything wrong.

Maramba was a small village. Not as small as Sailor's Island, but still small by normal standards. Each part of the town was protected by short stone walls to shield against the desert's harsh winds. Earth ponies and

buffalo filled what could loosely be called the streets. This was the only village in Equestria where buffalo could be found. They were a proud and ancient race, having been there since their fathers before them, and their fathers before them, and their fathers before them, and so on. They refused to use pony technology to fly to other lands, firm in the belief that doing so would be an insult to their ancestors. They did not bare animosity toward ponies however; they simply kept to their ideals.

"So this is Maramba..." Vyse mused as he, Aika, and Fina exited the ship. "It's so... hot!"

"... Huh?" Aika said as she looked around. "Where'd the Cap'n go?"

No sooner than the three of them noticed his absence did the Little Jack's reverse gears kick in. It pulled out of the pier, with Drachma at the helm.

"Hey!" yelled Vyse as he flew after him. "Cap'n! Where are you going?!"

"This is where we part company," said Drachma. "I've got my OWN quest to worry about. I've got to find Punta!"

"What?!" Aika shouted. "Wait a second! What are WE supposed to do? We're in the middle of a desert without a ship! How are we supposed to continue our mission?!"

"That is not of my concern. I have no interest in Elements or temples. I must find Punta. I cannot waste any more time foalsittin'."

Although Vyse could fly, he wasn't nearly as fast as a ship, let alone a nimble one like the Little Jack. The ship was soon out of sight, so Vyse gave up the chase and returned to Aika and Fina on the pier. They could not believe how quick Drachma was to abandon them, though Vyse and Aika regretted having not seen it coming.

"This isn't good at all," Fina stated. "What should we do?"

Aika sighed and lowered her head. "We can't even get out of the city, let alone make it to the temple! We're stuck here..."

"Well," Vyse began as he crossed his hooves. "We have no choice right now other than to start exploring the city. Maybe we can find somepony who can take us to the temple. That's all we CAN do... for now."

Vyse, Aika, and Fina began looking around the town. All of the buildings were stone cubes, hastily constructed, but enough to classify as shelter. A few apple trees could be seen in heavily shaded locations, just enough to feed the small village. They were probably very difficult to take care of. Even after centuries in the desert, the ponies of Nasr still had not completely adapted to the heat, so they all wore very heavy clothing to

shield them from the sun. The buffalo did not need to wear so much, save for the feathers they wore on their heads as accessories.

Our Air Pirates were not quite so accustomed, so they soon located the local tavern in order to rest. Aika expected to find small chairs like they had back home, but instead found only pillows surrounding very short tables.

“Oh...” Aika moaned, disappointed yet intrigued. “I guess in Nasr, they just sit on the ground.”

Vyse didn't complain. “Yeah, it feels good to finally sit down.”

“Well, we shouldn't rest too long. We gotta go look for a ship. I wonder if we can rent one from the docks... *sigh* I can't believe that Cap'n Drachma just left us here... I'm sure he had his reasons to leave, but I wish he'd said something sooner. He didn't have to leave us here in the desert, right Vyse? ... Vyse?”

Vyse was barely paying any attention. His eyes were fixated on a lone dancer, spinning about the stage at the end of the tavern. A unicorn with light, translucent clothing, glistening makeup, and puffy pants entertained the ponies in the bar, using her magic to create flashes of light, among other special effects. Vyse was completely mesmerized.

“VYSE!!!” Aika shouted. Vyse instantly snapped out of it, and was met with an angry Aika right up in his muzzle. “Have you heard a single word I've said?!”

“Um...” Vyse laughed nervously and grinned an innocent smile. “Y... yeah... I'm listening... You were talking about the... desert?”

“... You act like you've never seen a filly before... If you could just pry your eyes away from that dancer for a few seconds...”

“Okay, okay. It's just that she's such a good dancer... I didn't want to insult her by, uh... not looking. New lands, new customs, y'know!”

“What kind of excuse is that?! You practically had bedroom eyes!”

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry. But, seriously... don't you think she's looked over here more than just a few times? I think she likes me.”

Aika rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. Fina, will you try and talk some sense into him?”

Fina was confused. She didn't understand that Aika was just being jealous, so she could only view the situation from an objective point of view. “... Do you really find it that hard to believe?” she asked as she blinked her eyes. “Well, Vyse is very attractive... I don't think it would be strange at all if that dancer was looking at him.”

“Haha... You're kidding, right? Vyse wouldn't want somepony like her... I mean... who knows where she's been?” Vyse and Fina were both

looking past Aika with blank expressions. Curious to know what they were looking at, Aika turned her head, only to be confronted with the very unicorn she had just been talking about. Aika became frantic and tried to hide this fact. "Oh! Umm... I, so, umm... Do you travel a lot?"

"Tell me something..." the dancing unicorn began. "You wouldn't happen to be that group of Air Pirates that escaped from the Grand Fortress now, would you?"

"Huh?!" said Vyse. "How did you know about that?"

"Well, news of such a history-making feat is not an easily kept secret. And when you hang out in places like this, you overhear all kinds of things... Rumors, local gossip, news about other lands..... you even hear stories about Air Pirates needing a ship. If you want, I can give you a lift. What do you say?"

"Really?!" Vyse practically accepted the offer with this word alone. He was just eager to spend more time around the beautiful unicorn. "Thanks! That'll help us a lot."

"Wait a second," Aika interrupted, highly suspicious of this convenience. "Why would you help us? You don't even know who we are!"

"Let's just say," the dancer sung, "that anypony who can escape from the Valuan Grand Fortress interests me. My name is Bellena. Meet me at the port first thing tomorrow morning. See you around, handsome."

As she turned to head back to the stage, she blew a kiss to Vyse. This made Aika quite red in the face, but Vyse was convinced that the moons had sent him a guardian angel.

That night, as the Little Jack sailed aimlessly around Nasrean airspace, Drachma found it difficult to shake off his feelings of guilt. He shut his eyes, and shook his head. "... Hrmph... Should I have left those kids there? Bah! What am I worryin' about? Somepony else will take care of them."

As he looked up from his contemplation, he couldn't help but notice something blinking in the distance. A pink, steel ship was hiding behind the rocks of the stone reef. Drachma recognized it immediately, and realized exactly what the ponies he'd abandoned had gotten themselves into. And with this knowledge in mind, his feelings of guilt and worry began to rapidly increase.

The next morning, Vyse, Aika, and Fina left the inn they had stayed at and headed down to the docks. Bellena was already waiting for them next to a very small ship, which looked similar to the one the Nasrean merchant they helped before owned.

“Good morning,” the dancer greeted. “I trust you slept well last night...”

Vyse grinned. “It was the best night’s sleep I’ve had in a long time. So, I guess we should get ready and start exploring the desert?”

“‘Only those who have trotted through the desert can truly know its size,’ is a saying we have here in Nasr. It’s too difficult to cross the desert on hoof, because of the heat. A mere half day’s walk can be deadly... You’ll need a ship to cross it.”

“Hmph...” Aika snorted. She still didn’t fully trust Bellena. This all seemed way too convenient to her. “... Um, Bellena, why are you going out of your way to give us a ride? You don’t even know us.”

“Well! You aren’t very grateful, are you? If you were dying of thirst, and somepony offered you water, you would probably ask where it came from first.”

“What?!!!”

Bellena’s playful attitude quickly became more serious. “... Alright. If you must know, then I’ll tell you... My father was a soldier. He was a poor stallion, and sometimes a little short-tempered, but he was a good father. We struggled to get by, and my father was barely able to support us. We had nothing to rely on but each other... But we were happy... Until that day... Twenty years ago... Valua and Nasr declared war on each other. And my... my father was killed in battle. When he died, we had nothing... no food... no pony to support us... no pony to raise us... We had to live on the streets. Some say that you can’t die from a broken heart, but they’re wrong... My mother died shortly after my father... She was so sad... I was alone... and scared. I had to fend for myself on the streets. And that is how I ended up living like... this.”

“Oh... Bellena...” Fina apologized. She too had been somewhat suspicious. “We’re so sorry... We had no idea...”

“Ever since then, I’ve hated war. Hundreds of ponies die... Hundreds more families have to go through what I went through. And that is why, I’m letting you... No, I want you to use my ship. Please...”

Vyse had already agreed to accept her aid, but after hearing her story, all of his doubts, little though they were, vanished. “We’ll do it!” he assured.

“... Thank you, oh so much...”

“Bellena...” Aika began, as she looked at the ground out of guilt. “I... I’m sorry for... what I said earlier. I shouldn’t have spoken to you that way. I lost my parents when I was a foal, too. I know what you went through...”

“Heh heh... that’s quite alright. As long as you don’t take my generosity for granted. Alright everypony, get on board.”

Fina informed Bellena of their destination. “The Temple of Pyrynn lies far to the east, at the very end of the desert.”

“Let’s go!” Vyse ordered. The four of them got on the small ship, and flew off.

After traveling straight east for only until the next day, our Air Pirates reached an enormous mountain valley at the edge of the desert. And within that valley stood the Temple of Pyrynn, a gigantic pyramid that seemed to stretch as tall as the Grand Fortress. A long stairway led up to the entrance along the front side, and at its base lay a small courtyard with four, giant stone heads facing the center.

Aika almost fell backward as she tried to see the top of the enormous pyramid. “THIS is the Temple of Pyrynn?!! It’s HUGE! I can’t believe it! It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen!”

Its size and beauty made Vyse wonder how the Valuans hadn’t found it yet. “The ponies of the Old World were able to build this thing in this heat?! And it’s built on SAND, too!! It’s incredible!”

“Deep within this temple,” Fina began, “lies the Element of Honesty. Be careful, though... According to Alicorn lore, it is guarded by many traps.”

“I’ll be waiting out here,” said Bellena. “I would just get in your way.”

“Well,” Vyse began, “it might be a little rough in there for a beautiful mare, like yourself...”

“Oh, REALLY...” Aika snapped. “What about me and Fina?! We’re mares too, y’know! Just what are you trying to say? Come on, Fina. Let’s leave macho colt behind and get the Element ourselves.”

Fina giggled. “That might be kind of fun. We’d probably get it faster without him.”

“H... Hey!” Vyse turned around and rubbed the back of his head. “Wait a minute! I didn’t mean...”

Bellena couldn’t help but laugh at the three friends’ playful bickering. “Watching the three of you really cheers me up. You’re all such good friends, and Vyse is so funny.”

Aika smiled proudly. "Well, I'm sure a beautiful mare like yourself has got herself a much, Much, MUCH better colt than... Mr. Hoof In Mouth Disease..."

"Hahaha! Sorry... there's nopony special in my life right now... Well, there IS somepony that I'm in love with... But he would never even give me a second look... But I don't want to talk about it right now. You should probably get going. I'll be waiting here. Be careful in there, okay?"

"Don't worry," Vyse assured. "We'll be back before you even notice that we were gone."

Our three Air Pirates approached the entrance to the Temple. Vyse and Fina had it easy since they could fly, but Aika had to walk up the stairs, which was very difficult for her. The intense heat of the desert didn't make it any easier for her, either. By the time she'd finally reached the top, she felt as though her forehead had transformed into a warm rain cloud. As she desperately tried to catch her breath, Vyse urged her to come inside, claiming it would be cooler.

For a while, it was relatively cooler than it was outside. But deep into the temple, Aika was met with a most horrific sight: lava. The two things she hated most right now were swimming and heat, and the bubbling lava seemed to mock her for this.

The traps in the temple were not too difficult to overcome. There were a couple hallways that seemed to have come directly out of an Indiana Jones book, with boulders that constantly rolled down them. Aika almost got killed when she tried to go back into one of these hallways after something shiny caught her eye. By the time they reached the bottom, Aika's saddlebag was full of various trinkets she'd found. She was so proud of herself that she frolicked the rest of the way.

That is, until they came to a giant river of lava separating them and the next door. Vyse and Fina could easily cross, but Aika would need to be lifted. And with all that treasure weighing her down, this simply wasn't a safe option. After much frantic contemplation, she was eventually forced to part with her findings, but swore she would someday return for it.

And behind that door... lied the Air Pirates' reward. At the end of a long, dimly light hallway, a glistening jewel shone atop a small pillar. It was the Element of Honesty. It was small, but bright enough to light the entire room. It was orange of course, and shaped like a crystalline apple.

"Wow..." said Vyse. "So this is an Element of Harmony..."

“An Element of Harmony is the powerful source of energy that you will ever see,” Fina explained. “This Element alone has the power of thousands... no... tens of thousands of gemstones...”

“So this Element is powerful enough to control one of the Gigas?”

Fina took the Element from its altar and levitated it in the air with her magic. “Look at the light emanating from the Element... Even though a thousand years have passed since the destruction of the Old World, the Element still shines as brightly as ever.”

Aika was so taken by the Element’s beauty, that she had forgotten what she’d said before about not touching one. “Um, can I hold it? Please??”

Fina giggled. “Of course.”

“Wow...” Aika beamed as she held it in her hooves. “It’s so beautiful... It’s definitely prettier than that necklace Vyse gave me for my birthday.”

“A-Aika!” Vyse yelled. “What a thing to say!”

“I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to say that at all! It just... slipped out!”

“Oh, um...” Fina shied. “Did I forget to mention? The Element of Honesty forces all those who hold it to tell the truth for as long as they are doing so.”

“What?! I should’ve known! In that case, YOU hold onto it, Vyse! I don’t want to say anything I’ll regret!”

“Too late for that,” Vyse retorted as he slipped the Element into his saddlebag. “Fina, leave it to us. We’ll keep it safe! The Valuans are going to have to take it off of my dead body before I give it over to them. There’s so much of the world that I still have to see... I’m not going to let them wake some ancient guardians to destroy half it now!”

“Thank you, Vyse!” Fina thanked. “I know you will do your best to keep it safe.”

Behind the altar upon which the Element once stood, there was a glowing pattern on the floor. Fina did not hesitate to step on it, which caused her to vanish, much to Vyse and Aika’s horror. Hesitantly, they followed suit, and stepped on it as well. They were immediately joined with Fina outside of the temple, and the two of them had no idea what to make of it. Fina didn’t seem too impressed with the teleportation, leading Vyse and Aika to wonder exactly what WAS normal to this filly.

Bellena was patiently waiting for them in the courtyard at the base of the temple, just as she said she'd be. "Sorry to have kept you waiting so long," Vyse apologized. "I hope you weren't too worried about us."

"I'm so glad you're alright!" Bellena beamed. "Did you find the Element?"

"Heh, of course we found it!"

"I knew you could do it! Um, would it be alright if I took a look at it?"

The Air Pirates were, of course, a teeny bit suspicious, but they still felt bad about feeling that way about her before. Besides, for as long as she was holding the Element of Honesty, she couldn't lie to them at all, so any tricks she may have had up her sleeve were guaranteed to fail. Vyse accepted Bellena's request, and handed the Element to her.

"Wow..." she hummed, as she levitated it with her magic. "So this is one of the legendary Elements of Harmony... It's more beautiful than I ever imagined. Thank you so much. I'm sure that Lord Galcian will be very pleased."

"What?!?!" Vyse shouted as he jerked back. He, Aika, and Fina had been wrong to trust her, after all. On her command, several armored guards appeared from behind the giant stone heads, and had them completely surrounded. "Bellena... who are you?!"

Bellena closed her eyes and concentrated her magic. She was engulfed in a strong light, and when it faded, she was no longer dressed as a dancer. "Let me reintroduce myself," she sung. "I am Belleza, the 4th Admiral of the Imperial Armada. I specialize in covert operations. You don't need to get your hooves bloody to win battles, you know. Sometimes, a little trickery goes a long way."

"You!!!" Vyse angrily shouted. "You tricked us!!!"

"Bellena...?" Fina said quietly, hurt by the deception. "Or... umm... Belleza... So, everything that you said... about your parents... about war... about your childhood... Was it all a lie? Did you just say that to get us to trust you?"

"I told you the truth," Belleza admitted, still holding the Element of Honesty. "I never said my father was from Nasr. He was a Valuan soldier, and he did die in battle. Years later, I too, became a soldier... I want to put an end to all wars, so nopony has to go through what I went through. Countries go to war arguing over borders and resources. If Equestria was united under one rule, there would be no more war. And that is why we need the power of the Gigas, to make sure nopony opposes us! Valua must rule the world!"

"Belleza!!! NO, DON'T!!!"

Belleza's eyes glowed white as the Element of Honesty shined brighter and brighter. The ground began to rumble as she barked orders at it. "Orange Gigas, Hydra! As bearer of the Element of Honesty, I command you to awaken and do my bidding!"

"Um... Fina?" Vyse nervously asked. "What did she do? This is bad, right?"

"Goodbye, handsome..." Belleza whispered as she and her guards fled the scene.

"Vyse! Aika!" Fina yelled. "Hurry! We must run! Belleza... she... she is summoning the Hydra, the Orange Gigas!!! She's using the Element of Honesty to awaken him!!!"

"... She what?! I guess we ARE going to have to run! Let's get out of here!"

Vyse and Fina began flying as far from the temple as they could get, being careful not to go so fast that Aika couldn't keep up with them on the ground. After a few minutes of fleeing, the ground began to shake more violently. The stone heads that surrounded the temple courtyard began to twist and crack, until they broke apart completely as they rose out of the ground. It was the Hydra, a massive, orange, dragon-like creature with four long-necked heads, two legs under its stubby body, and a long tail with which to keep balance. All four heads opened their eyes and yawned, as each one had been asleep for an entire millennium.

"Is that...?!" Vyse asked.

"Yes," Fina answered. "That is the Orange Gigas, the Hydra."

"So those weren't statues in front of the temple," Aika realized. "They were its heads!"

After many deep, long yawns, the Hydra's heads were now fully awake, and viewing their unfamiliar surroundings. It wasn't long before all four heads noticed the Air Pirates fleeing from them. Angry, three of the heads let out a mighty roar. The fourth, however, wasn't sure what they were doing at first, but quickly roared along with the rest anyway.

"It's looking at us..." Vyse noticed. "RUN!!!"

The head closest to the Air Pirates began inhaling deeply, preparing to attack them from a distance. As Aika tried her hardest to gallop through the soft, dusty sand, she eventually tripped and fell. Not about to leave her behind, Vyse and Fina quickly flew to her side. The Air Pirates weren't able to continue fleeing before Vyse noticed the Hydra preparing its attack. He placed himself between the Hydra and his friends, ready to take the hit for them.

But just as the Hydra was about to release its attack, a strong cannon blast knocked its head off balance. The Hydra fired a powerful beam of energy from its mouth, but it missed the Air Pirates, hitting the desert instead and causing a massive explosion, which in turn caused a strong sandstorm as well.

“... It missed us...” said Vyse. “Something hit it in the head!!!”

Through the dirty sandstorm, Vyse, Aika, and Fina were relieved to see that a small, green ship with a harpoon had come to their rescue. “I can’t leave you three alone, can I?” Drachma shouted. “Stop gawkin’ and get on!”

“Cap’n!” Aika shouted as she jumped for joy. “You came back for us!”

“Hurry!” Vyse ordered as he lifted Aika into the air. “Maybe we can take that thing out in the Little Jack!”

Near the temple, Belleza and her guards were watching the events unfold. “Admiral Belleza,” a guard reported. “That ship is rescuing them.”

“Ready the Lynx,” Belleza ordered as she pointed to her pink ship. “I want to make sure they don’t escape.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“Heh heh... Well handsome, now we can see what you’re made of...” Belleza and her guard ponies boarded her ship, and remained on the sidelines while waiting to make their move.

On the Little Jack, the Air Pirates were reunited with their Captain. “Cap’n!” Aika shouted as she glomped him. “You came back just in time!”

“I didn’t come back for you...!” Drachma lied. “My search for Punta brought me back to this desert. And I wasn’t about to watch the three of you get roasted by that... that thing...”

Aika giggled. “Hey Fina, get a load of the Cap’n... I wonder how long he can act like he doesn’t care about us.”

Fina laughed as well. “Aika, you really shouldn’t tease him like that.”

“Who’s actin’?!” Drachma shouted to hide his embarrassment. “I just want to find Punta! Rotten little brats always gettin’ me into trouble...”

“Calm down, Captain,” Vyse eased. “But what should we do against the Hydra?”

“Hm... well, let’s treat it like a practice run for when I finally do fight Punta. That thing packs quite a punch. Do not get hit by that beam, no matter what. I don’t know if the Little Jack can handle a direct hit.”

“Aye aye! Let’s do this!”

The Little Jack began circling the Hydra, while the creature itself shook off the attack it had just endured. It stomped around angrily, led by Belleza's telepathic orders, but did not chase after the Air Pirates just yet. She knew better than to rush into enemy lines.

"Hey, Captain..." said Vyse. "Do you have any ideas on how to fight this thing?"

Drachma shook his head. "You know as much about this thing as I do. I don't know if we can kill him, but perhaps we can incapacitate him somehow. If you remember when I saved... I mean, when I picked you kids up, I attacked it with my cannons and knocked it off balance. So, what I'm thinkin' is that if we were to concentrate our cannon fire right before he attacks, we may throw his aim off."

"I suppose it's worth a try. What have we got to lose? Er, besides our lives. Let's give it a shot!!"

The Little Jack continued circling around the Hydra, waiting for it to make a move. At last, their ship was in range, and one of the heads began powering up another energy beam. Sticking to their strategy, Aika, Fina, and Drachma lit every cannon on deck and fired upon the head. The head was knocked so far to the side, that the beam it shot actually struck a nearby mountain, halving the titanic structure's height as the peak crumbled to the ground.

"Yeah! We did it!" Vyse cheered. "We knocked it off balance!"

"Yeah, but... well..." Aika groaned. "It doesn't look like we DID anything to it, though..."

"I don't know how long we can keep this up. It just feels like we're only prolonging our own deaths... He's GOT to have a weakness... Well, if attacking the heads doesn't work, let's try the legs. They're probably holding up a lot of weight; we might be able to knock it over."

The Little Jack lowered its altitude and pulled in closer to the Hydra's legs. The Air Pirates began firing upon them, but the Hydra did not even flinch. After much annoyance, the Hydra actually attempted to stomp on the ship with one of its fat, stubby little legs, but the Little Jack pulled out just in time.

"Damn..." Vyse cursed. "Nothing. We got in as close as we could, but our cannons did almost nothing to it."

"It's no use, colt," Drachma admitted. "The only thing we're managin' to do is waste ammunition. We can't continue fightin' like this for much longer. We must retreat for now. Get us out of range of its attacks, and we'll think of a new strategy."

Vyse bit his lip. Running away? Giving up? There was nothing else in the world Vyse hated doing more. Still, he realized they were fighting a hopeless battle. Maybe retreating was the best choice. "... You're right, Captain... I suppose we've got no other choice..."

"Well then, full speed ahead! Let's get out of here!" The Little Jack turned around and began speeding West, as far away from the Hydra as they could get.

"What the HAY!" Vyse growled, furious. "What are we supposed to do?! Nothing worked!"

"Hey Fina," Aika began. "Can you think of a way to stop it?"

"Gigas don't normally make their own decisions," Fina explained. "They only obey commands given to them by the ones who awaken them. Until Belleza tells it to stop, there is nothing we can do..."

"Hmmm..." Vyse thought. "So if something were to happen to Belleza..."

"I got it!" Aika sung. "I know how to stop that thing!"

"Ram into the Gigas?"

Aika's jaw dropped as she stared blankly at Vyse.

"Kidding! Sorry. You mean, attack Belleza, right? If we can stop her, we can force her to call off the Gigas!"

"That's a good idea," Drachma agreed. "Either way, we'll last longer against her than we will against the Hydra! Alright, full rudder! Target: Belleza's ship! All hooves to battle stations!"

"Aye aye, Captain!"

Luckily for our Air Pirates, Belleza was already tailing them. She had given chase when they attempted to flee from the Hydra. Now both the Little Jack and the Lynx were distant enough from the Hydra to have a brawl without any unwanted interference. "Hahaha..." Belleza laughed. "Meet my flagship, the Lynx. All of my crew members are trained unicorns, and they can enhance my cannon fire with magic! Now, I will show you the power of the Imperial Armada!"

The Little Jack and the Lynx sailed around each other in interlocking loops and turns. Every time the Blue Rogues thought they had a clear shot, Belleza would be clear out of the way by the time they fired. And every time they thought they were safe, they were struck by cannon fire, as well as cannon ice, and even cannon lightning. Magically-enhanced cannons were definitely a new threat, but what peeved Vyse off most was his inability to avoid them.

“Damn...” Drachma grieved. “The lady admiral is good. It’s almost as if she can read our every move...”

“I can’t find any openings!” Aika reported. “Her defense is too good! What should we do?!”

Vyse knew why the ship’s movements were so predictable. He had been trained to fight other ships by sailing in varied patterns. Well, the time had come for that to end. He made a sharp turn and caught the Lynx off guard, having the others fire cannons as they passed her up. But Belleza’s quick reflexes caused them to miss, anyway.

“Hmm... That ship’s quicker than it looks,” Belleza noted. “They may have surprised me this time, but I always have a backup plan. Preparation is one of the keys to victory, handsome...”

Now that the Little Jack had stopped following a set course in order to capitalize on its speed, Belleza adjusted her strategy accordingly. She would deliberately try and get in the Little Jack’s way in order to force it to turn in certain directions. This would once again leave them wide open every single time.

“She’s too good!” Vyse admitted. “I can’t find any openings!”

“This isn’t fair!!” Aika whined (or is it complained?). “Why won’t she just sit still like everypony else does?! How does she expect us to hit her like this?!”

Vyse had to think fast, or the Little Jack would be destroyed by Belleza’s magic cannons. So far, Belleza had anticipated almost every single one of their moves. But was it because she was a tactical genius? Perfect, with no equal? Or was it because... Vyse’s moves were actually THAT predictable?

Vyse got an idea. “Everypony! Bring the Little Jack to a complete stop!!”

“What?!” Aika shouted. “But... she’d have a clear shot at us if we did that!”

“That’s why she’d never think we’d do it! We need to try something completely unexpected! Now halt the rudders!”

The Little Jack came to a stop, and when the Lynx tried to get into its usual position, it sailed right past them. With a clear shot at the Lynx’s backside, the Little Jack began its pursuit.

“...?! Where did they go?!” Belleza yelled. “Vice Captain! What’s going on?!”

“Y, yes Lady Belleza!” the Vice Captain reported. “Well, they came to stop right in the middle of the battlefield, and... we just sort of... passed them...”

“What...? Their speed was their greatest advantage, and you mean to tell me that they just STOPPED?! Why would they do that?!?” Belleza was so confused and frustrated that she was beating her forehooves against the floor repeatedly.

“Now’s our chance!” Vyse cheered. “Her defense is down! It’s time to fire the Harpoon Cannon!”

Aika, Fina, and Drachma all worked together to power up the Harpoon Cannon. Atop the bowsprit, the harpoon spun around and around, like a drill, until finally, it fired off. It drilled straight through the Lynx, from back to front, and tore right out the other end! The Lynx quickly lost altitude as the harpoon reeled back out, as several of the onboard mechanisms had just been destroyed. Belleza took the helm immediately and, with all her concentration, managed to land the ship safely onto the sand below.

“Aika! Signal Belleza’s ship!” Vyse ordered. “Tell her that we will attack if she doesn’t call off the Gigas!”

“Yay!!!” Aika cheered as she used the ship’s lights to signal them with horse code. “Aye aye to THAT!”

“Now,” Drachma began, “all we need is for that lady admiral to listen to our demands...”

“Don’t worry, Captain,” Vyse assured. “Belleza is not the kind of pony that would needlessly endanger the lives of her crew. I’m sure she’ll call off the Gigas.”

“Belleza...” Fina prayed. “Please...”

In the distance, the Hydra could be seen yawning once more. It plopped down onto the desert floor and fell back to sleep. “Vyse! Look! The Gigas...!”

“There was reply from Belleza’s ship!” Aika reported as she read the horse code out loud. “‘We have called off the Gigas. We have made an emergency landing’. I repeat: ‘We have called off the Gigas. We have made an emergency landing’.”

“We did it!” Vyse cheered.

Ready to confront Belleza one last time, the Little Jack landed next to the Lynx, and the Blue Rogues met up with her outside. She already had the Element of Honesty waiting for them, and levitated it over to Fina without even being asked to.

“You may have won the battle,” Belleza began, “but you are far from winning the war. There are five Elements left. The Valuan Armada never makes the same mistake twice. You shall not defeat us again.”

Vyse nodded, almost if he had a friendly rivalry with the Armada now. "And we won't make the same mistake of underestimating you again, either. We'll get those Elements. Fina, where should we go next?"

"Southwest of Nasr," Fina explained, "beyond South Ocean... There is a continent under the Pink Moon."

Vyse couldn't believe what he'd just heard. Everypony he'd ever met only ever talked about the Red, Orange, and Magenta continents. What's more, South Ocean was a valley of storms that nopony had ever been reported capable of crossing. "Really?! There's a continent on the other side of South Ocean?!"

"Yes. The Element of Kindness should be there."

"Ha," Belleza scoffed. "That's the continent of Ixa'taka. Our soldiers are already there. Besides, South Ocean has warped sky rifts that have taken the form of perpetual tornadoes. You'll never make it across with that tiny ship of yours."

"No need to worry about that," grunted Drachma as he exited the Lynx, carrying a large machine on his back. "We're takin' your ship's engine. With that much power, we can get across South Ocean in no time."

"What?! Then, how am I going to get back?!"

Aika grinned. "We all decided that you should go back on hoof. You trick us... we take your engine... I think we're even now. What was that saying? 'Only those who have trotted through the desert can truly know its size'? Teehee..."

"You want me to... walk?" Belleza looked almost heartbroken at first, but she soon shrugged and smirked. "Heh. Well... I guess I don't have much of a choice. I never actually though I would truly know the size of the desert..."

The Blue Rogues began to board the Little Jack, but Vyse was called back.

"Hey. Handsome... You win this time. But, Valua is more powerful than you can imagine. And the trip to Ixa'taka is quite perilous... The chance that you'll survive long enough to get there is pretty slim. Are you sure you still want to go? You still have time to reconsider."

"Real sailors aren't afraid of the unknown," Vyse answered. "I want to see the world... I'm not going to rest until I've left my mark on it, and I won't let anything or anypony stand in my way."

"... I understand... You're rash and impulsive... I hope you survive long enough for us to meet again."

Vyse flew up to the bridge of the Little Jack, and began its departure. Belleza watched it sail off into the horizon, before returning to her own ship

to install the secret spare engine she conveniently forgot to mention to the Air Pirates.

South Ocean was located southwest of Maramba, and south of Middle Ocean. It was on the other side of one of the many sky rifts that surrounded Middle Ocean, making Maramba airspace the only place it can be accessed from. After a couple days of traveling, the Little Jack and its crew arrived at the entrance. South Ocean had sky rifts on either side of it, making it something of a giant hallway in the sky. And within that hall lied countless tornadoes. Some sucked you in, others pushed away, others merely revolved you around them. Pegasi have been searching for a way to stop the tornadoes for centuries, but have so far been unsuccessful.

"Listen up, colt," Drachma ordered. "This here is South Ocean. It's considered to be one of the most difficult places to sail through. There's a strong crosswind that blows primarily from the west. Nopony has ever successfully sailed through it."

"But the lands of the Pink Moon are through here, right?" Vyse asked. "And besides, we have Belleza's engine now. It's not like we don't have a chance of making it through."

"Perhaps. But my knowledge of this place is limited. You're on your own. This isn't going to be an easy journey. Prepare yourselves for the worst."

Vyse examined the challenge that laid before him. South Ocean curved around Middle Ocean, and Ixa'taka lied to the west of it. He concluded that if he sailed on the northern edge, the edge closest to Middle Ocean, the journey would be shorter and he'd avoid most of the tornadoes. He carefully sailed alongside the sky rift, and almost thought he could see Pirate Isle through it at one point. Vyse wondered if his friends and family were watching him now, and became more determined to see this through.

The entire day passed very slowly. South Ocean was huge, and seemed even bigger due to the powerful winds pushing them back. The rudders were at full power, and way too often did Aika have to refuel the engine with gems in order to keep up their speed. If they let up even once, they would be tossed around by the winds and thrust into Deep Sky.

The journey was long and dangerous. Vyse and Drachma even had to take turns at the helm while the other rested. By the time morning came, the amount of tornadoes in sight had drastically shortened, and the current was finally weakening. The Blue Rogues wondered if the worst was over,

and a small, almost unnoticeable sign confirmed their hopes: leaves.
Leaves blowing in the wind. And that could only mean one thing.
They were close to land.

CHAPTER 4

“Hey, look!” Aika pointed her hoof out the front window. “There are leaves blowing in the wind.”

“Which means... we’re close to land!” Vyse exclaimed as he steered the Little Jack. “We’ve finally made it across South Ocean!”

“I’m sure these leaves came from Ixa’taka,” Fina deduced. “Under the light of the Pink Moon, ever since ancient times, the lands of Ixa’taka have been covered in lush forests and many varieties of animals. The moon has blessed the lands with fertility...”

“Blessed lands, huh?” Aika pondered. “If that’s true, I’m sure there are all kinds of delicious things to eat there. I can see it now... piles and piles of fruits, vegetables, hay, oats... all of different shapes, sizes, colors, and tastes...”

Vyse grinned devilishly. “I bet there are just as many carnivorous monsters roaming around the woods, too... Preying upon unsuspecting foals who sit there, stuffing their muzzles with fruit...”

“Hey! You don’t have to crush my hopes like that!”

Fina couldn’t help but giggle. “If Aika was hungry enough, she’d probably eat the monsters, too!”

Aika scoffed jokingly. “Vyse! Look what you did! Now you’ve got Fina doing it!”

“Oh... I... I’m sorry...” Fina apologized, not realizing that Aika was kidding. “I didn’t mean any harm...” Aika laughed to let Fina know everything was fine.

“Alright everypony, get to your posts...” Cap’n Drachma ordered. “Get ready to drop anchor.”

“Aye aye, Captain!” Vyse responded. “As soon as we see Ixa’taka, we’ll look for a spot to land.”

Ixa’taka was an enormous continent, almost as big as Valua. It’s many large islands were, as expected, covered from shore to shore in thick trees that made up the nation’s many forests and jungles. Rivers, lakes, and waterfalls were plentiful, and several Ixa’takan ships flew around, which appeared to have been built from sticks and leaves. Ixa’taka was nature itself.

Surrounding the western borders of Ixa'taka was a giant, white stone reef. Although the Little Jack could sail through smaller reefs, this one looked completely impenetrable, even to steel ships. The northern borders were blocked by mountains and a giant net that appeared to be made of iron. Who could have built that, and why? The southern borders were blocked by sky rifts, and to the east lied the treacherous South Ocean, where our Air Pirates had just come through. It was no wonder nopony had ever heard of this place.

On one of the higher islands, on its eastern cliff, Vyse spotted what appeared to be a treehouse village. Vyse pulled the Little Jack into its harbor and dropped anchor to keep the ship from floating away. The welcome sign was in a language Vyse did not understand, but Fina recognized it easily. She read the village's name as "Horteka". Excited to meet the natives, the Blue Rogues entered the village.

As soon as Vyse and friends entered the town, they were immediately welcomed by some nearby villagers. Or so they thought; they didn't feel very welcome. The ponies that greeted them said nothing, staring at the Air Pirates with a mix of confusion and caution. They were of an unusual appearance as well, as not only were they all earth ponies, but they had matching coat and mane colors and, to their surprise, patterns.

"Umm..." Aika began, confused. "These ponies are all black and white... And they have stripes, too..."

"They're not ponies, Aika," Fina explained. "They're zebras, and they were born with those stripes."

A couple of the zebras whispered to each other and nodded. Finally, one turned to the ponies, and asked, "Are you Fluttershy?"

"Huh?" Vyse asked, also confused.

"The pony behind you with wing and horn. Both are features Fluttershy had worn."

"What?" Fina was more confused than anypony. "Are they talking about me?"

"Umm... We're Blue Rogues," Vyse tried to explain. "We came across South Ocean."

The zebra villagers looked disappointed. "You are not Fluttershy; you will only bring doom. You are the same as the others; it's best you leave soon." The zebras turned and trotted away from the Air Pirates, refusing to speak to them any further.

“What did I say?” Vyse asked, feeling the zebras’ animosity toward them was somehow his fault. “Who is this ‘Fluttershy’, and what do they mean by ‘the others’?”

Fina wore a blank expression. “I have no idea. I don’t know what they’re talking about.”

“We should meet with the leader of the village,” Drachma suggested. “He might be able to explain what’s going on here. Also, the trip across South Ocean has depleted our fuel supply. We need to stock up on gemstones if we ever want to leave this place.”

“Okay...” Vyse agreed. “Let’s find the leader of this village... Maybe we’ll be able to find some gemstones here as well.”

The village of Horteka was a confusing labyrinth of treehouses, ladders, and slides. For zebras, who apparently did not have horned or winged variations of their species, this was probably the most convenient method with which to build the village. They appeared to be a simple and peaceful tribe, so Vyse wondered all the more why they were so unwelcome. As they explored the shops and tried to make conversation, they were responded to with only glares and silence.

On the far end of the village lied a particularly decorative straw hut, one that seemed larger than the other buildings. Correctly assuming that it was the residence of the village’s leader, they stepped inside. Sitting on a short, wooden throne was an exceptionally old zebra with extremely long eyebrows. The Air Pirates approached the village elder.

“So you are the ponies from the east who’ve just arrived today,” said the elder. “Your kind bring disaster. I demand that you sail away.”

“Wait a minute!” Vyse insisted. “Why does everyone keep talking about this ‘Fluttershy’ and these ‘other ponies’? I don’t even know who ‘Fluttershy’ is!”

“Fluttershy is our goddess, since generations before. She aided us after the Rains left our nation sore. Prophecies state that when the zebras of Ixa’taka are in danger, Fluttershy’s messengers will come from the east to eliminate these strangers.”

“I understand... And since we came from the East, that’s why everyone thinks ‘Fluttershy’ sent us.”

“But...” Aika interrupted. “If Fluttershy’s messengers are supposed to save you, why did you say that ponies from the East bring disaster?”

“Even now,” the elder began, “the ponies from the East destroy our flora and fauna. They claim they come from a faraway land, a dark place they call ‘Valua’.”

“Valua?! Then Belleza wasn’t lying! They ARE here!”

“When the Valuans came, everyzebra thought they were sent by Fluttershy. They said they were looking for gemstones, and we never wondered why. We took them to Gemstone Mountain, where they could all be seen. But they turned on us and attacked with a fire-breathing machine. They took over the mountain, where much zebra blood is spilled... For if they refuse to work, then they are quickly killed...”

“That’s terrible! They’ve enslaved the zebras to mine for gemstones so they can make weapons!”

“So that’s why everyone is so against these ‘ponies from the East’,” Vyse realized. Knowing he had to convince the village elder to trust them, Vyse bowed before him and looked him straight in the eyes. “Please... You need to trust us. We are different from the Valuans... the ‘Ponies from the East’. We fight against Valua so they can’t hurt others... And that is why we’ve come all this way... We need a very precious stone, called an Element of Harmony.”

The village elder stared blankly into Vyse’s eyes. He had heard all of these things before from the lying mouths of the Valuans. And yet...

“You can’t expect him to trust us...” Drachma sneered. “You’re wasting your time!”

“... Please,” Vyse begged. “I am telling the truth. Please...”

The village elder couldn’t explain it, but the pony’s modesty was something the Valuans did not show. He had a feeling, just a feeling, that this time, these same claims had a different purpose. “... If you fly North of this village, you will see... A hut in the forest, where our king will be. The zebras have passed down the Sacred Pink Stone for many ages. From the strongest of warriors, to the wisest of sages. Your eyes, they are pure; I believe your words are true. Please... save the zebras; I place my faith in you.”

“Thank you...” said Vyse as he stood up. “I will not betray you. Let’s go! We’ve got a country to save!”

The village elder began spreading the word throughout the village that the Blue Rogues could be trusted. Although many zebras disliked the elder’s choice in allies, they nonetheless abided by his decisions and treated the Air Pirates more fairly. When asked where some gemstone fuel could be obtained, the zebras pointed the Air Pirates toward a cliff on the opposite side of town.

At the cliff, a large, rusty, iron ship had crash landed and was covered in vines and moss. Aboard and surrounding the ship was a sight Vyse

never expected to see: ponies. A mare stood by the ship, foals played with a zebra child from the village, and a colt was hard at work on the deck of the ship. Vyse wondered if they weren't Valuans. Predicting the hard-working pony to be the leader of the group, the Air Pirates approached him.

"Hello," the colt greeted with a smile. "You certainly don't seem to be from this town. Who are you?"

"We're not," Vyse informed. "Actually, we had to cross South Ocean to get here. My name's Vyse."

"Wow! You were able to cross South Ocean? That's impressive. My name is Hans. It's good to meet you. We're Blue Rogues under the command of Captain Centime. We had to crash land here after we tried to cross South Ocean ourselves, and a hurricane blew us off-course."

"Centime..." Drachma pondered. "He's the Blue Rogue that takes in orphans and trains them. I also heard that's he a brilliant engineer."

"Yeah, he was... I mean, is. The Valuans kidnapped him and are forcing him to build weapons for them. We're staying here and working on the ship until he returns."

"Oh..." Fina whispered, sorry to hear the bad news. "I hope he returns soon..."

"Hey!" Aika shouted, mostly to lighten the mood. "Hans, I was wondering if you could help out some fellow Blue Rogues... We burned our fuel supply crossing South Ocean. Do you think you could spare a few gemstones?"

"Of course," Hans agreed as he dumped a particularly large gemstone out of his saddlebag. "We've got plenty to spare!"

"Thanks!" said Vyse. "We owe you one. You've really helped us out a lot."

"You're welcome. Well, I need to get back to work. Good luck!"

Vyse was thankful that he was lucky enough to come across a fellow Blue Rogue willing to aid them, even if their being there was a misfortune. Vyse wondered if he couldn't do something about Hans's captain, Centime. Either way, now that they had enough fuel to last them a long time, the Little Jack was ready to head North. Hopefully, the hut the village elder told them about wouldn't be too hard to find.

It was a mere half a day's flight northward that the crew of the Little Jack noticed something peculiar. A particularly strong smell that wasn't coming from the ship, and thus must be something of great significance.

Aika sniffed around, trying to determine the scent. "What IS that smell?"

"It smells like something is burning," Fina deduced.

Drachma stepped to the front and pointed forward, out the window. "Look on the horizon."

Vyse was the first to notice what Drachma was pointing out, due to his keen eyes. "The forest!!!"

The forest was being burned to the ground. What was once a beautiful floor of trees now slowly faded into fire and ash. The entity responsible was the very machine the village elder had warned them about. A large, green, iron ship with an adjustable flamethrower attached to the front of the hull was sweeping the forest, burning every bit of flora until it was the last green thing in sight.

The one piloting this twisted machination was none other than the 5th Admiral of the Imperial Armada: De Loco. He grinned from ear to ear as he flailed his hooves around in uncontrollable excitement. "Burn! Burn! Buuuuuuuuuuurrnnnnnnnn!!! Witness the awesome power of my Flame Cannon! The thicker the forest, the more it burns! HAHAAHAHAHA!!! After I burn down the whole forest, I'll be able to find the Lost City of Rixis, and the Element of Harmony will be mine!!!"

"Lord De Loco!" his Vice Captain calmly reported, apparently used to his leader's hyperactivity. "There's a ship approaching from the aft. It matches the description of those Air Pirates!"

De Loco stopped flailing his hooves, but continued smiling. "Vyse is here?! He's the colt that escaped from the Grand Fortress and defeated Belleza! Perfect!!! PERFECT!!! He's just in time to feel the heat from my Flame Cannon! Hehehehe... I wonder how Vyse likes his food... Medium? Or perhaps... Well-done!!! I hope he doesn't die too fast! HAHAAHAHAHAHA!!!"

"Medium? Well-done? Sir, aren't ponies normally vegetarians?"

"It was a JOKE, you moron!!!"

The Little Jack moved closer to De Loco's ship, moving into battle formation. "This is horrible!" Aika cried. "What kind of twisted psycho would do this?"

"Whoever it is," Vyse growled, "he'll have to deal with me!"

"Heeheehee!" De Loco shrieked. "Fear the power of the invincible Chameleon!" De Loco may have been a few straws short of a haystack, but he was an Admiral for good reason. His ship was larger, so instead of rushing into the battle to make himself a bigger target for the Air Pirates, he kept his distance, staying out of their harpoon's range and waiting for them

to get close. What slipped De Loco's mind however, was that the Air Pirates had cannons other than the harpoon, all of which he was soon struck by.

De Loco couldn't believe he'd made such a novice mistake so early in the fight. "Damn you, Vyse!!! You dare even SCRATCH my precious Chameleon?! You will PAY for your insolence!!!"

"Lord De Loco..." the Vice Captain tried to reason with him. "We must repair the damage to the ship as soon as--"

"SILENCE! It may be damaged, but a perfect machine will never break down! Heehee... Just you watch! I'll make sure to give Vyse a branding he'll never forget!!!"

Out of pure, unnecessarily intense frustration, De Loco shifted the Chameleon into full pursuit mode, intent on getting his revenge even at the cost of further damage to his own ship. Despite the Little Jack's speed, De Loco's erratic strategy caught them by surprise, and their ship was immediately engulfed in the Chameleon's strong flames.

"Haahahahaha!" De Loco laughed maniacally. "How do like THAT, Vyse?! That's what you get for scratching my ship!"

Acting quickly, Vyse steered the Little Jack to safety while Fina used her unicorn magic to dump some barrels of water on the fire before it did any serious damage. Their ship was charred, but still perfectly functional. Though if they got hit by the flamethrower again, it would be the end of them.

"What the hay?!" Vyse shouted. "I didn't think that flying piece of junk could do that much damage!"

"Listen, colt," Drachma advised. "The next time he comes at us with that flamethrower, turn straight towards him and fire the harpoon!"

"What?! We'll be killed!"

"De Loco is unpredictably erratic. We might not be able to defeat him normally, but he just revealed something interestin' to us. Ya follow?"

"... I think so. It might be our only open shot at him. And if we survive, De Loco's ship will be crippled! Alright, Aika! Fina! Fire all of the cannons at De Loco's ship!"

Aika and Fina did as ordered, and De Loco, who was still gloating over having successfully burned the Little Jack, didn't even notice their attack preparations. He was once again hit by several cannon blasts. With a blank stare followed by an incredible scream, De Loco shifted his ship into full gear and speeded at the Air Pirates, flamethrower at the ready.

"Alright!" Vyse shouted. "Now, turn towards him quick! Fire the Harpoon Cannon! Target: the Chameleon's Flame Cannon!"

The ship turned, and backed away from the Chameleon while doing so. Being close to it while this occurred would be a terrible idea. The Harpoon spun and fired directly at the Flame Cannon, striking it right in the barrel and clogging it before it could fire. The energy and pressure given off by the cannon caused it to overheat immediately, and then... it exploded in a gaseous cloud of fire, heavily damaging the Chameleon's hull and permanently destroying its only offense. The harpoon was largely unaffected; nothing that couldn't be fixed overnight.

"What?! WHAT?!! Impossible! My... my Flame Cannon! How?!?!?" De Loco began flailing all four of his legs around in a fit even more severe than that of a foal having a temper tantrum because he couldn't have any candy. His blood boiled and his breathing got so hot and heavy, that the glass bubble over his head began to fog up. "It can't be! It Can't Be! IT CAN'T BE! There was no WAY they could defeat me!!! This must be a dream... A DREAM, I tell you!!!" And then he passed out.

"Sir... sir!" the Vice Captain called as he tried to shake his insane boss awake. "Get a hold of yourself! We must retreat! Attention crew: we are heading back to Gemstone Mountain immediately!"

The Chameleon shook and wobbled as it retreated to the south, smoke billowing from the various dents made in it. When De Loco woke up, he was NOT going to be happy with what had happened to his precious ship.

The King's Hideout was hidden on a tiny island between two enormous mountains. It was literally in the middle of nowhere, making it extremely difficult to find without directions. The hut itself was no bigger than the average bedroom, and it was largely uninteresting in appearance so as not to draw attention to it.

The king was waiting for them on his makeshift throne, with two others by his side as guards. He was a very young-looking zebra, especially for being a king. Age must have a different meaning in Ixa'taka, the Air Pirates thought as they approached him.

"So you are the ponies who came from the East," said the king. "I heard you drove off that fire-breathing beast. On behalf of Ixa'taka, I sincerely thank you. Now, what is it you would like us to do?"

"Actually, Your Majesty," Vyse politely began, "we did have something to ask of you. We are looking for the Element of Kindness."

“This Element of Kindness, I’m afraid we do not own. Or perhaps you speak of the legendary Sacred Pink Stone? The Valuans came looking for the same exact thing. I told them we knew nothing, and they thought I was lying. If, however, the stone did exist... you may find it in the Lost City of Rixis.”

“Lost City?” Aika asked as her ears twitched.

“Rixis...” Fina pondered. “I believe that was the name of the capital of Ixa’taka in the Old World.”

“You are correct,” the King said, “and the legends are quite old. It is said that its entirety is made of pure gold.”

“GOLD?!?!?!?” Aika shrieked as her eyes widened greatly and she bounced around the room. “Let’s go! Let’s go! Let’s go! Let’s find Rixis right now!!!”

“Calm down, Aika,” Vyse smiled. “You’re embarrassing me. So, Your Majesty, do you know where Rixis is located?”

“I’m afraid not,” the King answered, “and it may not even exist. The zebras call it the City of Mists. My high priest, Isapa, may hold the key. If anyzebra knows its location, it is he.”

“I see...” said Vyse. “Would it be alright for us to meet Isapa?”

“Isapa is not here, the Valuans took him away. If you rescue him from them, I will have you to repay.”

“Let me guess,” Aika began. “They took him to Gemstone Mountain with the rest, right? Vyse, what should we do?”

“Well,” said Vyse, “I doubt we can find Rixis on our own. Plus, those zebras need our help. Let’s break into the mines and rescue them!”

“Hmmm...” Drachma contemplated. “It appears to be our only option. Breaking into a Valuan stronghold isn’t going to be easy.”

The King seemed pleased to hear this. “You’re willing to risk your lives to save Isapa? In that case, you can find the mountain south of Horteka!”

“Leave it to us!” Vyse assured as he beat a hoof to his chest. If he could escape from the Grand Fortress, a measly stronghold looked like nothing to him. “Onward to Gemstone Mountain!”

Gemstone Mountain was a large, almost cylindrical mine that was probably a beautiful sight at one time. However, now it was covered from peak to ground in mechanical equipment and construction cranes. Even from the bridge of the Little Jack, the Blue Rogues could see several

zebras locked in cages, while others worked tirelessly, digging at the ground with the tools given to them. They were filthy, and it disgusted Vyse to see these peaceful creatures being treated so cruelly. He landed the ship in a hidden location in the forest, and the four of them began sneaking to the top of the mountain, where the entrance was.

In a fancy looking office above the mine's main hall, De Loco sat at his desk with an annoyed frown on his face. It wasn't because of what had happened between him and Vyse the previous day, no, De Loco had a more irritating peeve at his attention. Alfonso, the Valuan Admiral who'd been temporarily banished to Ixa'taka for his earlier actions, was in the same room as him. Worse, Alfonso was TALKING to him.

"Well, De Loco..." Alfonso began. "I've heard that the Air Pirates have crossed South Ocean and that they are on their way here."

"Yes..." De Loco responded, wishing he were anywhere but there. "I ran into them north of Horteka. They, ummm... narrowly escaped my Flame Cannon."

"Hehe... yes, well, fighting Air Pirates is a bit more difficult than burning down trees. But, I guess you already know that. Vyse was responsible for my demotion. I will make sure he suffers, and I will prove to all of Equestria that I am Valua's greatest Admiral. Soon, Galcian will be taking orders from ME. I simply don't understand why somepony as NOBLE as myself is forced to take orders from anypony other than Empress Teodora herself. Well De Loco, I must be going. I have some slaves to drive."

De Loco kept up his silence until Alfonso was out of the room, knowing that adding to the conversation would only prolong his stay. "Idiot," De Loco mumbled once alone. "Perhaps you should have stared into the mirror a bit longer this morning... I think you have a hair out of place. As for you Vyse, you damaged my precious Chameleon... You will pay for that... Oh, yes... You will PAY... The next time we meet will be the LAST!"

Vyse and friends managed to enter the main hall of the mine without being seen. Without even thinking, they continued trotting down the walkway until they stepped on an oddly-colored tile, setting off several alarms and causing the steel door behind them to slam shut and lock itself.

"Um..." Aika began. "The exit just closed by itself."

"I've got a bad feeling about this place," said Vyse.

De Loco, being in the room above, heard the sirens of course. Excited to see the pitiful foals who'd fallen into his trap, he sprung to the

floor window that looked down on the main hall. Just as he'd planned, Vyse had triggered the alarm system.

"Ah! Vyse!" De Loco sung, fully aware that Vyse couldn't hear him through the glass. "How NICE of you to drop by. You saved me the trouble of finding you. Yes... I know that you are searching for the Elements of Harmony as well... You must be trying to rescue Isapa... Hehehe... good, good! You see Vyse, these mines are full of traps... Too bad for you. You can't escape, Vyse! You will never leave these mines alive!!!"

Fearful of what awaited them, the Blue Rogues calmly explored the tunnels of Gemstone Mountain. Eventually, they came to a hallway with a series of X's and O's imprinted on the floor. Vyse easily recognized this as a trap, and simply flew right over it. But there was a minor problem. Only he and Fina could fly, and they weren't strong enough to lift Drachma over the trap. Drachma would just have to walk over it. But which spaces were safe to step on? Naturally, their first impression was that the X's were the dangerous ones, so Drachma stepped onto an O. After a second, nothing happened, so they all breathed a sigh of relief. But they had done so too soon, as the floor beneath Drachma fell open, dropping him into a mine cart that sped off somewhere.

"Captain!" the other three shouted. Vyse picked up Aika, and the three of them flew after Drachma in order to save him. When they reached the end of the tunnel, they found a dizzy Drachma lying on the floor, having crashed into the end of the line.

On the way down, Vyse noticed that there were several mine cart tracks that led to this place. He concluded that it was De Loco's own twisted method of striking hopelessness into the zebras, for no matter how many times they tried to solve the puzzles, they would always be thrust back down here. Vyse wondered if they, too, were trapped.

"Hm?" came a voice from the corner of the room. "You don't look like you're a Valuan. Who might you be?"

A white, somewhat pudgy unicorn with glasses sat in the corner of the room. Although he wasn't a zebra, it seemed he was still being forced to work in the mines, which implied he wasn't a Valuan. Vyse highly doubted it, but unicorns were known for their intelligence, so even though he wasn't a zebra, maybe this was the high priest they were sent to find.

"I'm Vyse. Are you Isapa?"

"No," the unicorn answered with a smile. "It appears you have mistaken me for someone else. My name is Centime."

"Then you're Hans's father!"

“You know Hans?! Then you must have been to Horteka. That’s where my wife and foals are... Everypony was okay, right?”

“Yeah, they were doing just fine. But, you should worry about yourself right now.”

“Oh, I’m okay. When I refused to help Valua, they threw me into these dungeons. I’ve been here for quite a while. You were looking for someone named Isapa, correct? If so, then you’ll need to venture further into these mines. I think I can help.”

Centime approached a nearby control panel. Even though it was of optimum security, Centime had no trouble hacking into it. After only a few keystrokes, Centime’s expression became one of success. “There. I’ve deactivated the weight sensitivity sensors in the trap floors. You should be able to walk over them without any problems now.”

“Wow, wait, really?!” Aika responded in hectic amazement. “Woohoo! You’re amazing, Centime!”

“Why, thank you. But for now, I think you should tend to your ally over there,” he advised as he pointed to Drachma, who was still resting on the floor. “I’ll go on ahead and see if I can’t disarm the other traps. It’s the least I can do for you. Good luck!”

Vyse, Aika, and Fina headed over to Drachma to help him get up on his hooves. But while they did so, Vyse couldn’t help but wonder... If Centime could disarm the traps so easily, why hadn’t he already escaped?

“Hehehe... good, good!” De Loco chuckled as he witnessed the events unfold on his security monitors. The fact that Vyse was making quick progress through his mines should’ve displeased him, but it only excited him more. There was a certain room he wanted Vyse to reach. “Soon, Vyse... VERY soon, you shall die! And when you die, I want you to die slowly! Yes... slowly... REALLY slowly... I want your brains to GUSH out of your head!”

“Pardon me, De Loco,” Alfonso barged into the office, instantly killing De Loco’s mood. “I didn’t mean to interrupt one of your... intellectual monologues. I came to tell you that Vyse has broken into the mines.”

“..... And you figured this out all by YOURSELF? What gave it away?? Was it the ALARM? Maybe it was the SIRENS.”

“Heh. Yes, well... The fact is, he was foalish enough to deliver himself to me. I shall go dispose of him.” Alfonso lifted his head proudly as he trotted out the door. And once he was gone...

“... YOU are the foal, Alfonso... Heh. The only reason you were made an Admiral was because of your family. You don’t stand a chance

against Vyse. -I- shall kill him. I want him to die! Die... DIE... DIE!!! Soon... very soon!!! Hehehehe!"

Our Air Pirates had traveled through much of Gemstone Mountain's tunnels now, and they hadn't had a single run-in with a trap. It would seem that Centime was doing his job swiftly and efficiently, apparently working so fast that they couldn't keep up with him. They never saw him once during their exploration of the mines.

Eventually, they came to what seemed like a series of jail cells. They were all open, as the zebras normally kept in them were all out working. But one remained locked. Using her unique thievery skills, Aika easily picked the lock, and found an extremely obese zebra inside with a long beard and no mane.

"Oh ponies so courageous and bold," the zebra heartily began. "Is this a rescue attempt I'm seeing unfold?"

"Are you Isapa?" Vyse asked. "We're on a mission from the King of Ixa'taka to rescue you."

"Haha... Well, the King knows what I like, sending two pretty mares! Now if you gentlecolts could leave us to our affairs..."

"Oh, REALLY..." Aika sneered as she crossed her legs. "There's no way this dirty old zebra is a High Priest."

Something caught Isapa's eyes, and he stepped closer to Fina. "Oh my, aren't you a pretty sight? I believe that you are an Alicorn, am I right?"

"What?!" Fina responded. "How did you know?"

"Hahaha! I am very observant, and am proud of my eyes. I could probably guess that goofy filly's saddle size..."

"OKAY, THAT DOES IT," Aika yelled. "I know we have to bring him back, but the King didn't say anything about him being CONSCIOUS."

"Relax, Aika..." Vyse eased, feeling as though he was the only force keeping Aika from someday becoming a Black Pirate. "Right now we just have to worry about getting out of here alive. Let's go."

De Loco giggled to himself as he watched the Air Pirates draw nearer. "So, you've rescued Isapa... Very nice... Hehehe! But soon, you will DIE! You will die a HORRIBLE death and you will SCREAM and I will LAUGH! I've prepared my favorite room JUST for you... Please, come in and stay a while... STAY FOREVER!!! Hehehehe!"

The Air Pirates, plus Isapa, eventually came to the room adjacent to De Loco's office. They were separated by a one-way mirror, so they couldn't see De Loco. The room they were in was stained with blood, and

another pair of doors lied on the other side of the room. The ceiling was covered in rusty, jagged spikes.

“Hehehehehehe! So, you’ve made it this far! I am impressed. But now you shall DIE!!!! You will pay for what you did my PRECIOUS Chameleon! Oh yes, you WILL.” De Loco pushed a nearby button, and the door the Air Pirates came through slammed shut and locked itself, surprising and worrying them. “I love it! HAHA! All of the zebra slaves who tried to escape have DIED in this room. Hehehe! Vyse, I want to hear you SCREAM! Now I shall have my revenge!!! Let’s start the show, SHALL WE?”

De Loco slowly reached for a nearby lever, giddy with excitement. But then something unexpected happened. The doors opposite the ones he just closed burst open. And standing on the other side of them...

“Long time no see, Vyse. It is I... Alfonso. I came here to watch you die!”

“What are you doing?!” De Loco shouted, forgetting he couldn’t be heard. “Alfonso, you FOAL! If you’re in there, I won’t be able to CRUSH them!”

Alfonso brushed back his mane, and glared at the Air Pirates. “Somepony of my stature does not deal with filth like yourselves personally. Antonio! Finish them!!!”

From behind Alfonso, a very large bear-like creature entered the room. It was blue, and strangely translucent, making it seem like a ghost. Among its body lied several star patterns, which seemed to make up a constellation.

“W... what is that thing?!” Vyse asked as he drew his cutlass.

“Antonio is my personal war-beast,” Alfonso explained. “An extremely rare creature found only in the wilderness of Valua called an Ursa Major! No pony has EVER defeated one. Well, except for me of course, but boasting is beyond me.”

“Liar!!” De Loco shouted, still forgetting that they couldn’t hear him. “Admiral Gregorio’s the one who captured that thing for you, and that was only because you blackmailed him!!”

“Now, Antonio!” Alfonso ordered. “Kill them all!”

The Ursa Major charged the Air Pirates, and Drachma used his incredible strength to hold the creature at bay. The beast roared in Drachma’s face not from anger, but from the wound that Vyse had just inflicted with his weapon. Angry, Antonio turned its attention to Vyse and swiped his claws at him, but Vyse easily flew out of the way. Aika then threw her boomerang in front of the bear’s eyes in order to confuse it.

Having been blinded by anger, the Ursa Major didn't even realize that it was all just a distraction. As the Ursa Major stood up on its hind legs to angrily swing at Aika's boomerang and at Vyse, Drachma was preparing to push it over into its back. All the while, Fina was struggling to prepare a powerful version of a simple sleep spell, one that would be enough to affect Antonio. When ready, the spell was cast, and the beast quickly lost consciousness while standing on its hind legs. It would've fallen forward, but Drachma was ready for this moment and charged forward, pushing it backwards instead.

"No!" Alfonso shouted as he stood behind Antonio. "Not this way!!!" Alfonso turned and tried to flee, but was crushed by his pet's incredible weight. It wasn't enough to kill or severely injure him, but he wouldn't be able to get out from under there without help.

"Ha! We did it!" Vyse cheered.

Aika chuckled. "That was too easy! Way to go with that spell too, Fina!"

Fina blushed. "Well, Alfonso's crew used a sleep spell on me before... So I guess you could say we're... even?"

"Still, I can't believe we actually managed to defeat an Ursa Major!"

"Um... That wasn't an Ursa Major. It was a baby. An Ursa Minor."

"That was just a baby?! Then... what's an Ursa MAJOR like??"

"... You don't want to know..."

In his office, De Loco had watched the fight unfold, almost hoping that he could see Vyse torn limb from limb by an Ursa Minor, but also happy to see Alfonso get crushed instead. "Hah! Serves you right, Alfonso! You got what you deserved! Oh, well... I guess I'll just have to skewer ALL OF YOU!"

De Loco reached for his lever and pulled it. The spiked ceiling above the Air Pirates began to descend, but after only a second, it stopped. The Blue Rogues noticed this, and were confused by it.

De Loco was furious, and repeatedly pulled the lever up and down, faster and faster each time he did so. "What? What?! WHAT?!?!?! What's going on? This trap has NEVER failed me before!!! Crush them! Crush Them!! CRUSH THEM!!!"

"Admiral De Loco!" the Vice Captain reported as he entered the room. "Someone has tampered with all of the machines in the mines. They are all malfunctioning!"

"WHAAAT?!?!?!!" De Loco resumed his temper tantrum, this time adding stomping to the mix. "Why? WHY? WHY?! How can this be?!?!? I

don't understand!!!! Vyse!!! Why won't you just DIE?!?!" And then he passed out again.

"Sir? Snap out of it! Please, get a hold of yourself..."

Still relatively confused, the Air Pirates, plus Isapa, exited the way Alfonso came in, walking around him to do so and ignoring his moans. At the end of the hallway they'd entered, Centime was waiting for them by the exit to the mines.

"You made it out of the mines unharmed, I see," Centime observed. "I made a few adjustments to the machinery in the mines. Did it help?"

Aika perked, now realizing what had happened in the previous room. "So THAT'S what that was..."

"Yes, yes... Well, let's be on our way. All of the zebras have left already. With all of the traps and security systems turned off, they managed to overpower the guards, steal their ships, and flee!"

"You freed the zebras?! You're amazing! But... if you could do all of this at any time, why did you wait until now?"

"Isn't it obvious? If I had wandered around on my own, De Loco would've easily caught me. I had to wait until he was heavily distracted by something. Or rather, somepony."

"I get it! You were just biding your time until the right opportunity presented itself. Heh, you really know your stuff!"

"You're a good stallion, Centime," Vyse thanked. "We're glad we could help you."

"Thank you very much," Centime returned the thanks. "Well, I must get home and see my family. Maybe we'll meet again someday!"

Almost all of the Valuan ships had been stolen by the zebras during their prison break. Now, the only ones remaining were the flagships (which were indoors and couldn't be accessed without security clearance) and a few others. Centime helped himself to one of these few others while the rest of the Blue Rogues returned to the Little Jack. Having rescued Isapa, they had completed their escape from Gemstone Mountain.

On their way back to the King's Hideout, the Little Jack passed over Horteka. All of the zebras that escaped from the mines had returned safely, and were happily reunited with their families. Centime informed everyone in the village that they had the Blue Rogues to thank. As the Air Pirates flew

overhead, everyone in Horteka waved to them in thanks. This... is why Vyse loved his job.

By that evening, the Little Jack had returned to the King's Hideout with Isapa completely unharmed. The king was very pleased by what he saw. "I thank for saving the zebras and my priest. I did not doubt your efforts in the least."

Isapa bellowed. "Yes, thank you for rescuing me. I'd love to thank you two fillies personally... But I have work to do; it was nice meeting thee."

"Not so fast!" Aika halted. "You were supposed to tell us the location of the Lost City!"

"Ah, that's right! How could be I be so blind? It had completely slipped my little zebra mind! Hahaha!"

Vyse lowered his head and looked at the king with concern. "Your Majesty, with all due respect... Where did you GET this zebra? Is he really a High Priest?"

"Of course, my skeptical young pony," the King replied. "He has much knowledge of ancient history."

Isapa stepped forward and closed his eyes. "Listen carefully, listen well. The legend of the Lost City, I am about to tell... *ahem*

"On the longest day of the thousandth year, the stars will aid in her return..."

"That is all. Now, what did you learn?"

"Whaddaya mean, 'That is all'?" Vyse questioned as he glared at the priest. "I have no idea what you were talking about!"

"To be honest, I haven't a clue! The ones who must solve the riddle... are you! Ahahaha!"

"I give up!" Aika shouted in frustration. "If you didn't know, you should've said so in the first place!"

"Calm down, Aika," said Fina, being the mediator for once. "Listen to what he just told us. 'On the longest day of the thousandth year, the stars will aid in her return...' I know what it means! This year marks the end of the New World's first millennium. It has been one thousand years since the Rains of Destruction fell. Now, what is the longest day of the year?"

"... Summer Solstice, right? That's when we hold the Summer Sun Celebration. Hey, wait... That's tomorrow!"

"Wait, really?" Vyse asked, impressed with their own timing. "Wow, what luck. I can't believe we arrived just in time!"

"Luck has nothing to do with prophecy," Isapa explained. "For you see Vyse, this was your destiny."

"And the 'stars that will aid in her return'?"

"I believe," Fina continued, "that the position of the stars tonight will be what guide us to the Lost City. We will just have to wait and see."

As the sun set that evening, the stars in the sky became more and more visible. On that night and that night alone, the brightest stars in the sky formed a strongly apparent constellation -- one of an Alicorn, pointing straight West. Vyse knew a lot about astrology; he had studied the subject much as a foal. When sailing the empty skies, knowing the positions of the stars was an essential part of navigation. Using this knowledge, he easily calculated the exact location the new constellation was pointing to: a distant mountain near the western edge of Ixa'taka. With their destination in mind, the Air Pirates rested up in preparation for their next adventure.

The following morning, the ponies awoke and prepared to depart for the western mountain. Strangely, the king, Isapa, and their two guards were nowhere to be seen. The hut in which they had slept that night was abandoned save for themselves. Vyse didn't think anything of it, and assumed the king merely wished to tend to the zebras who'd returned to Horteka. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that something funny was going on.

The trip to the western mountain was short and swift, and only took a couple of hours. They landed the Little Jack at the base of the mountain, where a bunch of ruins were found. Inside a giant, stone zebra head, a strange platform floated in midair, waiting for someone to step onto it. The four Air Pirates did so, and to their initial surprise, it began to ascend. It rose for what felt like half-an-hour, and when it stopped, they were met with more ruins, where more floating platforms and stairs were seen. The view was covered in thick water vapor, and scattered about the whole area were giant craters.

"Now I know why they call this place the City of Mist," Aika realized. "But I don't remember seeing any mist before we got on the platform."

"The air is thin..." Vyse observed. "It's a little hard to breathe. We were going up for a long time. I think these mists are actually clouds. But this doesn't look anything like a Lost City of Gold... There's just a bunch of ruins up here."

"In the Old World," Fina began, "Rixis was the capital of the Pink Civilization. It was destroyed by the Rains of Destruction. Since then, it's been frozen in time."

"Those craters must have been caused by the gemstones that were bombarding the city..."

Aika frantically looked in all directions, and after her worst fears had come true, she turned and glared at her teammates. "I'm-not-seeing-any-gold-here..."

"As time passed," Drachma began, "stories about this city probably got more and more exaggerated."

"*SIGH* We were supposed to find gold here... I should have slapped that dirty old zebra silly when I had the chance." Aika slumped into disappointment, but as her angle changed, so did her line of sight. In the middle of the ruins, a shadowy silhouette stood quietly in the mist. "..... Vyse... If this city has been dead for generations, then who is THAT?!"

Everypony turned in the direction Aika was facing. But they saw only mist. "... Where?" Vyse asked. "I don't see anything."

"... Huh? But... but... there was someone there!"

"Aika, who ELSE could possibly be here? It's just your imagination acting up."

"Why don't you believe me? I know I saw something. Fina... Do you think that maybe I saw a ghost?"

"A... ghost?" Fina asked. "Umm... what's a ghost?" Fina looked at each of her friends, hoping for an answer, but was met with only silence and exasperated smiles.

"Heh... It's been a while since you said something like that... A ghost is... umm, how should I explain this...? Well, it's something very scary, that's for sure!"

"Really? Well, if you're this scared, then this 'ghost' must be something scary indeed."

"The two things I hate most right now are dirty old zebras and ghosts. Vyse... let's... let's not go in! We'll be cursed!"

"Oh come on, Aika..." Vyse argued as he crossed his legs. "There's no such thing as curses. Or hexes. We came all this way for the Element of Kindness, and we're not about to go back empty-hooved. Though, I guess you COULD always just, you know, giggle at it."

"Do you honestly think that laughing at my fears will make them disappear?! *sigh* Alright, alright! I'll go with you! I can't believe I'm doing this..."

Although what remained of the ruins felt like a temple, Rixis was once a city, and many of its broken buildings gave an air of residence. Zebras once lived and thrived in this place; it was the capital of an entire nation.

Now, it was abandoned and desolate. Strangely, the magic platforms that acted as transportation across the town were all active, with brand new gemstones powering them. Aika's fear of the place being haunted only increased with the knowledge of this fact.

On the far end of the city was a magic platform that didn't seem to lead anywhere. They stepped on it, and it began to carry them even higher than they already were. They very soon reached the peak of the mountain, which lied just above the clouds. Vyse was excited to be in Upper Sky, a place most ponies had never managed to venture. On the highest point of the mountain lied a small temple with an altar at the top of its stairs. The Air Pirates climbed these stairs, and found that their search was likely at an end.

"Well," Vyse began. "It looks like the Element of Kindness should be here..."

"Hey, everypony... Look over here!" Aika called, as she pointed to the front wall. "This drawing looks kind of like Fina!"

In the center of the front wall was an ancient glyph of what looked like an Alicorn, with yellow coat and pink mane. The fact that it was an Alicorn was the only similarity Aika drew between it and Fina, really.

Vyse put a hoof to his chin as he examined the drawings. "I wonder if this is that 'Fluttershy' the zebras were talking about..."

Fina was too busy to notice the drawings. She was translating some ancient text written on a nearby column, and was reading its contents aloud. "'We, who have come from the Temple of the Magenta Moon... have sealed within the forests, after the Rains of Destruction washed away the lands, the Gigas known as the Manticore... And upon its sealing, the Element of Kindness was kept within these walls...' This is written in the holy language of the Magenta Temple. The Alicorns must have inscribed these words when they were here."

"These are the ruins of Ixa'taka, right?" Vyse asked. "Why would Alicorns come here?"

"The Rains of Destruction nearly destroyed the Pink Civilization. But even after they fell, many warlords from around Equestria still sought the Elements of Harmony. The Manticore did its best to protect it, and in doing so, destroyed even more of the land in its rampage. The Alicorns came here to contain him. But they came too late. The Pink Civilization was destroyed, and the zebras were reduced to only a few tribes of scavengers..."

Drachma looked at the Alicorn drawing. "The zebras probably began revering the Alicorns as gods because they were able to contain the Manticore."

"It all makes sense now..." Aika realized. "That's why they thought Fina was this 'Fluttershy'."

"But..." Vyse interrupted. "It says the Element of Kindness is kept within these walls, right? But I don't see it anywhere. I wonder where it is..."

The ponies' contemplation was halted when they all heard a noise come from behind a nearby column. "Who's there?!" Vyse shouted.

A startled zebra emerged from behind the column, and began galloping down the stairs.

"That's it!" Aika shouted. "That's the ghost I saw earlier!"

"Vyse!" Drachma shouted. "Don't let him get away! He might have the Element!"

Vyse soared high into the air and arced his course, ready to land right on top of the zebra as soon as it reached the bottom of the stairs. The zebra did not even notice that Vyse was chasing him, until it was too late. Vyse crashed into the zebra and pinned him to the ground. The other Air Pirates soon caught up and surrounded the zebra.

"Hmph," Aika snorted as she crossed her legs. "So this is the 'ghost'..."

Drachma pointed his mechanical hoof at the shivering zebra. "Who are you? Why are you following us?!"

"Don't kill me, please!" the zebra pleaded. "I am an Ixa'takan priest!"

"A priest?" Vyse asked. "So you followed us all the way from Horteka?"

"... I could never follow you up to this height. You see, I have been here since last night. If anyone manages to reach this place, I am to leave and report to the king, posthaste!"

"Wait a minute... You mean the King has been to this place already?"

"Yes... After you decoded Isapa's clue... We came while you slept, to get the Stone before you. Upon finding the Element, the King it chose... to rid our lands of our arch foes."

"Rid your lands of...? You aren't going to..."

The zebra remained silent, fearing he had said too much already.

"Tell us!" Drachma demanded. "Or do you want me to crack your skull?!"

"Alright, I'll tell you! I'll confess!" the zebra continued. "The King intends to awaken the Gigas! The Manticore will chase them back to the eastern skies, and we will forever be safe from their cruelty and lies."

“What?!” everypony shouted. They had been used by the very zebras they were trying to help. Ridding the lands of the Valuans was something they all wanted. But awakening one of the Gigas, especially one this ferocious, was far too great a risk. The Air Pirates rushed back to the Little Jack, praying they wouldn’t be too late.

Sitting aboard his wooden flagship, the King of Ixa’taka flew along the edge of the battlefield, opposite the Valuan fleet that now confronted him. The Element of Kindness, a pink, crystalline butterfly, shone brightly in his hooves. “It is time,” the King said. “Our plan is in motion. High Priest Isapa... give me the potion.”

Isapa uncapped a flask and fed its contents to his king. It was a special, tribal hallucinogen for inducing hypnotic trances in whoever drank it. As long as the King possessed the Element of Kindness, it would not allow him to willingly perform acts of violence. Thus, he must be hypnotized and given orders, so that he might control the Gigas more properly.

“Now, Your Majesty. Hear my command,” Isapa chanted. “Awaken the Manticore. This, I demand!”

Now unaware of his own actions, the King stared blankly in a superfluous direction as he held the Element up. It shone even brighter than before, and the lands beneath them began to vigorously shake. The earth cracked and opened, and from the depths of the earth rose the Pink Gigas.

The Manticore was a giant lion, as big as a mountain, with a scorpion tail and two small bat wings, too small to even lift its weight, therefore proving useless to it. The Manticore stomped around its former prison, shaking the dirt it had been buried in out of its fur. Once free from its earthy chambers, and fully aware of its surroundings and situation, it bellowed a mighty roar and approached the Valuan fleet.

Aboard his new flagship, Alfonso watched as the Manticore awoke. He brushed back his mane. “So, the King was hiding the Element from us after all... Heh, this is going to be easy. All I have to do is take the Element from him and the Empress will be pleased.”

“Awaiting orders, Admiral,” his new Vice Captain reported. “Oh, and I heard that you were injured in the mines. Are you alright, sir?”

Alfonso immediately lost his composure and began swinging his hoof at the Vice Captain. “Ergh! I don’t EVER want to hear you speak of those

mines again! Understand?! All ships, prepare for battle! Follow my flagship, the Cygnus!”

As the fleet approached the King, one of the grunt ships was the first to get exceptionally close to the Pink Gigas. Following its orders, the Manticore swung its paw at the ship, and with a heavy swipe, the ship spun out of control and slammed into a nearby landmass, exploding and crashing to the ground.

“Blast!” Alfonso sneered. “Retreat!!! We cannot get past the Gigas!”

“But... but... sir...” the Vice Captain argued. “The battle hasn’t even started yet.”

“Why are you questioning my orders?! I refuse to die in these FILTHY lands! All ships, return to Valua at once!”

Every ship in the fleet turned 180 degrees and fled northward. Two grunt ships headed for each corner of the giant Iron Net they had used to block off the northern exit, and undid its bindings. With the way open, the Valuans had finally left Ixa’taka. That is, except for one very persistent unicorn...

“Hehehe...” De Loco chuckled aboard his flagship, the Chameleon. “Well, it looks like the Manticore’s awake...”

“Admiral De Loco!” his Vice Captain reported. “The experimental Gemstone Cannon is ready!”

“Looks like it’s time for me to test out my newest weapon! Target the King’s ship!”

“... What? Sir, aren’t you going to fire at the Gigas?”

“The Gigas only follow commands from the one holding their Element. So if we destroy the King, the Gigas will be defenseless. This is what happens when you cross me, foolish zebras! Fire the Gemstone Cannon!”

The front of the Chameleon’s hull had been rebuilt into an enormous cannon, with what appeared to be the entirety of the ship as its barrel. The whole ship charged with electricity, all of which was focused at the front tip. When at last it was fully charged, it fired an incredible beam that shot right past the Manticore’s head and heavily damaged the port side of the King’s ship. Everyzebra onboard was rattled around by the impact, but the one zebra who was unable to brace himself was the King, who had been knocked unconscious.

“Wake up!” Isapa pleaded as he shook his King. “You can’t be beat! This isn’t good... We must retreat! The King was controlling the Pink Gigas. If he doesn’t wake up, it will surely kill us!”

The zebras aboard the ship turned tail and fled the battlefield. Until the King awoke, there was no way to command the Manticore to cease its rampage. With no zebra to give it orders anymore, it began acting on its own, and destroyed everything it saw.

"Hehehe... So close!!!" De Loco snickered. "It looks like there is still some fine-tuning to be done. I'm sure Vyse has seen the Gigas, and he's probably on his way right now to try and save every zebra. Be ready for him."

"Sir!" the Vice Captain reported with ironic timing. "A ship has been spotted off port side!"

"He's here! HE'S HERE! I've been waiting for this! Well, Vyse... it's time to die... Wait `til you feel the power of my Gemstone Cannon! You should feel honored that you are helping me test out my greatest creation ever!"

The Little Jack had arrived on the scene too late. The Manticore was freed, and now, no longer under any zebra's control. However, an obstacle prevented our Air Pirates from solving this problem.

"The Manticore is in range..." Aika reported. "But, there's a ship blocking our way! It's De Loco!!!"

"It looks like we'll have to get past De Loco first," Drachma observed. "Look out for that cannon."

"Aye aye, Captain!" said Vyse. "Bring it on, De Loco!"

The Chameleon and the Little Jack got into battle position, but unlike last time, the Chameleon was actually moving at a steady pace. De Loco had learned not to underestimate Vyse this time. "I've been waiting for you, Vyse! Now, you will learn the true power of the ever-changing Chameleon!"

"It looks like he's serious this time," Drachma deduced.

"Vyse!" Aika shouted. "Just make sure to watch out for that big cannon he fired at the King! One hit of that and we're dead!"

De Loco brought the Chameleon to a complete halt, and began issuing orders to his crew. "Prepare to fire the Gemstone Cannon! Halt all systems and redirect all power! Hehehe... you can't catch me off-guard if my ship isn't moving, Vyse! Heehee... Now, feel the power of my Gemstone Cannon!!"

"The enemy vessel has stopped!" Aika noticed. "What's going on?!"

"It looks like he's got somethin' up his saddle," Drachma assumed. "But, now's our chance. We need to hit him as hard as we can while he's just sittin' there. Get into position! We're gonna take him out with the Harpoon Cannon right now!"

The Chameleon began charging all of its energy, redirecting it to the front of the ship. When all of the energy was stored up, De Loco attempted to fire the Gemstone Cannon. But... nothing. The cannon did not fire.

"What's going on?!" he shouted. "Why didn't the Gemstone Cannon fire?!"

"Lord De Loco!" his Vice Captain began. "The last blast we fired drained nearly all of the ship's energy! We need to wait until power has been properly restored! Perhaps firing this prototype Gemstone Cannon was too much for the ship to handle. I think that maybe we should..."

"Silence! SILENCE!!! I don't want to hear ANY excuses! Fire! FIRE!! FIRE THE GEMSTONE CANNON!!!"

"They're still just sitting there!" Aika pointed out. "They probably used too much energy on their last attack!"

"Now's our chance!" Vyse shouted. "Fire the Harpoon Cannon!!!"

The Harpoon spun and shot towards the Chameleon. At the same time, the Gemstone Cannon gathered what little power it had remaining and attempted to fire. The Harpoon struck just as the energy was about to erupt, causing a massive explosion of gemstone radiation and destroying much of the ship's military hardware. By the time the Harpoon was reeled back in, the Chameleon was still airborne, but it was no longer suited to fight.

"This cannot BE!" De Loco shouted as he once again resumed his tantrum. "How could I lose TWICE?! No... NO... NO...! NO...!!! This has to be a dream...! IT'S ALL JUST A BAD DREAM...!!!" And then he, once again, passed out.

"Sir! Get a hold of yourself!" his Vice Captain shouted, though he should expect this by now. "We can't face the Gigas in this shape! Everypony, back to Valua!" The Vice Captain took over piloting the Chameleon and sailed north, following their allies who'd fled moments ago.

"Alright!" Aika cheered. "De Loco's retreating!"

"It's too early to celebrate," Drachma stated. "We still have to stop the Manticore!"

"But... he's too big!" Vyse argued. "How can we stop him?"

Drachma pointed to a large crevasse with a river flowing along its floor. "See that canyon? No matter how strong that thing is, if it falls into the canyon, it will be stuck."

"I see... So, all we have to do is knock him down!"

"Aye. Wait for him to pass in front of it, then give it everything we've got!"

“Got it! Alright, everypony! Let’s take him out!”

The Little Jack sped toward the Manticore, who’d already destroyed several nearby landmasses in its rage. Its sights now fixated on the Air Pirates, it turned around and attempted to swipe its claws at them. The Little Jack’s speed would prove to be an important asset. Were it not for that, the Manticore’s claws would’ve made quick work of them right there. The ship flew from side to side, avoiding the Manticore’s swipes and inching closer to the canyon in an attempt to lure it.

The Manticore was becoming more frustrated, and began trying to sting the ship with its scorpion tail. Its tail’s speed was far greater than that of its heavy paws, and Vyse struggled to avoid the stabs. Deciding it needed to be distracted, the other crewmates fired some cannons at the Gigas. Without even trying to, one of the blasts struck the palm of the creature’s left paw, something it reacted to quite strangely. It roared angrily, as if in severe pain. Looks like they’d found its weak spot.

The Little Jack crossed the canyon, and as the Manticore stood up on its hind legs in order to try and reach them, Vyse spun the ship around and ordered the immediate firing of the Harpoon Cannon. Target: the Manticore’s left paw. It spun and fired straight at the suspended paw, striking it in the center and sticking forth like a splinter. With an even louder roar than before, one that almost sounded like a shriek, the intense pain the Manticore felt caused it to lose its balance, and it fell into the canyon, becoming stuck between its walls.

“Alright!” shouted Vyse as the Harpoon reeled back in. “We knocked the Manticore into the valley!”

“Good job, colt!” Drachma congratulated. “Now’s our chance to grab the Element of Kindness from the King and send that thing packin’!”

The battle was over. All of the Valuans had fled, the zebras were freed, and the Manticore had resumed its peaceful slumber. Ixa’taka had been saved, thanks to the Blue Rogues. The Element of Kindness now shone in Fina’s hooves as she and her crewmates attended their audience with the King.

“Vyse...” the King began. “You saved the zebras, you saved our lands, you ended this terrible war. We’ve realized our errors and have you to thank. We should never have summoned the Manticore.”

“With great power,” Vyse stated, “you need great responsibility. The Gigas are far too dangerous...”

"We realize that now, and apologies are due. So our Element and trust, we bear upon you."

"Thank you, Your Majesty... We will do our best to achieve peace."

"The Valuans fled when faced with our threat," said Isapa. "When they escaped, they took down the Net."

"If we pass through there," Drachma began, "we'll reach North Ocean. That will take us back to Valua."

"The Element of Loyalty should be there," Fina stated.

"Okay, everypony," Vyse addressed. "We're heading back to Valua. They're REALLY upset with us now... Getting the Element of Loyalty isn't going to be easy."

"Sounds pretty dangerous," Isapa sung. "But have no fear. For you are all welcome to stay behind here! It's an island paradise, beyond any you'll conceive. After sampling our luxury, you'll never want to leave!"

"What do you say, Aika?" Vyse joked. "Who knows? Maybe you'll find some more ghosts, too."

"Vyse!!!" Aika retorted. "Don't even joke about them around me... You know I'm afraid of them... I've had enough ghosts to last me a long time..."

The Blue Rogues waved their final goodbyes to the zebras of Ixa'taka, and continued their journey north. The Iron Net that had once blocked the way had sunken into Deep Sky completely. With Ixa'taka no longer blocked off from the rest of the world, it wouldn't be long before trade routes could be established between them and the other nations.

North Ocean was vast, wide, and empty, with even less landmasses than Middle Ocean. It lied on the other side of Middle Ocean's northwestern sky rifts, and southwest of Valua. The western borders of North Ocean were blocked off by a particularly strong sky rift, even thicker and darker than normal ones. Even the strongest of pegasi wouldn't be able to fly through one of these.

The part of Valua that connected to North Ocean was not the capital, but the northern wilderness that the city itself was blocked off from. The only way to get to northern Valua was through North Ocean or northern Nasr. Because the safest way to reach Ixa'taka was through North Ocean, it was through this route that Valua sent its troops there, and set up the Iron Net to prevent outside interference.

And it was because of Valua's high levels of activity in this region that the Black Pirates were attracted there. Slowly flying through North Ocean was a rather rotund wooden ship, shaped like a fish and waving a black flag. Onboard this ship was the most horrifically obese pegasus you ever would see, stuffing his face with various foods. He had a yellow coat, curly black mustache, balding mane, and a fork for a cutie mark.

"Apple fritters, hay fries, carrot cake, berry punch, muffins, and pumpkin pie decorated with flowers! This is wonderful! The ship we hit yesterday really had some great food on board!"

"Captain Gordo!" reported one of his pirates/chefs. "A ship armed with a gigantic harpoon has been sighted off the port side!"

Gordo stopped eating. "I see... good, good! Another ship full of goodies is there for the taking! I'll take on anypony if I think they have good food on board. I really hope they have something that goes good with cupcakes..."

"Vyse!" Aika reported. "There a ship heading right for us. And they're Black Pirates."

"I know that flag..." Drachma realized. "It belongs to a pirate named Gordo. He's known as the Gourmet Pony. He attacks other ships and steals their food. He rarely uses his cannons because he's afraid he'll burn the food on the other ships. He'll do anything for a good meal. As far as Black Pirates go, he's a strange one."

"You're telling me," Vyse agreed. "He's getting awfully close..."

Gordo's ship, the Bloodlust, pulled up next to the deck of the Little Jack. Once in position, Gordo and his crew began hopping on board.

"They're boarding us!" Aika shouted. "They're challenging us to hoof-to-hoof combat!"

Vyse smirked. "Well, while they're here, we might as well kick their plots..."

It was an even four-on-four fight, right there on the deck of the Little Jack. Gordo's three lackeys kept the Blue Rogues at bay while he prepared for something on the backlines. The Black Pirates under Gordo's commands also doubled as his chefs, and strangely, they fought using frying pans. They were a silly bunch, and were probably underestimating today's opponents. Vyse and his friends had no problem avoiding their attacks and fighting back.

It wasn't until it was too late that they realized it was all a distraction. Gordo had been preparing a fort of apple pies, both to protect himself, and for use as ammunition. Once ready, he began throwing apple pies at the

Blue Rogues. Although pies are not normally considered suitable weaponry, they were nonetheless a huge distraction. As the Blue Rogues attempted to evade the pies, Gordo's chefs used the opportunities given to beat them with their frying pans. And if they got hit in the face, it would blind them.

Vyse attempted to flee the pie barrage by flying up and over the chefs and going directly after Gordo. But Gordo managed to blind him with a pie, causing Vyse to crash in his disorientation. The Black Pirates were beginning to win, but then Fina came up with an idea that would put a serious hole in their plan.

Fina ordered her pet Parasprite, Cupil, to eat all of the apple pies. He buzzed around happily, as he had not eaten in a while, and ate every drop of apple pie on board, leaving only tin pans. It all happened so quickly, Gordo didn't realize what was done until it was over. With no more distractions, the Blue Rogues overpowered the Black Pirates. His ridiculous strategy a failure, Gordo surrendered.

Gordo chuckled as he bowed and rubbed the back of his head. "We give up... You and your crew fought well... Your name was Vyse, right? I don't think I've ever seen you in North Ocean before."

"This is the first time we've ever been to North Ocean," Vyse explained. "For now, we're riding aboard Captain Drachma's ship, the Little Jack."

"Drachma? Wait... that name's familiar. Drachma, were you ever in North Ocean before?"

Drachma glared at the fat pegasus. "... What if I was?"

"Then it IS you! I've heard all about you! You're the pony who's chasing the dragon, Punta. If I remember correctly, it was to avenge your son, right?"

"ENOUGH!" Drachma shouted as he stomped his artificial leg into the deck. It shook the entire ship, and everypony became strongly intimidated by his sudden outburst. "I don't know what stories you've been hearin', but I suggest you keep `em to yourself... And unless you want me to throw you overboard, you should GET OFF MY SHIP..."

"Ahh... that's quite alright... we'll be going now..." Gordo and his crew flew back onto their ship and sped off.

"And what are YOU staring at?!" Drachma shouted as Vyse, Aika, and Fina looked at him with gaping mouths. "Are you going to stand there all day?! Get back up to the bridge before I throw YOU overboard!"

"Yessir!" they all shouted before galloping back inside, although Fina stopped to bow to her captain before leaving his company.

Now alone, Drachma took a deep sigh, and looked up at the clouds. He whispered to himself... "Punta..."

At the northern edge of North Ocean were the ruins of an old lighthouse no longer in use. These ruins marked the western edge of the Valuan continent, letting our Air Pirates know that they were no longer in North Ocean and had finally returned to Valua.

"Looks like we've reached Valuan airspace," Vyse deduced as he looked up at the Red Moon and the dark clouds it created. "So, this is where the Element of Loyalty is hidden, right?"

"Yes," Fina confirmed. "It is sealed somewhere within these lands, along with the Red Gigas."

Aika smiled and looked up at her captain. "Considering how much trouble we've caused the Valuans already, we should be extra careful, right Cap'n?" Drachma did not react. He simply stared at the floor, silently. "... Cap'n? What's wrong?"

"Ah... um... nothing," Drachma muttered. "I'm sorry... were you saying something?"

"... Nothing really. It... wasn't anything important..."

The ponies were quiet for the rest of the trip. They all glanced at their poor captain with expressions of worry. It was obvious that something was troubling him, but all they could do was wonder what.

CHAPTER 5

"That chunk of metal is huge!!!" Vyse shouted as he pointed to the floor on which he stood. The Blue Rogues had just arrived at the center of the Valuan wilderness, to a small and very strange circle of old ruins. Fina had explained to them before they'd landed that several millennia ago, even before the time of the Old World, the ruins were called "Stonehenge". Since then, the name had been changed, as its purpose had as well.

"Beneath this metal floor," Fina began, "is the 'Maw of Tartas'. It's an entrance to a series of caverns. These caverns are the resting place of the Element of Loyalty, as well as the Red Gigas. This seal was built by my people after the rains of destruction in order to contain the Gigas. Now, it lies dormant..."

"Good..." Drachma snorted. "Keep that thing locked up..."

Aika rubbed her hoof against her head, a mixture of relief, confusion, and worry swirling about her face. "Well, I know this means that the Gigas can't get out... But, it also means that WE can't get IN!"

"Hmm..." Vyse looked around as he tried to think of ideas. "I don't think there's any way we can get through this seal. What should we do?"

"Hey! Don't move!" shouted a team of Valuan guard ponies from behind them. The obvious ringleader of the group bared a small lance at the Air Pirates. "The punishment for trespassing near the Great Seal is death!"

The crew of the Little Jack had taken down an Ursa Minor all on their own. They weren't scared of a bunch of lowly grunts. Drachma's artificial hoof had the unique ability to fire off of his leg, and be reeled back in by a cord that connected them, not unlike his ship's Harpoon Cannon. Vyse darted into the air and got behind the guards as Drachma fired his iron hoof past them. Vyse caught it and quickly zipped around the guards in a circle until they were tied up and helpless. Drachma reeled them in closer, their easy victory coming as no surprise.

"We.. we surrender!" The guard pony leader shouted, realizing how powerless they really were. "Please don't kill us...!"

Aika took over the interrogation. "Tell us how to open the seal, and we'll let you live!"

"That's impossible! Our entire army couldn't open it! Our commanders aren't concerned with the Element of Loyalty right now because it's already in Valua and safe from you."

"That makes sense," Drachma believed. "They'll go after the other Elements first..."

"Something's not right..." Vyse suspiciously noticed as he looked around. "You'd think this place would be more heavily guarded. Where are the rest of your ponies?"

The guard lowered his head. "They're preparing for the raid on Nasrad."

"What?!" Aika shouted. "Valua is going to start another war with Nasr?!"

"I... I think so. I'm just a grunt, so I don't any of the details... And there was a giant dragon... It destroyed a few of our ships recently... One of our Admirals is hunting it."

"A giant dragon?!" Drachma gasped as he pulled the guard's face closer to his. "Punta is here?! Answer me!"

"I... I don't know for certain! Some smog rolled in yesterday and there were sightings of a huge creature!"

Drachma lowered the guard and untied them, reeling his iron hoof back in. He didn't even pay attention to the guards as they fled. "... That means it's probably still in the area. I have to go after Punta..." Drachma turned to Vyse. "I've been following you foals around looking for the Elements all this time... but now it's your turn to follow me."

Vyse felt as though a weight had just been laid on him. He had completely forgotten about Punta, and wasn't expecting to have to fight him so soon. But this was Drachma's ulterior motive for traveling with them, the sole reason everything that happened so far even was. Drachma's quest for Punta expected a heavy debt from Vyse and his friends, and he was only too willing to pay it.

"I understand," Vyse agreed. "It doesn't look like we'll be able to get to the Element of Loyalty anytime soon. Okay Drachma, we'll go with you."

"Very well... Now the time has come for me to finally face Punta. He was the reason I got the Harpoon Cannon in the first place... I'm going to kill him... or die tryin'."

Rather than frantically search the entire continent for Punta, the Blue Rogues decided to drop anchor and hide in a canyon for the night, ready to ambush him at the first sight of smog. Vyse's heart was racing with excitement, too anxious to get even a wink of sleep. Punta was nearby...

That's all he could think as he lay there, trying to sleep. Realizing his efforts were futile, he decided to take a walk to calm himself down.

Aika and Fina were sound asleep in their room - Aika talking in her dreams even. Drachma, however, was neither in his room nor in the bridge. Out the window of the bridge, Vyse could see a lit lantern out on the deck. It was Drachma. He was sitting outside, alone. Vyse went out to the deck to see if anything was the matter.

"Captain...?" Vyse asked as he approached him.

"... Is that you, boy?" he responded. "What are you doin' up at this hour? You should be gettin' some rest."

"I was about to say the same thing. It's the middle of the night." Vyse then noticed that his captain was holding a small box in his good hoof. "What's that?"

"Hrmp..." Drachma snorted. He looked reluctant to answer the question, but then realized... maybe it was for the best if Vyse knew exactly what he'd soon be fighting for. He handed the box to Vyse. "... Open it."

Vyse took the box in his hoof, curiously. Using his other hoof, he popped the box open. "It's full of..." he began as he lifted one out, "... molted pegasus feathers..."

"... My son collects... used to collect those. He was fascinated by pegasi. Always talked about how he wished he'd been born one."

"You... had a son?" Vyse was surprised. Drachma never seemed the type who'd settle down with a mare, let alone have a foal.

"... Aye. About the same age as you. A long time ago, I ran a fishin' business in North Ocean... My son was learnin' to be a sailor. He used to come out with us. His name was... Jack. He was a small colt, who loved to help out. The other sailors... they used to call him 'Little Jack'."

Vyse was speechless. He started to feel uneasy about being on a ship named after his captain's deceased family. All the times he'd allowed the ship to be damaged made him feel guilty.

"One day, we went out fishin' as usual. Then Punta came. We didn't know how powerful Punta was, and we tried to fight him. But, there was no way a fishin' boat stood a chance against that thing. Punta retaliated against us and destroyed our ship. I barely managed to survive, losing my right foreleg in the process..."

But my crew... and Jack... weren't so lucky. Last time I saw Jack, he was reaching for part of his pegasus feather collection as he fell, as if he'd become one and fly to safety... I can still hear my son scream as he fell... From that day on, I swore revenge on Punta... for my crew, and for Jack. I need to kill Punta... to avenge them."

"Captain..." Vyse tried to find the words needed to console him, to ease even years of suffering and sadness, but nothing came to him. Even if they did, he'd have been interrupted, as the ship had just been enveloped in a thin cloud of smog. "This smog! Could it be?"

"Vyse... go wake the others," Drachma calmly ordered. "It's him. Punta is here."

The Little Jack began heading deeper into the smog cloud, searching for its center. Near the eastern edge of the continent, a large shadowy figure could be seen flying directly towards them. A figure whose purple color and vast wingspan became more and more apparent as it neared ever closer.

"... It's him!" Drachma shouted as he turned hard to avoid colliding with Punta. Punta was not interested in the Little Jack; it was attempting to escape the fleet of ships firing upon it. Two small ships led by a larger ship, all black. Known as the Monoceros, it had a unicorn horn ornament built into the front, likely used for ramming.

"Captain," Vyse began as he watched the fleet's expert tactics in awe. "Whose ship is that?"

"While we were in the Valuan capital," Drachma began, "I heard rumors that the Armada altered their chain of command. That must be Ramirez's ship. He was Galcian's Vice Captain... He's the most feared officer in the Armada."

"Ramirez..." Fina whispered the familiar name.

"Fina?" Aika asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing... Everything is fine..."

Vyse examined the battlefield. "We can't fight both Punta and Ramirez at the same time! Captain, what should we do?"

"Take out the Valuan ships first," Drachma ordered. "I don't want them interferin' in the fight with Punta. I need to kill him myself. Battlestations! Leave Ramirez's ship alone. Concentrate on the two cruisers first!"

The two cruisers were painfully simple to deal with. The two ships thought they'd attack the Little Jack from both sides by firing at them from opposite ends. As soon as they did, however, Vyse maneuvered the Little Jack into the air, dodging the shots. The wayward cannon blasts ending up striking the opposite ship, and the two foolishly ended up destroying each other.

With the two cruisers so easily destroyed, Punta had let its guard down and slowed to a near halt. In the commotion, the Little Jack had

managed to get into perfect firing position to do some serious vital damage. This was the greatest opportunity they'd ever get to mortally wound the beast, so they decided to take it.

"I've waited for this for a long time..." Drachma mumbled. "Harpoon Cannon... FIRE!!!" The Harpoon spun and shot from the ship's bowsprit. It drilled into Punta's scaly exterior and dug into his flesh, becoming stuck like a stray fishing hook. Punta let out a sharp cry, but continued its steady course to avoiding hurting himself further. "Heh... There's no escape for ya now."

The Blue Rogues thought they had made the best of the commotion in order to sneak up behind Punta. But they were wrong. That honor had gone to Ramirez, who had remained on the sidelines, waiting for this moment. He attacked the Little Jack, which could not properly maneuver itself due to being connected to Punta by the harpoon.

"Captain!" Vyse shouted as he gripped the helm. "Ramirez is attacking us off the starboard side!"

"The Little Jack is on fire!" Aika reported. "Propelling power dropping rapidly! We're... losing altitude!"

"This isn't good... If we keep this up, we're all going to die."

"NO!" Drachma screamed. "I've waited far too long!!! I may never get another chance!"

"Captain! We've got to abandon ship! We need to get to the lifeboats!"

"What...?! You're tellin' me to abandon the Little Jack?! You're tellin' me to let Punta go?!?!"

"YES!!! If you die, it won't bring back your son! And as long as you're alive, you'll always have another chance! If you die now, then the lives of your crew... and your son... would have been lost in vain."

Drachma stood still as the blue pegasus, who reminded him so very much of his son, stared into the depths of his soul. He could almost see his own son standing there, scolding him. How could he ignore what he knew was the truth? Drachma stomped his iron hoof into the floor harder than he ever had, screaming at the top of his lungs. Somehow, his crew could tell this meant he was agreeing.

"Alright," Vyse directed. "We're abandoning ship! Everypony! Get down below!"

The crew of the Little Jack galloped down the stairs, all the way down to the hull. In it was a room where two lifeboats were kept for emergencies, and a door that opened up into a ramp to the outside, to allow them to slide

out. Aika and Fina quickly boarded one of the lifeboats, and are pushed out by Drachma. Vyse climbed into the other.

"Captain, hurry!" Vyse shouted. "Get in!"

Drachma place his hooves on the lifeboat, and stopped. He saw that his ship was going down in flames. His ship, that he had named after his only son, was to be dragged away and torn to shreds by Jack's very murderer. Drachma closed his eyes in contemplation. He was not about to let Punta take his son away from him a second time.

"Nooooo!!!" Vyse screamed as Drachma pushed him out. The image of Drachma standing aboard his ship quickly faded into the smog. Vyse would've flied back for him, but Punta was pulling far too quickly; there'd be no way he could catch up. Vyse's captain was gone from sight.

"Cap'n!" Aika shouted.

"Why did he do that?" Fina asked.

Ramirez's ship had caught sight of the Little Jack's escapees, and began firing at them with incredible accuracy, making near direct hits despite the size of his targets.

"Ramirez..." Vyse grunted. "He... fires at lifeboats?!?!"

The lifeboats were spinning out of control. They could no longer be handled as the force from the midair explosions rocked them in various directions. As they did their best to hold on tight, they were eventually knocked unconscious, as they each hurtled in different directions.

When Vyse woke up, his eyes were still clenched shut. He felt as though he'd been hit by a train, though he wasn't too far off, now was he? His hind hooves were wet, and the feeling of sand brushed against the rest of him. Was he on a beach? After gathering his strength, he lifted himself up and wiped his eyes off with his scarf.

He was stranded on a tiny island in the shape of a crescent moon. A large, curved cliff on one side of the island, a small mound on the other. The middle of the island was covered in trees. Vyse had crash landed in a small pond on the island, which happened to break his fall. The remains of his lifeboat lay next to him, splintered apart and broken in several places.

"I'm... I'm alive?" Vyse asked once he'd gained his composure. "It looks like I've been separated from Aika and Fina... I hope they're okay. Where am I?" Vyse flew up to the air and circled the island to get a good look at his surroundings. "Well, I'm definitely on an island... And an uninhabited one at that. Hmm... I should try and find some shelter."

Vyse could see a cave in the base of the mountain. In front of its entrance was the skeleton of a pony, with its tattered clothes draped over the bones. Vyse could tell from the presence of wing bones that it was a pegasus.

"Well, I guess I'm not the first pony to get shipwrecked on this island. From the look of his clothes, he was probably a sailor, too. Looks like he's been dead for a long time. There's something embroidered on his collar... 'Gonzales'. I guess that was his name... Hm? There's something in his pocket... It's a map! Or... part of one, anyway. It's really old. Maybe it's a map of this island. Hmm... there aren't any of the same landmarks... It's probably a map of a different island. It may come in handy someday. I'll just hold onto this map for a while."

Vyse stuffed the map piece into his saddlebag, and took a long, disappointed look at the body of Gonzales. If he was a pegasus, why didn't he fly away from the island? Did he bother to try? Are they really that far away from the nearest island? Vyse made it a point to try escaping by wing as soon as he got the chance. For now, he decided to give Gonzales a proper burial. At least, as proper a burial as one without tools could give. The tombstone was a mere pile of rocks. Vyse silently apologized that it was the best he could do at the time.

Vyse entered the cave in the cliffside and found that Gonzales had a nice little home set up. A pile of hay for a bed (and possibly snack), some boxes of supplies, an unlit lantern, etc. There were even some books available for mild entertainment.

"I guess my friend Gonzales had the same idea. It looks like he was living here for quite a while, too. I don't think I have much of a choice, so I might as well set up camp in here and get some rest." Vyse plopped down onto the pile of hay and curled into a ball. Before falling asleep, he whispered, "Aika... Fina... Wherever you are... I hope you guys are safe..."

Aika and Fina woke up to find themselves alone in a large, pink bed in a larger and pinker bedroom. Aika's pigtail ties had been taken off, so her mane was hanging down. If they weren't so worried, or if they didn't know any better, they'd almost assume that something questionable happened between them recently. They could tell from the outside noises and the rocking they felt that they were aboard a ship.

"Uh..." Aika moaned. "How did we end up in this place? And where exactly are we?"

"This place does seem peculiar..." Fina examined. "I don't see Vyse or Captain Drachma anywhere... I hope they're okay."

"... They're probably fine... They're both too stubborn to die that easily... Hmmm... I wonder who saved us?"

The door to the bedroom opened up, and in peered a pair of bright, brown eyes. Into the room came a very cheerful looking, hot pink pegasus, with a brown mane, and a winking heart as a cutie mark. "Oh! You're awake!" the mare exclaimed. "There's no need to get up just yet. Let's see, what can I get you...? How about a nice, hot bowl of soup?"

Aika and Fina's eyes lit up. Their savior was not only beautiful and kind, but very generous as well. "Sure!" Aika agreed. "That would be great! Oh, my name's Aika."

"And I'm Fina. Thank you so much for saving us. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts."

"Aika and Fina..." the pink pegasus repeated. "You both have such pretty names! You two are lucky I found your lifeboat. You were both unconscious. What exactly happened? I love exciting stories!"

Aika and Fina's good mood turned somber. She just had to remind them of recent events...

"Ah, don't worry about it," said the mare. "You don't have to tell me; I won't force you to. But, by the looks of you... I'd say that you two are Air Pirates."

Was it that obvious? The last thing they wanted was to be at the mercy of a stranger who knew they were pirates. If she were anypony else, she may have had half a mind to turn them in for a reward.

"Haha... looks like I guessed right," the pegasus chuckled. "You don't have anything to worry about, my dears... Because... I'm an Air Pirate, too!"

Aika and Fina were both pleasantly surprised. "What? Really?"

"Yes. I am Clara, of the Blue Rogues. Pleased to meet you!"

"Ah... I see," Clara mused once Aika and Fina had finished explaining their current situation. "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Vyse is probably fine! You two like him, right?? You need to have faith in your stallion..."

"Um... yeah..." Aika responded with a grin. Fina simply blushed and shied away.

"Captain Clara!" came a voice from the door. A pink filly with odd white stripes had come to give a report. "We'll be reaching Nasrad in a few moments!"

"Okay... Prepare for landing," Clara ordered. "We'll be landing in Nasr's capital, Nasrad, very soon. Nasrad is a very large city. Who knows? Maybe you can find out where Vyse is there."

Nasrad was indeed a very large city. Because there was no enormous crater in the center of it, it had more mass than the Valuan capital, arguably making it the largest city in Equestria. Their population was probably nothing to sneeze at, either. Was it any wonder they equaled Valua in military power, despite their lack of technological advancement?

The desert city may have been hot, but these earth ponies knew very well how to take care of their produce. Nasr was world-famous for its seemingly limitless supply of apples, a tradition said to have lasted since the Old World. The city streets were decorated with performers, outdoor shops, water fountains... Everywhere you looked, there was something to behold.

Clara docked her ship, the Primrose, and she, Aika, and Fina got off. The crew remained on board, knowing they'd be leaving again immediately.

"It's about time for me to set sail again," Clara said. "It was very nice meeting the two of you. I'm sorry we couldn't spend more time together. Here... take this. It's only 20'000 bits, but it should help."

"Wow! Really?!" Aika exclaimed as she accepted the purse. "Thanks for everything you've done for us. First you save our lives, then you give us bits..."

"Don't give it a second thought. After all, I too, am a Blue Rogue."

"Where are you going now, Clara?"

"Me? Well, I'm going after the stallion I love. He's an Air Pirate, too... He's a little on the wild side, but he's strong, smart, and so... YUMMY...! I follow him wherever he goes. I know that someday, he'll come around and fall in love with me, too. Isn't that romantic?"

"Um... sure!"

"Well, I'd better get going! I hope we see each other again! Good luck!" And with that, Clara boarded the Primrose and took off. Aika and Fina had both been fighting the urge to bust out laughing about the things Clara said about the "stallion of her dreams". Once her ship was out of sight, they did just that.

"That was the nicest stalker that I've ever met!" Aika laughed. "But at least it explains why her entire ship looks like a honeymoon suite."

"Honeymoon?" Fina asked between giggles.

"I kinda figured you wouldn't know what that was. Don't worry about it. Let's go see if we can find a place to sleep tonight."

Aika and Fina did not have to travel far to find an inn, as one was located to their immediate right as soon as they passed through the main gates that served as Nasrad's welcoming entrance. It was in such a perfect location; it doubtlessly drummed up a lot of business.

"Welcome!" greeted the innkeeper pony. "This inn is 960 bits per night. Would you like a room?"

"Um..." Aika considered their budget with unease. She didn't know how long they'd be there, or how much they'd have to spend. "We've actually been shipwrecked, and we don't really have a lot of money. I can try to find a way to raise money, but..."

"Bah..." the innkeeper hummed as she batted a hoof. "You two look like good fillies. I trust you. I will start a tab, and you can settle it when you leave, okay? You can use the room all the way in the back on the second floor. I hope you sleep well."

Aika and Fina thanked the kind mare and headed up to their room. There was a single bed, and a beautiful view of the city and its sky through the window. The Orange Moon shone down upon them, mixing the warm colors of the sky as the sun set upon the horizon.

"Looks like we're going to be stuck in Nasrad for a little while," Aika deduced.

"What are we going to do tomorrow?" Fina asked.

"Well, I was thinking about looking for a place to work. We have to save up some bits. Let's put aside the money that we got from Clara. If we save up some more, we can buy a small ship and go looking for Vyse. What do you think, Fina?"

"Yes! That sounds like a good plan."

"Well, tonight, let's just get some rest and hope for the best!" Aika plopped onto the bed with a smile on her face. But since the conversation had died, her mind couldn't help but wander. She kept thinking about Vyse, and was starting to really worry about him.

"Vyse..." Fina whispered as she looked up at the sky. "I wonder if you're looking at the same moon right now..."

"Aika... Fina..." Vyse whispered as he looked up at the Orange Moon from the warmth of his campfire. "Are you looking at the same Moon right now? I hope you're alright."

Vyse spent his first night alone on that deserted island. He woke up to some fresh, clean air and a warm sun. He was, of course, pretty hungry. Luckily, the island was in a temperate zone, and had plenty of grass and flowers for him to munch on. He'd have to watch just how much he ate, though. It was a small island, and he didn't know how long he'd be stuck on it.

He decided to do what he had previously planned to do. And that was to fly around the island, to keep a lookout for nearby landmasses. Just because Gonzales didn't find any doesn't mean Vyse won't. He leaped into the sky and flew straight until the deserted island was just barely visible, even through his telescopic eyeglass. He must've been at least two miles away from the island. He flew at a slight curve, being sure to keep the island at a visible distance so he wouldn't lose it. The last thing he needed was to get lost in the middle of the ocean without a ship.

Vyse had almost completely circled the island when he saw something strange to the east. A dark gray sky rift, so thick that nothing could be seen through it. He had seen one of these before, to the west of North Ocean. He couldn't possibly be on the opposite side of that, could he? North Ocean was dozens of leagues away from where they fought Punta and Ramirez. Vyse wondered if there were any islands on the opposite side of the rift, but decided not to risk it. Even if he could pass through one with his wings alone, there'd be no guarantee of any islands being on the opposite side. It was a deadly journey, one Vyse simply could not afford to make.

His wings had begun to grow weary, and ended his search. Vyse had completely circled the island. There wasn't a single visible landmass within a four-mile radius of it. Where on Equestria was he? Is it an uncharted part of the world? Would anypony even find him after today? He remembered that he was not the first pony to set hoof on this island, and reassured himself. If it was possible for them to get here, then somepony else can too.

That night, Vyse sat at the campfire, eating an assortment of flowers he'd never seen before. Eating strange food was probably unintelligent, given his situation, but it was either that, or starve. To his relief, the flowers were not only delicious, but far from lethal.

"Oh wow, I ate so much," Vyse moaned as he rubbed his stomach with his hoof. "I wonder if this island is near any of the trade routes... A ship

has got to pass by here sooner or later. I should prepare some sort of signal fire in case I see any ships."

The next day, Vyse climbed to the highest point of the island and set up a small column of stone. He filled it with burnable materials like grass, hay, and twigs, but only left enough room for the fire to be minute. The smoke emitting from the column was all anypony needed to see, and it should last for several days.

On the fourth day, Vyse spent his time collecting supplies. He gathered firewood, flowers for food, and even harvested a patch of hay from the corner of the island. Four days on solid ground, and Vyse was really starting to miss sailing. He would just have to think of this as some sort of vacation and just... deal with it.

On the fifth day, Vyse couldn't help but notice that the grass had started to die, and the water in the pond had begun to recede. It had likely been an extremely long time since the island had seen rain, on account of it being deserted. He had not forgotten his duty as a pegasus. He flew as high up as he could and grabbed hold of some stray clouds from Upper Sky, trying to find the most condensed ones he could. He gathered them above the island, and gave his manually formed raincloud a good pounding. Lightning shot from the cloud, and rain began to pour out.

Vyse decided it would be best to simply let it rain on the island for the whole day, and stayed inside. Vyse tried to entertain himself with Gonzales's old books, but he couldn't sit still. He didn't want to just sit around for who knows how long waiting for a ship to pass by. And that's when he came up with the idea to fix the lifeboat from the Little Jack.

On the morning of the sixth day, Vyse bucked all the rainclouds out of commission, and cleared the sky above the island. He flew up to the peak of the mountain to ensure his signal fire was still burning. Upon landing back on the ground, he'd noticed that an orange gemstone was sticking out of the dirt. They had likely fallen there a long time ago, and had only just now been unearthed by Vyse's rainstorm.

The entire island was covered in orange gemstones. Vyse finally realized, even after seeing the Orange Moon for so many nights, that he must've been somewhere in Nasr. He hadn't noticed just how distracted and flustered he'd really been, else he would've figured out which continent he was in a long time ago. The fact that he was in Nasr was proof that the

dark sky rift to the east did not lead to North Ocean, as that place was far to the west of Nasr. It's a good thing Vyse never tried to pass through it. Who knows what dangers he may have found?

Vyse began collecting the orange gemstones. He felt very lucky that the island was deserted, or somepony else may have found them a long time ago. They were large, but they were also unprocessed, so they wouldn't give off a whole lot of power. Vyse simply had to hope it would be enough to get him to the next island. If he was in Nasr, all he'd have to do is follow the Orange Moon, and it would take him straight to the center landmasses, and hopefully civilization.

One week passed. Vyse spent all of his time working on the lifeboat. The island had plenty of trees, so building materials were far from scarce. The magic of unicorns and the natural craftsmanship of earth ponies were what were normally used when it came to situations like this. Pegasi would be completely lost if given such a task, but Vyse was no simple pegasus. He was an expert on ships, and could probably build his own given enough time and materials.

By the end of his second week on the island, the lifeboat was complete. Vyse inserted the gemstones into the engine and into the control panel. He grinned as it hummed to life and began to hover a few inches off the ground. "Alright... That should just about do it. I'm finally going to be able to get off this island! ... What?"

Vyse's accomplishment was immediately robbed of all its value, but Vyse didn't care. A ship had appeared! It sported black sails, yes, but it was a ship nonetheless. Vyse was ecstatic to leave, even if it were done as a prisoner. He'd simply escape should that happen.

"Heh... why couldn't they have come sooner? I wouldn't have spent so much time working on the boat!" Vyse flew up to his signal fire and began waving all of his hooves as he hovered around it. He probably could've gone after it, but there's no way to know if he'd catch up with it.

The black-sailed ship fired a single cannon into the sky, a sign that they had spotted him. "Yes!!! They saw me!! Well, looks like I'm finally getting off of this rock."

On the bridge of the black-sailed ship, the Captain snoozed away on a small sofa. He was a pegasus, sporting a red coat, and a long brown

mane. He wore a pair of tinted glasses, and his cutie mark was of a skull wearing an eagle feather warbonnet, like the kind Buffalo chiefs wear.

"Captain Gilder!" one of his male crew members called to him.

"Uhhh..." Gilder moaned, still half-asleep. "Not again, Maria... Let me sleep a little longer..."

"... Captain!!! Uhh... Captain... You need to wake up!"

"... Huh? Oh..."

"We just picked up a pegasus stranded on a deserted island. He says that he's been there for two weeks! Judging by the way he's dressed, he's probably an Air Pirate. He looks like he's about 17. He's pretty much still a foal."

"Who! Who!" cried Gilder's pet owl, Willy, as he flew onto Gilder's head.

Gilder slid off the sofa and stretched his legs. "He's a lucky colt... he was only stranded for two weeks. But, if it was me and I was stuck on an island without any mares for two whole weeks... I'm not sure if I would have made it!!!"

Gilder followed his crewmate out onto the deck, where Vyse was waiting to meet him. "So, you're the pony that was stranded?" Gilder asked. "Hmm... and you're dressed like an Air Pirate. What's your name, colt?"

"I'm Vyse. Thank you for saving me. Are you the captain of this ship?"

"Yes, I am. Just call me Gilder. The ship's name is Claudia. And this 'beast' on my head here is Willy. Come to the bridge. I want to hear about your adventures."

Vyse had missed talking to others very much. He was very glad that his rescuers were so friendly, despite them wearing black sails. Vyse wondered if it wasn't simply a ruse. He talked to Gilder for hours about who he was, where he came from, and all the wonderful and fantastic accomplishments he'd achieved.

"Hahahahaha!!!" Gilder bellowed once Vyse was finished, overwhelmed by the weight of his stories. "So you've defeated three of the Armada's Admirals AND escaped from the Grand Fortress? I like you, Vyse. I wouldn't expect anything less from an Air Pirate. Personally, I'm constantly searching for adventure. Treasure, brawls... and mares. There are tons of things in this world that make me happy. 'Mares are like sunsets... They're beautiful, but there will be a different one tomorrow.' That's my motto."

Vyse felt somewhat offended. He didn't think it was right to think of mares that way, but the last thing he wanted was to insult his savior, so he simply nodded in agreement.

"So you've been away from your ship for two whole weeks, right?" Gilder asked. "I'll bet you really miss sailing. Go ahead. Take the wheel."

"Wha?!" Vyse gasped. "Really? You'd let me...?"

"I don't care... Anypony who's accomplished what you have knows his way around a ship. The Claudia's a little on the sensitive side, but you'll get the hang of her in no time... I'm heading to Nasrad. It's the capital of Nasr, due south from here."

Vyse discovered their position easily using a nearby map. The location of the island he had just been stranded on was southeast of the frontier lands, a series of uninhabited islands that ponies have yet to migrate to. The eastern exit of the Valuan wilderness emptied right into it, explaining how he got there. That lifeboat must have been drifting for hours before it finally crashed, and Vyse was so very lucky it did.

Vyse steered the ship south, toward Nasrad. As they neared the landmass on which it stood, Gilder's lookout came storming into the room. "Captain! There's a suspicious looking ship heading straight for us... it's coming in fast! And it's PINK!"

"What?" Gilder pondered. "I wonder who... OH, NO..."

It was Clara's ship, the Primrose. It had spotted the Claudia and was moving in on it at top speed. "There you are, my love!" she exclaimed as she held her blushing cheeks in her hooves. "You can't play hard to get forever. My heart belongs to you!!"

"Eyup..." Gilder moaned. "It's Clara, alright... Hmm... in some ways, she's even more frightening than the Armada! Okay, here's the plan: Vyse, you and I are going to take a lifeboat to Nasrad, and my crew will sail my ship in the opposite direction as a decoy. Whaddaya say?"

Vyse's eyes and mouth were agape as he listened to Gilder's irresponsible tactic. "Umm... Okay... But, you're the captain... Is it alright for you to leave your ship?"

"Heh heh... don't worry about it. Titles mean nothing to me. And I told you earlier, didn't I? I'm always searching for adventure." Vyse smiled as he slowly began to understand Gilder's way of life. He didn't live by anypony's code but his own. "Alright, everypony! Time for Operation Clara... You know the routine. Catch up with us later."

"Aye aye!" they responded.

Gilder's plan was a success. He and Vyse escaped from beneath the hull of the ship in a rather fancy lifeboat. Clara's eyes still fixed on catching the Claudia, she didn't even notice them.

"Haha... works every time," Gilder chuckled. "Alright Vyse, let's see what kind of fun Nasrad has to offer."

Vyse was finally back in civilization. He'd realized, however, that he hadn't missed it quite as much as he thought he did. Two weeks wasn't so long, after all.

"I have some personal stuff to take care of first," Gilder explained as he got ready to trot off. "You go on to the inn and rest up. I'll catch up with you a little later."

"I don't mind traveling separately," Vyse began, "but what is it you need to do, exactly?"

"I need to stop by the tavern for a bit. There's a few mares there that will be happy to see me. Don't wait up..."

Vyse headed straight for the inn. He paid for his stay in full, and was given the first room on the second floor. There was no way he could've known who was staying in the room right next to his... As he entered his room, the next over opened up. Vyse was already shut inside his room before he could see Aika and Fina emerge down the hall.

"It's payday!!!" Aika exclaimed. "Working as a waitress is actually more fun than I thought!"

"I... I've never worked for bits before," Fina admitted as the two of them headed downstairs. "It's... it's rather exciting, actually."

Aika and Fina had been working as waitresses at a tavern across the street for the past two weeks. Their looks and charm made them both customer favorites, but those say little about how hard they worked. They entered the tavern to collect their pay from the manager, and to say their goodbyes too, of course.

"Oh! It's you," the tavernkeep happily greeted. "Here you are... this is your pay. You earned it. You both worked very hard, so I decided to help you out with a little extra bonus. Thank you for everything!"

"Wow! Thanks!" said Aika. "With this, we finally have the 40'000 bits we need to buy a ship!"

"Well, well!" came a voice from the bar. It was Gilder, right where he told Vyse he'd be. "I didn't know there were such pretty fillies working here!"

"Gilder, you scoundrel..." the tavernkeep scolded. "Keep your hooves off the help, okay?"

"They just stopped working here, right? You don't need to get so protective..."

"Some things never change... Gilder, you never were one to resist a pretty face... Aika... Fina... Be careful out there! You better take care of yourselves!"

"Thanks for everything!" Aika thanked again. "Alright Fina, let's go back to the inn and pay off our bill!"

Aika and Fina had almost made it back to the inn, when they saw a very old-looking pegasus with broken wings collapsed in the middle of the street. They immediately ran over to his aid.

"Sir!" Aika called to him. "What's wrong?! Do you need help?"

"Ugh..." the old pegasus moaned. "Starving... Thirsty... Need water... Need food..."

"Alright, just hang on. I'll bring you inside. We'll take care of you."

Aika and Fina both helped the old stallion up to their room, and gave him some of their food and water. Once he had regained his strength, he felt it necessary to thank his saviors properly.

"Thank you for your kindness. My name is Pedro. I'm not sure how I can repay you."

"That's quite alright," Aika gleefully said, happy she wouldn't have the death of somepony weighing on her conscience. "Don't give it another thought. Helping ponies in distress is what we Blue Rogues live for."

"Oh...! You're an Air Pirate? I can't do much to repay you, but please accept this..."

"What's this?" Aika asked as she took the parchment. "It looks like an old map..."

"I... I used to be a sailor. I used to travel with my friend, Gonzales. One day, we were lucky enough to find this... 'Discord's Map'."

"Discord's... Map?"

"Many generations ago, long before my time... There was an exceptionally powerful being named Discord who terrorized Equestria. And this map supposedly shows where Discord hid all of his treasures... 'Chaos Island'."

"But, half of the map is missing!"

"Well, Gonzales and I promised each other to look for it together someday... We tore the map in half and we each carried a piece with us. Right after we found the map, we were attacked by Black Pirates. We had to abandon ship. I don't know what happened to Gonzales, but I ended up here in Nasrad. I've been waiting for him in this town for a very long time... I don't think I'll ever see him again."

"That's very sad..." Fina consoled.

"Now I am too old to be going off looking for buried treasure. I'm sure that Gonzales would have been happy if you found it instead... Thank you again for saving me. Good luck finding that treasure." Pedro slowly slid off the bed, and inched his way to the stairs. Aika and Fina followed him out into the hall to make sure he'd be okay.

"Fina, what do you think? Do you suppose this map is worth anything?"

"Hmm... He didn't appear to be the kind of pony that would lie."

"Yeah, that story did seem a little farfetched, but it might be worth checking out. Hey... Do you want to go searching for the treasure?!"

"Sure, I would like that very much. It sounds interesting."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's pay the innkeeper and get going!"

It was this very moment that Gilder had returned from the tavern. He noticed the two fillies down the hall, and called to them. "Why, hello there. Do you want to grab a bite to eat? I have a friend that can come along, too."

Aika smiled, and politely declined. "We'd love to, but we're about to go on a trip. Maybe some other time."

"I see. Well, that's too bad. Safe travels."

"Thank you. Maybe we'll run into you later."

Gilder entered Vyse's bedroom, his body blocking the view of the hall as Aika and Fina passed and headed downstairs. Vyse wouldn't have been looking, anyway. His eyes were fixated on the map he'd found on the deserted island.

"Hey," Gilder began. "We just got into town, and you've got your muzzle buried in that map. Have a little fun, will ya? ... Hey! Wait a minute! Where'd you get that map?!"

Vyse looked up at Gilder's shocked expression. "I found it on that island I was stuck on."

"That's the map to the hidden treasure of the god of chaos, Discord! It's said that he once ruled the world, and has seen all six moons with his own eyes. And it is also said that all the treasures he'd accumulated are

hidden somewhere on a small island. And this is a map to that island! Vyse... you certainly know how to pick your maps!"

"Hmm... But how do we know if it's real?"

"Look... it's Discord's seal," Gilder pointed to a stamp showing a thin, horned pony head with a goatee and an enormous grin. "It isn't easy to duplicate that seal. It's no fake, Vyse. This is a REAL treasure map! We can't just sit here... We have to leave right away!"

"But Gilder, didn't you say something about meeting mares and having some fun?"

"Which do you think is more important? Mares? Or DISCORD'S TREASURE?! Besides, with Discord's treasure, we'll be able to get MORE mares! C'mon, Vyse... let's go!"

Vyse was about to leave Nasrad with Gilder on their epic treasure hunt, when an old, faint memory came rushing back to him. He'd completely forgotten about it until just now, as he was walking through the streets of Nasrad. The grunt pony back at the Maw of Tartas had leaked information about Valua's plans to start a war with Nasr. It wouldn't take long to warn the city's ruler real quick, Vyse thought.

As they approached the gates to the palace, they were stopped by two guard ponies. "This is the Royal Palace of the Nasultan! If you do not have official business, then you are not welcome here."

"Please..." Vyse pleaded. "We must speak to the Nasultan right away. Let us through."

"What?! You wish to speak to the Nasultan? Do you think we'd allow commoners into the Royal Palace?"

"I have important information regarding the Valuan Armada. Please, let us pass."

"Important information about the Valuans? Hmm... Valua is our greatest enemy. If you have information about them, then perhaps we can let you speak to the Nasultan. Very well, I will grant you permission to enter the Royal Palace. Now, if you will follow me."

"Heh, not too shabby," Gilder congratulated. "Who'd have thought that two ruffians like us would be able to meet the Nasultan?"

"Well," Vyse responded, "I just figured that if they knew we were doing them a favor, they'd let us in."

Despite the city's incredible size, the palace itself was rather small, and the throne room made up most of it. Everything seemed to be made from

gold. On the throne sat the fat, brash-looking Nasultan, being fanned by two scantily-dressed mares.

"So, you're the Air Pirate who escaped from the Grand Fortress, eh? I am the Nasultan of the Nasr Kingdom. What is it that you want from me?"

"Valua is planning an attack on Nasrad," Vyse wasted no time in explaining. "They are already organizing their forces. You should warn your ponies and assemble your fleet right away!"

"HAHAHAHAHA!!! You came all this way to tell me this? Do not fear. Our navy is powerful enough to crush the Valuan Armada."

"But, Your Majesty... you shouldn't underestimate them. You need to assemble your fleet or many innocent lives may be lost."

"HA! You seem very concerned about Nasr for a PIRATE. Nasrad is shielded by mountains in the south and dark sky rifts to the east. It is impossible for them to invade. If they were to try, it would have to be from the north. And that is where our fleet is located. The South Dannel Strait is properly guarded, and a maelstrom blocks off the North Dannel Strait. In other words, it would be impossible for anypony to invade us! Hahahaha!"

Vyse knew where the Nasultan was coming from. There were only two possible entrances to reach Nasrad. Through the frontier lands, and through the South Dannel Strait. And as the Nasultan just explained, those are where the fleets are located. The North Dannel Strait is completely blocked by a cylindrical sky rift that serves as an impenetrable ship graveyard. No pony had ever been able to pass through it.

But the Valuans weren't stupid. They must have some strategy that works around these obstacles. It was foolish to underestimate them. "But..." Vyse begged.

"Do not worry..." the Nasultan boasted. "Nasr is protected by the Orange Moon. Valua cannot touch us. And besides, if somepony as young as you can get past the Armada, perhaps they're losing their edge! Imagine that... The once mighty Valuan Armada, FOALED by a FOAL! Hahahahaha!!!"

Vyse was starting to get really peeved at the fat king's arrogance. "It's no use, Vyse," Gilder informed. "I don't think he'll listen to anything we have to say. Let's stop wasting time and get to looking for Chaos Island."

"I don't know," Vyse regretted. "He seems way too overconfident, but I hope for his sake that he's right. C'mon, let's go."

Meanwhile, Aika and Fina had just finished their transaction. They were now the proud owners of a small boat. It was no pirate ship, but it would get them to where they wanted to go.

"Alright!" Aika cheered. "It's a little small, but we bought a ship!"

"Yes," Fina said. "But the bits that we got from Clara and from working are all gone now."

"Don't worry about it, Fina. All we need to do is find Discord's Treasure and we'll be fine!"

Aika and Fina examined their half of the map. The map was entirely sepia, except for one small section of the ripped edge, which was red. It seemed to be circling something, but what couldn't be told without the other half of the map. To the west of this ripped section, however, was what could clearly be made out as the continent of Valua. They decided to use that as their waypoint, and headed out to the frontier lands.

Not long after Aika and Fina leave do Vyse and Gilder arrive on the docks as well. They stood next to the Claudia's lifeboat as they formulated their game plan. "Well, then!" Gilder began. "Let's go find us some treasure!"

"Okay," Vyse agreed as he examined the map. "There are some directions here. 'To the North of the City of Apples, when the two pieces become whole, the way to the treasure will be known'."

"The 'City of Apples' probably refers to the city that was here before Nasrad. I think it was called, like... Appa... Appulo... somethin'. It's to the north of here, right? We can get there in no time."

"I'm a sailor without a ship at this point. There's no way I'll be able to search for my friends now. If we do find the treasure, I'd like to use my share to buy a ship."

"Hahaha, I like you Vyse. You never give up. Very well... off we go!" And so they went, unknowingly following Aika and Fina into the frontier lands.

Aika and Fina were the first to reach Chaos Island. They were surprised that nopony had discovered it until now, seeing as how it ended up being the largest island in the frontier lands. They stood on the northern edge of the island's mountain, and were confronted with a giant, steel door, with a pressure plate at its foot. They stood on the plate, but nothing happened. The door had no knob, or any other visible method of access.

"Hey!" Aika complained. "Why won't this door open?! It won't even budge!!"

"There's something written on the door..." Fina examined. "It's an old language, but I think I can read it. 'When the two become one, the path will reveal itself to you...'"

"What's that supposed to mean?! Why is Discord being so stingy?! It's not like any of his treasure means anything to him anymore!!!"

On the opposite side of the island, Vyse and Gilder had just arrived. "This door is huge!" Vyse exclaimed as he approached the southern foot of the mountain. "I don't know how the two of us can open it."

"There's probably some sort of trick to opening it," Gilder pondered as he stepped onto the pressure plate. It sunk into the the ground, and the door before both parties opened to their surprise.

"I didn't touch anything..." Vyse claimed. "Did you?"

"Hmm... The map said something like 'When the two pieces come together...' I wonder if anypony else is here? Heh... nevermind... what are the chances of that?"

"What was that?!" Aika asked as the door randomly decided to open.

"Whatever it was," Fina began, "it just opened the door."

"I don't know if that's good or bad."

"Aika... what do you think we should do?"

"I'm not sure how, but the door opened, and there's treasure inside! We should go!"

The two groups explored the depths of Chaos Island, both totally oblivious to the other's presence. It was a masterfully built labyrinth inside that mountain, flooded with twists, turns, dead-ends... and shifting pathways with no predictable pattern whatsoever. Every time they stepped on a switch, pushed a button, pulled a lever, or turned a valve, absolutely nothing seemed to happen.

Neither party had any idea that the shifting pathways were the result of the other's actions. The devices on one side of the island shifted the maze on the other, and vice versa. But because neither knew this, the entire trek was confusing beyond compare.

"This place..." Aika moaned. "... Is SO... RANDOM... Nothing in this place makes any sense!!!"

Fina lowered her head. "I guess they don't call it Chaos Island for nothing."

"Geez," Gilder grunted. "Discord sure had a strange method of maze construction."

Vyse chuckled. "At least there was a good reason he was named as such."

After many more bouts with patiently waiting for doors to open and walls to shift, the ponies finally reached the center of the maze. In it was a large room containing a giant treasure chest.

"Hey, Vyse!" called Gilder. "I believe that's what we came here for! Heh, Discord's Treasure."

"That's got to be it!" Vyse agreed. "Heh, now I can buy my ship."

"Wow!" came a voice from the corner of the room. "Look, Fina! Look!!! That treasure chest is HUGE!!!"

"Oh, yes..." came another voice. "I see it! Do you think it's Discord's Treasure?"

Vyse and Gilder spun around to see who had managed to sneak up on them. "Who's there?!"

"Who's there, yourself?" Aika shouted as her eyes adjusted to the light. "Oh!!! Vyse...! It's Vyse!!!"

"Vyse!!" Fina exclaimed.

Vyse couldn't believe his eyes. "Aika! Fina! You're both okay!!"

Aika and Fina galloped as fast as they could to where Vyse stood. Aika leaped onto Vyse and wrapped her legs around him, cheering and crying tears of joy. "You're alive!" she shouted as she nuzzled his cheek. "We raised enough money to buy a boat and we were gonna go looking for you once we found the treasure!"

"V-Vyse..." Fina stuttered, unable to hold back her tears. "I'm so glad that you are alright... Oh, I'm sorry... I'm a little emotional right now. I'm just so happy!!!"

"Aika... Fina..." Vyse smiled as he hugged the both of them. "I was so worried. I was gonna buy a boat to look for you, too."

"Heh! Well, look at you..." Gilder interrupted. "On top of that, I didn't know that your partners were the cuties I met in Nasr!"

"We're all together again!"

With their emotional reunion subsided, they finally decided to reap the rewards of their efforts. They approached the giant treasure chest, and Gilder placed his hooves on the lid.

"Heh... Let's see what the god of chaos has to offer, shall we?" The Air Pirates all remained silent, anxious to see what they'd find inside the chest. Gilder slowly opened it... "... What? What's this?!"

"What the?!" asked Vyse as he looked inside.

The chest was almost completely empty. All it contained was a piece of paper, and a single bit with Discord's seal printed on it. Aika disappointingly took the coin from the chest and held it in her hoof, as if it were some sort of dying animal. Vyse took the paper and read its contents aloud.

Problem, Ponies?

Hahaha... You thought there was treasure hidden here, didn't you? My, how incredibly gullible you are. And my island; was it fun for you? No doubt you've noticed by now that it was all for absolutely nothing. But I ask: if you even managed to get this far, what do you need treasure for? You're obviously adventurous enough to live fulfilling lives without it. Having fun; that is the only thing in this world that has meaning.

*Arrivederci,
Discord*

"I don't believe this..." Vyse groaned.

"That's it?" Aika asked as her lip quivered. "No gems... No jewels?!"

"HAHAHAHAHA!!!" Gilder bellowed, lightening the mood instantly. "I didn't know Discord had such a great sense of humor. I haven't laughed this hard in a long time! A good laugh beats a bunch of bits any day."

"Well," Fina added, "this treasure has brought us all back together... and friends are more important than any treasure."

"Somehow, I doubt Discord would agree..."

"I understand that friends are important..." Aika whimpered. "But he could've at least threw in a little something for our trouble! First it was the Lost City... then it was Discord's Treasure... All of these old legends haven't paid off at all!"

Vyse chuckled. "I'll bet the god of chaos had no real need for money in the first place."

"Some moronic joker is somewhere in this world laughing at us right now!!! We galloped around like idiots the whole time, and we're STILL poor!"

Vyse's mood immediately sank.

Far to the south, Nasr's impenetrable defenses were, for lack of simpler description, penetrated. The maelstrom surrounding the North Dannel Strait slowly parted, as a fleet of black, iron ships passed through it easily, led by the Monoceros, the flagship of Admiral Ramirez.

"Admiral Ramirez..." his Vice Captain reported. "It is almost time. Everything is going according to plan. With the modifications to our engines, we were able to pass through the sky rift. Our spy ponies have reported that the Nasr fleet is busy guarding the southern strait. Nasrad is defenseless. We can take the Capitol without destroying it, sir."

"I suppose we could..." Ramirez calmly replied. "But I want it burned to the ground."

"As you wish, Admiral."

"Begin the attack on Nasrad! All vessels, full speed ahead!"

The Blue Rogues had just arrived back in Nasrad. Reunited at last, and exhausted from their adventures on Chaos Island, they had hoped they could finally relax and catch up on all that had happened during their separation.

Aika sighed deeply as she lowered her head. "I was hoping to find a bunch of money so I could buy a bug ship..."

Fina giggled. "If we all work together, perhaps you will still be able to buy one, Aika."

"... Huh?" Gilder gasped. As he looked upon the red, evening sky, black silhouettes crept upon Nasrad, overshadowing it before lighting it up with rapid cannonfire. The Armada was showing absolutely no mercy, even as they were met with zero resistance. Within the first minute of the attack, the Nasultan's Palace had been obliterated.

"The Royal Palace!" Vyse cried.

"Looks like they're trying to make an example of Nasr," Gilder deduced. "Vyse, if we just stand around here, we're all dead. Head for the docks!"

The black fleet had planned for this. The pier was one of the first things they had destroyed. Every ship had been burned down. The Blue Rogues looked on in horror as their only means of escape vanished before their eyes. The explosions subsided. Only silence and the crackling of fire remained. And then, from the opposite side of a nearby wall of fire... a voice.

"Fina... So, you are here." A blue pony with a chin-length white mane, dressed in tight black leather trotted through the wall of fire and approached them. The fire never once touched or even seared him, and he never took his eyes off of Fina as he neared. "I've been looking for you."

"Ramirez..." Fina said, instantly recognizing him.

"Fina, you know him?!" Aika asked. Fina did not respond. The sight of Ramirez, the confirmation that the Admiral known as Ramirez was the one she personally knew, was still weighing its revelation on her fears.

"Did you lead this attack?!" Vyse interrogated.

"Yes," Ramirez answered as he levitated his jagged rapier and bared it at the pirates. "From this day on, Nasr belongs to the Valuan Empire. And... I will be taking you back to Valua. Surrender or you all die."

Vyse, Aika, and Gilder all readied themselves to fight the new Admiral, ready to pay him back for all he'd done so far. But Fina immediately stood between them. "Vyse!" she cried. "Please, do as he says!"

"What?!" Vyse gasped, dumbfounded by Fina's new behavior.

"Please... you won't be able to defeat him! Not yet! Do as he says..."

Vyse was conflicted. He'd never turned down a challenge before. He hated running away, and if there was a wrong that needed righted, Vyse would not hesitate to make it so. Ramirez, a pony who's been responsible for their separation, who'd just burned down the largest city in Equestria, possibly killing thousands of innocent ponies in the process, was standing right in front of them.

But Vyse had been told that he could not win. Were such a claim to come from anypony else, Vyse would fight to prove them wrong. But it was coming from a very worried Fina. Vyse didn't know how the two knew each other, but he trusted Fina. And besides, even if they could beat him, what then? The whole city was taken by an entire fleet, and every method of escape was gone. There really was only one intelligent choice.

Vyse growled, hating himself for what he was about to say. "Alright... we surrender."

"A wise choice," Ramirez condoned as he sheathed his rapier. They were immediately surrounded by guards and clad in irons, ready to be taken prisoner.

"Ramirez..." Fina cried. "Why are you doing this?"

Ramirez simply closed his eyes and lowered his head. Would Fina understand if he told her? Did she even need to? Neither was important. All that mattered now was his duty to the Armada.

CHAPTER 6

Following the takeover of Nasr, Vyse and his companions were taken prisoner by Ramirez. Upon returning to the Grand Fortress, the Air Pirates were divided between two distant cells, split by gender, while Fina was taken into the direct care of Ramirez himself. The destruction and failure that lingered in our heroes' hearts were only strengthened by the gloom of Valua's black clouds.

"Well done, Galcian," Empress Teodora praised in her throne room. "Nasr was our only enemy with a navy. Now we rule the skies unopposed. Soon, all of Equestria will bow before the might of Valua... And they will see me as their ruler."

"Yes, Your Highness," Galcian dully agreed as he bowed his head.

"It is my understanding that the Alicorn and those Air Pirates had the Elements of Harmony in their possession when they were captured. Bring the Alicorn and the Elements to me. As for those Air Pirates..." A wicked smile spread across her face. "I want them executed in Lower City. I want the ponies to witness their deaths..."

"I will personally see to it that everything goes as you..."

"Wait!" came a voice from behind Galcian. It was the Prince of Valua, Enrique. He was a young, thin, gray unicorn with a short blonde mane, and blue eyes. He wore a purple feathered cap, and his cutie mark was that of a fencing foil. "Mother! I just heard that our fleet destroyed Nasrad while it was defenseless. How could you...? Why did you have to murder so many innocent ponies?! I know that we are acquiring more lands, but if we use these brutal tactics, the ponies will rise up and rebel against us. Please, we've made our point... Pull our troops out of Nasr."

"Silence, Enrique!" Teodora shrieked, causing her son to flinch. "It is Valua's destiny to span across Equestria and bask in the glory of the six Moons! How do you expect us to conquer the world without a little bloodshed?"

"But, Mother..."

"How can you expect to inherit the throne of the empire I worked so hard to build? You're too much of a coward! Remove yourself from my sight."

Enrique was just about to burst from his anger, but quickly calmed himself down, remembering his place. "... Very well..." He bowed, and with a heavy, vengeful heart, turned to take his leave.

"I hate Valua," Vyse groaned as he stared out the window of his prison cell in the Grand Fortress. "It's always so dark and gloomy here."

"Yeah," Gilder coolly agreed, "especially when you're locked up in a jail cell. Valuans have no sense of hospitality... Hey guards, can we get some food in here?! How about a drink or something?"

Several floors above them, Aika was alone in her own cell, also staring out the window. "*sigh* I can't believe we're back in Valua. I wonder where Vyse and Fina are being held..."

To her surprise, a guard and a very large earth pony had just opened the door to her cell. "Is this where the Air Pirate filly is being held?" the large stallion asked.

"Yes, Admiral Vigoro," the guard answered. "But, sir... Why does that concern you?"

"Hey, don't worry about it. Now run along and go make yourself useful somewhere else." The guard took his leave as ordered, leaving Vigoro alone with Aika. Vigoro was a large, blue earth stallion with a pointy brown mane and a red lipstick mark on his flank. He was also unclothed, unlike other Admirals, who normally wore some sort of uniform when on duty.

"Well, what do we have here?" Vigoro examined Aika's figure as he rubbed his chin with his hoof. "Nice legs, and curves in all the right places. Well, I suppose I've seen better, but she's not too bad."

Aika blushed, but not in a shy way. She was embarrassed to have somepony eying her like this, and almost felt insulted to hear she didn't live up to his "standards". "Who are you?! And are you always this crude?"

"I am Vigoro, the toughest stallion in the Armada. I'm surprised you haven't heard of me. The mares I've been with love to brag."

"I've never heard of you before in my life!! Where are Vyse and Fina being held?!" Vigoro said nothing as he quickly approached her and placed a hoof on the wall next to her. Aika flinched and reflexively tried to fend him off by wrapping her forelegs around herself. She had a feeling she knew what was on Vigoro's mind, and she wasn't about to let THAT happen. "Get

away from me, you creep! You're all sweaty and you've got a serious fetlock problem! And what's that smell?!"

"Aww, c'mon Red... You know I'm the stallion of your dreams... We were meant to be together. I'm sure you'll grow to like me. Just give me a chance."

"Yuck, you're disgusting!"

Meanwhile, Vyse was still moping around his cell, complaining. It wasn't something he normally did, but then again, he'd never been imprisoned before, either. "This is shaping up to be a great day..." Vyse sarcastically moaned. "Let's see, so far we got captured, separated from Aika and Fina AGAIN... And we lost all of the Elements. What's next? Maybe they'll torture us... A perfect end to a perfect day."

"Vyse, you're only making things worse," Gilder calmly said. "Take it easy."

"How can you stay so cool at a time like--"

Vyse was interrupted by the sound of tiny flapping wings. Gilder's pet owl Willy had just flown in through the window, "who-ing" repeatedly. Gilder held out his front hoof so Willy could land on it. "Oh, Willy. How're you doing?"

"Who! Who!" Willy cried as he landed.

"Very bad, you say? Haha, is that so? Well, you had to fly all the way over here. I'm not surprised."

"Gilder..." Vyse began. "There's a note tied to Willy's leg with a piece of wire..."

Gilder undid the wire bindings and unrolled the note. "Let's see... 'We will begin bombarding the fortress at midnight, and will await your arrival just outside... The Claudia.' Heh... This isn't the first time my crew has had to break me out of a prison... They know the routine. Well, the Claudia may not be able to destroy the Grand Fortress by herself, but she'll cause quite a bit of commotion."

"That's when we make our escape!" Vyse exclaimed with newfound confidence.

"Exactly."

"But, there's still one problem... We need to get out of this cell."

"Leave that to me," Gilder said as he picked up the wire. "There was a wire around Willy's leg for a reason. I'll have this door open in no time."

"... Of course! Heh... is there anything you can't do?" Vyse then noticed something odd about the note. "... What's this?"

"What's wrong?" Gilder asked as he played with the cell door's lock.

"There's some writing on the back of this letter."

"Oh... Well, what does it say?"

"*ahem* 'To my darling Gilder, I will fight for your freedom as well! For you, my love!'" Gilder flinched in a very obvious manner. "'Your soul mate... Clara.' And there're lipstick marks at the bottom."

"Clara?! She's here, too?!"

"Well, according to this letter... yeah..."

Gilder stood up and rubbed his hoof to his chin. "Hey, Vyse... We don't really need to break out of here, do we?"

"What are you talking about?! We'll be hanged."

"Hm... being hanged... and being stuck with Clara... tough choice. Ah... oh well..." Afterwards, Gilder lightly pushed the cell door open, having already unlocked it several moments earlier.

"Wow! I'm impressed..."

"Willy," Gilder called to his owl, "tell the crew to wait for me with a barrel of berry punch! I think I'm gonna need it."

"Who! Who!" cried Willy as he flew out the window.

"Well then... I'll grab our weapons," Gilder said as he grabbed Vyse's cutlass and his own pistol. "Let's go!"

"Heh... Let's not forget about Aika and Fina," Vyse reminded. "I'm not leaving without them."

Vyse and Gilder moved to the main hall of the prison cells. Strangely, there were very few actual prisoners. Vyse wondered if everypony else had already been executed... But his thoughts were interrupted by a loud shriek, voiced unmistakably by Aika.

Following the echo of the screams, Vyse and Gilder took an elevator up to the floor above them, where Aika was held. When they arrived, Aika had her legs clutched around the iron bars of the window, suspended off the floor like a monkey. Vigoro had one of her hind legs in his grasp, and was kissing it.

"Hey, Aika," Vyse nonchalantly began. "Do you want us to come back later?"

"Vyse!!" she screamed. "Get this creep off of me!"

Vigoro lifted his head from his kissing. "Hey, beat it squirt!"

Vyse bared his sword. "Sorry to spoil your fun, but you heard the lady."

"Who said we were having fun?!" Aika yelled as she climbed down from the window.

Vigoro stood up tall and inflated his chest, towering over the Air Pirates in an attempt to intimidate them. "I am Vigoro. No filly in Valua can resist me. I believe that the worth of a stallion can be measured by his popularity with the mares."

"Hmm... I kind of like that," Gilder agreed. "I should remember that for later."

"Where's Fina?!" Vyse interrogated. "Give us back the Elements and bring Fina here!"

"Fina?" Vigoro asked. "Oh, the Alicorn... Ramirez escorted her to the Imperial Palace."

"Is that so?" said Aika. "Well, after we beat the snot out of you, we'll be rescuing her."

Vigoro grinned. "I love it when mares talk tough. Lemme give your friends a lesson in brute force."

Without even bothering to get a good look at his target, Vigoro turned toward Vyse and raised his forehoof. Vyse shot into the air just in time to avoid Vigoro's punch, which struck the iron bars of the jail cell and heavily dented them. The strength of earth ponies was never anything to sneeze at, but Vigoro was a particularly large one.

Gilder attempted to fire at Vigoro, but alas, the bullets were taken out when the pistol was confiscated from him earlier. After a few futile pulls of the trigger, Gilder noticed Vigoro heading in his direction. Gilder reflexively ducked, causing Vigoro to topple over Gilder's crouching body. Vigoro's tumbling halted with him in the middle of a hoofstand, but before he could get his hind legs back on the floor, Aika rushed up to him and bucked him the rest of the way over. Aika was an earth pony too, and was strong enough to kick his grand weight clear into the wall. The collision with the concrete, as well as his head smashing into the stone floor after falling from it was enough blunt trauma to weaken him to the point where he could no longer move.

"Heh..." Aika chuckled as she stood over Vigoro, who was struggling to stay conscious. "Looks like you were all talk."

"Grr..." Vigoro struggled to get up, wanting a better look at the mare who'd defeated him. "Well... you got lucky... And... and... I didn't have my cannon or... my... armor."

"On Pirate Isle where I was raised, we have a saying... 'A true pony never makes excuses for his shortcomings.' And, going by that saying, you've got quite a ways to go."

"Heh... You've got an attitude... I like that. You'll be seeing me again. You can count on it." And then Vigoro slipped into unconsciousness. Aika

grabbed her boomerang, and they took their leave of the prison cells, but they weren't out of Valua yet.

They reached the hall where the elevators were and tried to call the one they'd used before. The doors did not open, revealing that somepony else was using it, possibly coming to their location. They quickly found a present elevator and slid in before the other could open.

The elevator they avoided waiting for was indeed occupied, and had arrived at their previous position. Prince Enrique had come to the Grand Fortress to see Vyse, escorted by his personal guard.

"So, this is where the Air Pirates are being held..." Enrique deduced, taking in the lifeless scenery.

"Yes, Prince Enrique," said the guard.

"I wish to speak with them. Take me to them."

"Sir... perhaps it would be best for you to wait out here. The cell is... not fitting... for one of your stature. I'll get the other guard ponies. We will bind the prisoners and bring them to you." The guard rushed off, leaving Enrique unattended in the prison halls.

Well, I'll finally get to meet the Legendary Air Pirate, Vyse, Enrique thought to himself. If the rumors that I've heard are true, he'll look like a demon and spit fire... But, my instincts are telling me that he's fighting for all the right reasons.

"Prince Enrique! It's an emergency!" shouted the guard as he came galloping back. "I found Admiral Vigoro unconscious in one of the cells. The rest of the cells are empty. It appears that Vyse and the others have escaped!"

"What?!" Enrique asked, pretending to look surprised. He had actually expected this turn of events somewhat. *I see... They're trying to escape from the Grand Fortress again.* He turned to face his escort. "Listen carefully. Do not tell anypony about this. Keep the doors to this area closed. Don't let anypony in or out. If you are questioned about it later, tell them that it was a direct order from me. Understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty! But..."

"Very well, then. Good job. Stay here. There's an urgent matter that I must attend to."

When their elevator came to its stop, the Air Pirates found themselves inside the control room for one of the Grand Fortress's giant cannons, with a shell twice their height sitting right next to them.

"What the..." Vyse gaped as he beheld the size of the weapon. "This cannon's new... and it's HUGE!!!"

"This thing is big enough to wipe out an island!" Aika added.

"We can run through the barrel of the cannon to the other side of the Fortress. Oh... Hey. What happened to Gilder?"

Vyse and Aika looked around. Gilder had hidden from them. After a second or two, he emerged from behind the giant shell. "Sorry about that," he said. "Let's get moving!"

"Hey, what were you doing?"

"I just had to take care of something. Heh, don't worry about it. We should get out of this dump. My crew is about to attack."

The Air Pirates ran through the barrel to the outside wall of the Fortress. It was currently in offensive mode, so the catwalks normally used for maintenance were on the outside, and directly beneath each cannon. Vyse and company used these to reach an elevator, also used for maintenance, on the far end of the fortress wall. This elevator would take them to the very top of the fortress, where the Admirals gathered. According to what Vigoro had told them, Fina was in the care of Ramirez, so if he hadn't left for the palace yet, they would both still be there.

The peaceful trip up the elevator was interrupted by the quakes of rapid cannon fire raining upon the fortress walls. The Claudia and the Primrose had come to create a distraction for Gilder. But since they were so far away, they couldn't have seen that Gilder was ON the side of the fortress they were blasting away at.

"My crew is right on time," Gilder noted. "Heh... but we're running a little late."

"Whoa!" Vyse said in awe of the Claudia's might. "Look at that firepower! Hey, what about Clara?"

"I'm sure she can hold her own... I think."

Meanwhile, the Valuan soldiers were preparing the Fortress's cannons to fight back against the Claudia. They were loading the cannon that Vyse and the others had run through before, but as soon as the shell tried to slide through the barrel, an immense amount of sparks generated from the friction, causing it to explode in an enormous blast of fire that heavily damaged a small portion of the wall.

"That cannon we went through..." Aika pointed out. "It just exploded!"

"Heh..." Gilder snickered, looking proud of himself. "I, umm, left them a little present... Are you two ready? Here's where the real fun begins."

Fina was watching the commotion from the window of the Admirals' meeting room. She had been left there temporarily, only until the situation was under control. She heard the door open behind her. Standing in the doorway was Ramirez, a blank expression stained with regret upon his stern face.

"Ramirez..." Fina said to him as he approached. He remained silent. The words would not come to him. "Ramirez... why? Why are you fighting for the Valuans? What about our orders? What about the Elders?"

Ramirez continued to stare at Fina. He had yet to come up with an explanation that would make sense to her. Neigh, an explanation that would make sense to anypony but himself. If Fina couldn't understand, then nopony else would, either.

"Lord Ramirez, it's an emergency!!" shouted a guard who'd just come into the room. "One of our cannons exploded and the entire deck is on fire. But no enemy shells hit that area."

"Find out the source of the fire and report back to me," Ramirez quickly, yet calmly ordered as a master tactician would. "In the meantime, stop firing and set the fortress to defensive mode. There are only two or three ships attacking. Their effect on the wall will be minimal."

"Yes, sir!" and the guard ran off to do as ordered.

Ramirez turned again to Fina. "I fight for Lord Galcian now. That is all you need to know." He turned from her, and exited the room, closing the door behind him.

"Ramirez..."

Vyse and company had just arrived at the top floor of the fortress. After re-entering, they were about to open the doors to a large hallway, but stopped when they heard a voice coming from the other side.

Ramirez was marching down two rows of guard ponies, preparing them for the mission that lied ahead and barking orders. "Everypony, remain calm. The Grand Fortress isn't about to crumble under the firepower of a few ships." He turned to face his soldiers and glared at all of them. "Anypony who deserts his post will have to deal with me personally."

"Yes, Admiral Ramirez!" they saluted.

"I will go investigate the cause of the explosion. Two of you stay here and guard the Alicorn. The rest of you, follow me."

Once Vyse was certain Ramirez had left, he and the others prepared to burst into the hall, knowing that there'd be two guards waiting for them. On the count of three, Vyse and Gilder bust the door open, surprising the two soldiers. Being caught off-guard, they couldn't have prepared for Aika's boomerang, which knocked one clean on the head, and bounced off the other's before flying back to Aika's skilled hooves. Both guards were knocked unconscious before they could even get a good look at their attackers.

The Air Pirates kicked the door to the meeting room down and were, at last, reunited with Fina. "Fina!" Vyse called to her. "We came to get you out of here!"

"Vyse!" Fina cried as she ran towards him, embracing Vyse after having been so worried about him and Aika.

"We got here as soon as we found out where you were. Are you okay?"

"Yes... I am... Thank you..." Fina slowly let go of Vyse's shoulders. "It's strange... The first time you rescued me from the train, I was really surprised to see you. But this time, I knew that you would come for me. I knew you would find me."

"Hahaha... Oh Fina, after all we've been through together... I swear on my oath as a Blue Rogue that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

"... I know..." said a smiling Fina.

Gilder chuckled. "Heh... Good one, Vyse. I didn't know you were so smooth with the fillies. Getting jealous, Aika? I bet you wish that Vyse would say stuff like that to you."

"I don't need to hear him say those things," Aika happily responded. "I know he would do the same for me. Whenever I'm in trouble, I have faith that Vyse will always be there to save me. He already saved me once today."

"Heh... Good point. But can we save the mushy stuff for later? We just broke out of prison, and we're still in Valua."

"Alright," Vyse agreed. "But, how exactly are we going to get out of here?"

"Well, since we're in the Grand Fortress, there should be Valuan ships docked all over the place. We can borrow one of those. We should be able to reach the docks from the bottom floors of the fortress."

"So, we'll take the elevator back down and look for a ship. Alright! Let's go!"

As the Air Pirates descended, the Fortress began doing exactly what Ramirez had commanded of it. It was rotating, shifting into defensive mode.

"Now's our chance," Gilder announced. "We should find a ship and get out of here."

Once the elevator reached the bottom, the Air Pirates re-entered the fortress. As soon as they did, however, the doors surrounding them suddenly locked as the alarms began blaring.

"Oh, no! The alarm!!" Aika shouted.

"This isn't good..." said Gilder. "In a few seconds, this place is going to be crawling with guards."

"Quick!" came a gallant voice from above a nearby elevator shaft. "Get on the lift!"

"Somepony is telling us to get on that thing!" Aika said as she looked up the shaft. "I can't see who it is! Vyse, what should we do?"

"If we just stand around here, we're gonna get caught anyway," Vyse said. "We should take our chances."

"That's true," Gilder agreed. "It looks like that's our only option."

The Air Pirates all stood atop the lift, and it raised them up and through the shaft. The loud blaring of the sirens below faded, until the sounds were completely silenced. At the top of the lift... stood a very proper-looking unicorn with a rapier sheathed at his side.

"So, you're Vyse?" the unicorn asked. "I am Enrique."

"Enrique?!" Gilder shouted, instantly recognizing the famous name. "You're... the Prince of Valua!!!"

"You're the Prince?!" Aika asked.

Enrique simply laughed, as he was used to ponies being surprised by his status. "Yes... I am. After you escaped from your cells, I figured you'd head for the docks to try and steal a ship. Please, follow me."

"Alright, what's going on? Why is the Prince helping us?"

"I have no idea," Vyse admitted. "But, we should probably follow him."

The Air Pirates all followed Enrique down a long, metal tunnel. It became quite dark, but not so much that they couldn't continue to follow him. Eventually, they came to a stop, and Enrique flipped on a nearby switch, causing the lights in the room to activate.

"What the?!" Vyse asked as the lights turned on.

They were in a long, elliptical room made almost entirely of steel. The front walls were windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, and the back wall had what looked like a captain's seat. The center of the room had a meeting table, surrounded by control panels with a steering wheel facing the windows. The Valuan flag hung above the captain's seat.

"You've probably already figured out that we're on the bridge of a ship," Enrique guessed. "Say hello to the Delphinus, the newest member of the Armada. This is my personal flagship."

The Delphinus was a long, sleek, gray ship with purple markings. The front of the hull was bladed for the purpose of ramming, and the engine powered a large number of propellers for speed. The bowsprit was extremely long and thick, and housed all of the high-tech cannons equipped to the Delphinus. Vyse had seen many of Valua's steel ships before, but never anything like this.

"It is heavily armored," Enrique continued, "and can still match the top speed of our Cruisers. And it is equipped with the weaponry of a Heavy Battleship."

"It's amazing!" Vyse shouted in awe.

"This ship is the prototype. Soon, we will begin building a whole fleet of Delphinus Class Ships. Valua plans to use these ships to take over the world."

Gilder looked around the bridge, compelled to rub his hoof along the corners of the control panels. "With a whole fleet of ships like this, Valua would easily take over the world. Especially since Nasrad has fallen. SO, your Royalness... There's still one thing that I can't figure out. Why would you help us escape, then take us to the bridge of your flagship? You've gone through a lot of trouble just to show off..."

"Yeah," Aika agreed as she crossed her front legs. "Gilder has a good point."

All eyes were on Enrique. His actions were largely suspicious, and we WAS a Valuan after all. What was he planning? Was this some crazy scheme to lure them into a trap? Enrique lowered his head, and a brief silence followed.

"I..." Enrique began. "I want you to take this ship... And I want you to take me with it!"

"WHAT?!" Vyse shouted as he almost tripped backwards.

"Are you serious?" Aika added.

Enrique raised his head and lifted his hoof. "Valua has been taking over other countries by force, destroying their lands, and murdering

innocent ponies. As a Prince of the Valuan Empire, all of the innocent blood spilled by the Armada is on my hooves. I've done all I can to convince the Empress, and Galcian, that what Valua is doing is wrong, but I cannot convince them to change their ways.

"Everything I have tried has failed. I am powerless to stop them. My only chance for redemption is to aid you. Please! Take me with you! I will even go with you as a hostage."

Enrique bowed to the Air Pirates, ready to do whatever it took to end his mother's evil plans. Vyse saw the determination in his eyes, and heard the honesty in his voice. How could he turn away such a noble endeavor?

Vyse placed a hoof on Enrique's shoulder. "Of course you can come with us. But, there is one problem... the Blue Rogues don't take hostages. If you want to sail with us, you must do so as a Blue Rogue."

Everypony on the bridge smiled, even Enrique. "... Thank you!" said Enrique as he lifted himself up. "I will do my part as a member of your crew!!"

"You know, I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Vyse of the Blue Rogues."

"It is an honor to be a member of your crew Vyse," Enrique said as he shook Vyse's hoof.

Aika rubbed her head. "I never would've thought that I'd be riding in the same ship as a Valuan, let alone the PRINCE of Valua. But... The Elements are still in the hands of the Valuans..."

"Yes..." Fina agreed, the fact dawning upon her as well. "You're right..."

"Well..." Enrique interrupted. "Technically, you are right."

"What?" Aika asked, curious as to what Enrique's little smirk was all about.

"I have the Elements. I stole them before I came to the docks to find you. I tried to destroy them... But perhaps it would be best if I returned them to you. Please, take them." Enrique levitated two jewels out of his bag: one shaped like an orange apple, the other a pink butterfly.

"Wow! Enrique, you've done so much for us already... Thank you!"

"Heh," Gilder laughed, "you act an awful lot like an Air Pirate, for a Prince."

"Alright!" Vyse yelled as he took the helm. "Start the engines!! Let's take the Delphinus and get out of here!!"

"Yeah!!" everypony cheered.

The Delphinus hummed to life, as the support structures locking it in place gently lifted from it. With the grace of a pegasus first taking flight, it slowly hovered out of the docks, and into the giant tunnel that led to the Grand Fortress gates. But alas, they were too late.

"They sealed off the entrance!" Vyse shouted, noticing the gates were now closed.

"I wouldn't worry too much about the fortress," Gilder said. "They haven't had time to repair the spot where I blew up the cannon, so it should be extremely weak right now. And if this ship's got the firepower that the Prince said, we should be able to blast our way out."

"Vyse, just to let you know..." Enrique began. "The Delphinus is equipped with Valua's newest and most POWERFUL weapon. It's called the Gemstone Cannon. Until recently, it was only an experimental weapon under development by Lord De Loco. He used data collected from the Orange and Pink Gigas to develop it. He says that this cannon's power rivals that of the Gigas themselves... But the manufacturing cost of this cannon is so immense that this ship is the ONLY one in the entire Armada equipped with it."

"Wow!!" Aika beamed. "That means this ship is as powerful as a Gigas then! I can't believe it!!!"

"Well then..." Gilder began. "Vyse, let's give her a test run, shall we?"

The Delphinus approached the smoking hole where the blown up cannon was. With a press of a few simple buttons, the part of the hull directly beneath the ship's bowsprit opened up a flower coming into bloom. A long, thin cannon stretched out of it, and began to glow with a powerful-looking aura that completely encompassed it. The aura passed through the barrel and around it again, in a never-ending cycle of ever-growing power.

"Gemstone Cannon..." Vyse said as he slammed a large red button before him. "FIRE!!!"

A beam, the size of which would never have been predicted based on the cannon's diameter, shot forth at a speed faster than the eye could watch. For what seemed like several minutes, a near endless supply of pink energy blasted through the walls before it. The beam caused tornadoes, lightning bolts, and various explosions all around it, each one adding to the limitless destruction the Gemstone Cannon was capable of.

Within the first second of the blast, a hole big enough for even the Delphinus to fit through was formed. The Grand Fortress was severely scarred. Had it been a living creature, it would have died right then and there. The Delphinus, as well as everypony on board, had escaped from the "impenetrable" walls of Valua.

"We did it!" Vyse shouted as he flew through the air.

"I can't believe it!" Aika yelled. "We just broke through the Grand Fortress!"

Gilder laughed. "You sure know how to break in a new ship!"

"Now," Fina began as she slowly formed a smile, "we can finally continue on our search for the other Elements of Harmony!!"

Enrique looked out the window at the sight of Valua becoming more and more distant. "Well Valua, it looks like this is goodbye for now..."

From the window of the Admirals' meeting room, Ramirez watched the Delphinus escape. It flew far into the distance until it disappeared on the horizon, along with the Air Pirates, his Prince... and his foalhood friend.

"We did it!" Vyse celebrated once they were safely out of Valuan airspace. "We escaped from the Grand Fortress twice!"

"Yes," Fina agreed, "and I'm happy that we're all together again!"

"Some of us are happier than others..." Gilder moaned. Clara had recently boarded the Delphinus to be with Gilder, and had been nuzzling the side of his neck nonstop ever since. Both of her forelegs were wrapped around him, and she was almost tearing up with joy.

"Oh, Gilder!" she cried. "I'm so happy! I'll never let you go!"

"Out of one prison, into the next."

Aika laughed. "What's wrong, Gilder? You two make a cute couple!"

"I am very happy for you, Clara," Fina added.

"Oh thank you, Fina!" said Clara, finally looking up from Gilder's neck. "This is too good to be true! This is the happiest day of my life!!!"

Gilder rolled his eyes. "I'm REALLY starting to miss that jail cell back in Valua..."

"Well," Enrique interrupted, "since we have a new ship, I believe it's time to decide on a captain. Even though this is my ship, I am not an experienced sailor. I would feel more comfortable with somepony else at the helm."

"I know who I'd cast my vote for," Aika said. "Vyse... You're the best pony for the job!" Vyse stumbled backward from Aika's unexpected forwardness, totally speechless.

"I agree with Aika," said Fina. "I would feel most comfortable with you as our captain."

"I know that I just met you," Clara began, "but there's something about you... I think you would make an excellent captain."

"You're a great sailor, Vyse," said Gilder, "and a good leader. I think you'd make a great captain."

"Well, it seems unanimous..." Enrique announced. "Vyse, will you accept the responsibility of being Captain of the Delphinus?"

Vyse had no idea what to say. Everything was happening so quickly. In the course of the past hour, he had literally been given the most powerful ship ever created, and then voted by everypony he knew to be its captain. Becoming the captain of his own ship had always been his dream. Now that it had been dropped right in front of him, was he going to let the opportunity slip away so easily?

Of course not. He would never forgive himself if he did.

"I'll do it!" Vyse announced. "I won't let you down!"

"That's what I wanted to hear!" Aika cheered. "Oh yeah! The Delphinus is going to need a new flag!"

"You're right, Aika!" Gilder agreed. "Every crew should have a flag that symbolizes what they stand for. And in most cases, that would be the cutie mark of that ship's captain."

"Yeah..." said Vyse. "The flag of the Albatross was based on my Dad's cutie mark. I think I'd like to follow in his hoofsteps."

"I'll make a big flag with your cutie mark on it," Fina offered, "and we can hang it right here in the bridge."

"Hey, Vyse," Aika interrupted. "I want to take a look around the Delphinus."

"I think we all should," Vyse agreed.

"We should split up and check the ship," said Gilder. "If something's wrong with it, it's better to find out now, rather than in the heat of battle."

"Sounds good to me! Break time, everypony! Meet back at the bridge when you're done."

Everypony in the room split up to take a good look around the Delphinus. There was a ladder that led up to the crow's nest, which was large enough to hold a slumber party in. Attached to the ridges of the nest was a large searchlight that could be rotated. The bridge of the ship was nice and wide, and because the ship didn't require wind to sail, there were no masts in the way. This would not only make it easier to clean, but also easier to fight on.

In the bottom rear of the ship was the luxurious dining hall, complete with gold chandeliers, tables for everypony, and a large kitchen stocked

with sealed supplies. Even ponies that couldn't cook would be spared the threat of starvation with the wide variety of foods on board.

Vyse had finished exploring, and had returned to the bridge. He was alone, except for Gilder, who had been waiting for him. "Vyse, do you hear something?" he asked. "I keep hearing this rattling noise nearby..."

Vyse looked around for the source of the rattling. Behind one of the control panels was a large, lidded compartment for storing supplies. Vyse opened it, and could never have been prepared for what he'd found inside it. A green foal, with a red mane and a band-aid on his cheek.

"Heh... Long time no see, Vyse!" greeted the colt.

"Marco!" Vyse shouted, remembering him from his previous visit to Valua. "What are you doing here?!"

"I heard that the prince's ship was finished and was being prepared for departure. So, I snuck on board and was planning on escaping Valua in it. I'd heard that the prince was a really nice pony, so I figured he wouldn't kill me for trying to escape. Well, at least not right away.

"But I never would've thought that you, of all ponies, would get your hooves on this ship! At least now I don't have to go looking for you! I'm gonna travel along with you whether you like it or not. But don't worry... I'll stay outta your way, okay?"

"Heh... You're pretty pushy there," Vyse chuckled. "Ah, why not...? I'll make you my first crew member!"

Marco began bouncing back and forth, excited to have been as lucky as Vyse had been in having his dream come true so unexpectedly. He immediately put himself to work as his captain's first mate, swabbing the decks of the Delphinus with an uncanny enthusiasm.

Lots of dreams were coming true today. Could anything possibly go wrong?

"I'm leaving," said Gilder.

"What?!" shouted Vyse.

"I'm going to head back and meet up with the Claudia. I figure this is probably my best chance to escape from Clara. I don't think I'm ready to settle down just yet."

"Sure you are. You two make a really cute couple."

Gilder raised his eyebrow as he checked to make sure no one was listening. "Vyse! Don't even joke about that!"

"Hahaha... alright, alright. Sorry, I couldn't resist. But seriously, we're all going to miss you."

"Thanks. Before I go, I have three pieces of advice for you. First... You'll need to get a crew. With a ship this size, you'll need a lot of crew members to take care of the specific duties. Get a good watchpony, a cook, a gunner... I'm sure there are plenty of skilled ponies out there who will join the fight against Valua. If you run into anypony who can help you, bring them aboard.

"Second, you'll need a base. You'll need a place to repair your ship, and your crew will need warm beds and meals every once in a while. Your father has his own base, right? You said it was on Pirate Isle. Well, you'll need your own headquarters as well. What about that deserted island that I found you on? I believe it's called Crescent Isle... That island looks just about right. Why don't you head back there?

"And most of all... No matter what happens, never give up. I don't know if you've realized it yet, but you've accomplished a lot so far... especially for somepony your age. You've escaped from the Valuan Coliseum, crossed South Ocean, found Discord's Treasure, defeated three of the Armada's Admirals, took two of the Gigas out of commission, and escaped from the Grand Fortress... twice.

"For some reason, everypony seems to follow you, myself included. Even though you're a little loco in the coco. Actually... it's because no matter what happens, you never give up. Anytime something stands in your way, you never let it stop you. Your crew knows that you will always do everything in your power to protect them. I can tell by the way they all look at you.

"... And on this bridge, with this ship, you're going to sail around the world. You'll probably run into things ten times more dangerous than you've already faced, but no matter what happens, don't give up! If you follow my advice, you'll accomplish things that you've never even dreamed of..."

"Thank you..." Vyse said after Gilder's long-winded, yet meaningful speech.

"Oh, Gilder!" called the voice of Clara. "Where are you?"

"Oh no!" shouted Gilder as he ran for the door. "It's Clara! Sorry, Vyse... I can't stay and chat any longer. She'll catch me and it'll be all over!!! So long, Vyse. I hope to see you again someday... I usually just sail around in search of fun, but the time I spent sailing with you... was probably the most fun I've ever had. Keep it up!"

"Thanks for everything, Gilder," Vyse whispered as his friend bolted out the door. About a half-minute later, a dumbfounded Clara came into the room.

"Hey, Vyse..." she began, looking around the room. "Where did Gilder gallop off to?"

"Uh, um..." Vyse mumbled, not wanting to betray Gilder, but not wanting to lie to Clara, either. "He said that he was... um... going back to the Claudia."

"What?! Well, I've got to catch him right away! He's not getting away from me that easily!" And Clara left to continue her lifelong chase.

Vyse giggled to himself. "... Well, it looks like Gilder is going to need more luck than me..."

All was silent, save for the ever-present humming of the engine. Vyse was finally completely alone in the bridge. With an almost hesitant air about him, he slowly approached the helm of the ship, as if he were nearing a great treasure. When he came to it, he rubbed his hoof along the wheel, carefully easing it to the left, and to the right.

This was his. The ship, and everything on it, belonged to him. He didn't even need to steal it. It was rightfully his in every sense of the phrase. And the helm he held in his hooves was the proof of it. Standing in that very spot, Vyse was going to make all of his dreams come true...

Vyse took in a deep breath, as the clouds before him whisked past. "I can't believe it. I'm finally the captain of my own ship. And the Delphinus is quite a ship! Alright... let's go! Full speed to Crescent Isle!!!"

In truth, the Delphinus had not yet been completed. The hull hadn't been fully reinforced yet, so it was impossible to fly through stone reefs, as the Little Jack could with the Harpoon's aid. And the engine's output settings hadn't been properly adjusted yet either, so it wasn't able to power through sky rifts. They would have to wait until a professional made the necessary upgrades to it.

Because Nasrad and its army had fallen, the South Dannel Strait was no longer guarded, allowing the Delphinus to pass through unhindered. The sight of the burnt city tempted Vyse to flood his own heart with anger, but now was not the time for that. There was nothing he could do for the surviving ponies of Nasrad at that moment.

Despite having been totally lost when he was on the island before, Vyse managed to locate Crescent Isle's exact location this time around. The Delphinus dropped anchor, and the crew emerged to take a good look

at what would become their new home. It was largely unchanged from when Vyse was last on it.

"Hey, Enrique..." Aika said. "How does it feel to be outside the Imperial Palace?"

"Huh? Oh..." Enrique was looking rather ill. Bags had formed under his eyes, and he struggled to put on a smile. "Everything is so... ungh... so... beautiful. The sky is... blue... and the clouds... are white. I've never seen anything like it... before..."

"Heh. Looks like somepony is a little airsick. Perhaps all of this traveling is a little rough for our sheltered Prince."

"Yes... Aika... you are correct... I... I never realized that sailing could be so... so... rough. But this was my... decision... I can't let a little airsickness... slow me down... Ungh...!!!" Enrique leaned over the side of the island to hurl, gasping to catch his breath afterward.

Fina laid a hoof on his back to comfort him. "Enrique... are you going to be alright?"

Vyse grinned. "Well, it looks like this is going to be a long trip for Enrique."

"Yeah, don't worry Enrique," Aika consoled. "Once you get used to sailing, you won't get sick as easy. I'm sure you'll be okay."

"Hey!" came a gangly voice from behind them. "It took you look enough to get here!"

Standing behind the Blue Rogues were two very old-looking stallions. One was so skinny, he looked as though standing alone was strenuous enough to snap him in half. He had a blue coat, a long blonde beard, and a wrench for a cutie mark. The other was extremely short for his age, even shorter than De Loco. He was green with a short white beard and an image of a hammer on his flank. Both of them were earth ponies.

"Hey! Hey!" yelled the short one. "It's good to meet you! You're Vyse, right?!"

"Gilder told us you needed a crew," said the skinny one. "We're here to report for duty. I'm Brabham! If anything's broke, I can fix it! I'm the greatest engineer that ever lived! That's a nice lookin' ship! If you want, I can get it running smoother than ever! Crank it up a few notches... give it more power..."

"Ba-ba-bam!" shouted the short one as he spun around and struck a pose. "I'm Izmael. You want something built? I build it. You don't want something built? I build it anyway. I'll build some buildings for you! You're going to need a base, right?"

"Uhh... sure..." Vyse replied, unsure how to react. He'd never met ponies this eccentric before. "Thank you."

"Leave it up to us!!!" Brabham laughed. "... But, before we get started, we'll need some funds to cover expenses and labor. First, I'll fortify the hull of your ship so you will be able to pass through the stone reefs. Then, I will upgrade your engine, so... you'll be powering through sky rifts in no time. But it will cost you... 100,000 bits."

"I plan to build you a port and some living quarters first," Izmael explained. "Let's see... Cha-ching! I'll need about 300,000 bits. What a bargain!"

"What?!" Aika shouted with a shocked look on her face. "So all together, we'll need to give you 400,000 bits?!"

"Well," Enrique began, having slightly recovered from his sickness, "the Delphinus does need some modifications. And we are going to need more than a couple of caves to call this a base..."

"Enrique is right," said Vyse. "Let's put off our search for the other Elements of Harmony until we can get this all sorted out. But, how are we supposed to come up with 400,000 bits?"

"Gilder already offered a solution, actually" Brabham explained. "He told us that you found the lost treasure of Discord, right?"

"Well, yeah, but it's only one coin."

"That coin is still a priceless artifact. We are more than willing to accept that in place of a standard payment."

"Wow, really? This piece of junk?" Vyse held the Discord coin in his hoof, the emblem on it seeming to mock him with its cheesy grin. He did not hesitate to give it over to the two old ponies, who seemed very ecstatic about the transaction not because they were being paid, but because they could finally get to doing what they loved most: working.

"Oh, it's getting late..." Vyse blurted. "I'm starting to get hungry, too..."

"Way ahead of you!" said Brabham as he pointed to a nearby campfire. The two of them had already prepared dinner for their new employers.

"Great timing!" Aika said.

Vyse began trotting down to the campsite. "Well, it looks like we're spending the night at our new headquarters... Crescent Isle."

By the time the Blue Rogues had finished their dinner, night time had already rolled in. The four sat in a circle around the campfire, laughing at small jokes they each made about every tiny little thing. Brabham and

Izmael did not join them; they were too busy working their plots off. Marco was already fast asleep.

"Well, the improvements to our ship are almost finished," Aika announced. "And pretty soon, we'll have an actual base on this island."

"Yeah," said Vyse. "Starting tomorrow, we should start searching for the remaining Elements of Harmony."

"Yes..." moaned Enrique. "But I hope this time, I won't get airsick..."

"Hahaha... You'll need to get over that!"

"Oh, Fina," Aika began, having suddenly been reminded of something that was bothering her. "There's something that I wanted to ask you. That Admiral... umm... what was his name? Ramirez? How do you know him?"

"What?" Fina asked, surprised by the question. She was subconsciously hoping it would never be asked.

"When we met him in Nasrad, you seemed to know an awful lot about him." Fina remained silent. Speaking about Ramirez was difficult for her, especially after learning what he was doing these days. "If you don't feel like telling me, it's okay... Don't worry about it."

"... No, I'm sorry," Fina apologized. "I should have told all of you about him sooner. I will tell you everything I know about... Ramirez. You know that I am an Alicorn... a descendant of the Magenta Civilization... Ramirez is an Alicorn as well."

"What?!" Vyse asked. "But, he only has a horn!"

"He has wings as well. He is merely hiding them beneath his clothes."

"That makes sense," Enrique pondered. "If the Armada knew he was an Alicorn, they'd be trying to capture him instead of Fina. He probably feigns ignorance of the Elements in order to keep up his disguise."

"Ramirez was our best warrior. He can channel the power of the Magenta Moon through his blade, making it sharp enough to cut through light. We grew up together... A long time ago, he was one of my best friends. He didn't used to be so... so heartless and cruel. He used to care for me like a little sister.

"When we heard that the Valuans were trying to reawaken the Gigas, Ramirez volunteered to come down here and stop them. He went on a journey to search for the Elements... alone. Shortly after he started his quest, we lost track of him. We never even dreamed that he would join forces with the Valuan Empire. Those were the ponies that he was sent here to stop.

"I don't know why he changed. I hope the Ramirez I knew isn't gone forever..."

"Admiral Ramirez," Enrique mused. "Not only is he one of Valua's greatest swordspories, but he is also a master strategist. He used to be Galcian's Vice Captain. But, I don't even think he knows Ramirez's past."

"Cheer up, Fina!" Vyse suddenly broke the somber mood. "We're here with you now! Two Air Pirates, an Alicorn, two crazy old stallions, a snot-nosed brat, and an airsick Prince! Valua doesn't stand a chance against us. There's no other ship that can boast a more motley crew!"

Fina couldn't help but giggle.

"Fina, what Vyse is trying to say..." Aika began, "is that you aren't alone..."

Enrique turned to Fina as well. "I'm not sure if I appreciate his comment about the airsickness, but we're all together now."

"Vyse... Aika... Enrique..." Fina wiped away the water that was forming in her eyes. "When I came here, I was all alone... Now I have so many wonderful friends... Thank you so much. Thank you all. I... I will do my best."

"Alright!" Vyse cheered. "So tomorrow, we continue our search for the rest of the Elements of Harmony! We'll start early."

"Oh, Enrique..." Aika sung. "Are you sure you can get up on time without a servant to wake you?"

"Hey!" Enrique snapped back. "I always get up on my own! I don't need any servants..."

Everypony laughed at how easily Enrique got angry at Aika's little joke. Afterwhitch, they all turned in for the night. Another big adventure awaited them.

By the time morning came, Brabham had already finished making the adjustments to the Delphinus. The stronger hull would allow it to push through stone reefs. The stronger engine would allow it to power through normal sky rifts. Brabham even painted over the purple markings, making them blue instead, to represent the Blue Rogues.

"Well, it's time," said Vyse as the Blue Rogues stood around the bridge's meeting table, maps and the like covering it like a tablecloth. "Fina, where should we head next?"

"In the East," Fina began, "there is a land that basks in the light of the Blue Moon. That land is known as Yafutoma. Their culture is very different from yours."

"Yafutoma... Yafutoma..." Enrique whispered to himself as he rubbed his hoof against his head.

"You've heard of it, Enrique?" Vyse asked.

"Yes. According to Valuan historians, Yafutoma is a country far east of Nasr. It is scattered across several small islands. I remember the stories... the creatures living there are hybrids of birds and beasts, and they eat by manipulating multiple appendages at the ends of their forelegs."

"They're hybrids??" Aika asked, looking more dumbfounded than ever. "And they eat with, what, tentacles or something? What are they supposed to look like? And how do they eat with tentacles? Are they monsters?!"

"Hmm..." Vyse thought. "Somehow, I don't think it's what you're imagining, Aika..."

"I was hoping that we'd get to eat all kinds of exotic food on our trip... This has me a little worried..."

"To get to Yafutoma," Enrique explained, "we should sail around the southern tip of Nasr. Some time ago, during the Valuan-Nasr War, a cape was discovered by invading Valuan forces. The cape was named Cape Victory. There is a city there called Esparanza. If anypony knows how to get to Yafutoma, it would be the ponies there."

"Okay," Vyse said, "so we're heading south of Nasr. Alright, everypony to their stations! Let's go!"

At this point, the Delphinus only had a five-pony crew. It was more than what the Little Jack had, but then again, the Delphinus was a much, MUCH larger ship, and would eventually require much greater care. Vyse was positioned at the helm, steering the ship. Enrique did his best to be the lookout, despite his airsickness. Aika was stationed at the cannons as usual; that was a job she knew how to do well. Fina spent this time learning where everything was in the kitchen, as she was the only member of the crew who actually knew a bit about cooking. Marco continued his work as the pseudo-janitor, and never regretted a second of it. Brabham and Izmael stayed behind to build the headquarters, promising to be done by the time they returned.

The trip to Esparanza took about three days. They had to travel south past Nasrad, and then west into the desert where the Temple of Pyrynn stood. Further southwest still, they came to a sky rift, which made them

quite proud of themselves that they could actually pass through it. On the southern tip of the Nasrean continent, just as predicted, was the steel city of Esparanza.

The Blue Rogues disembarked at the pier, except for Marco, who remained on-board. The notion of sailing excited him so much that although it was even newer to him than it was for Enrique, Marco didn't get airsick. He wanted to spend as much time on the ship as possible.

Far to the east of where they stood, on the edge of the horizon, the Blue Rogues could see a sky rift. It was similar in appearance to the two darker sky rifts they'd seen before, and were still incapable of passing through. But this one... this one was pitch-black. It looked rounder, thicker, like an ever-present storm the size of a whole country.

In at least two visible directions, walls of dark sky rifts poured from it, one of them to the north. This giant rift had been the source of the ones Vyse encountered before. The storm itself may have been concentrated to this one area, but its effects were spread worldwide. Vyse wondered what pegasi, in their right minds, would create such a devastating storm.

"That sky rift looks worse than any of the others..." Vyse noticed.

"If we tried to power our way through it," said Aika, "I think the Delphinus would get ripped to pieces."

"But, if we don't go through there, we won't be able to reach Yafutoma. Isn't there something we can do?"

"Ungh..." moaned Enrique, airsick as usual.

"Are you feeling any better this time?" Aika asked.

"No... To be completely honest, I feel awful. Why don't you take a look around the city? I don't think it would be wise for me to move in my condition."

Enrique leaned over the side of the pier to hurl again, prompting Fina to rub his back. "I'll stay here and look after Enrique."

"Alright," said Vyse. "Aika, let's go check out the city. Somepony here has to know how to get to Yafutoma."

The city was a lot drearier up front. The buildings were rusted, debris lied all over, and stray dogs ran amok. It was nearly identical to Lower City Valua, only hot instead of cold and twilit instead of dark. They weren't many ponies roaming the streets, and the few that were seen wore very tattered clothing. The citizens of Esparanza included Valuans and Nasreans alike, and they seemed to be living together in peace. But then, why did everypony look so depressed?

As any good adventurer knows, the best place to scour for information is the local pub or tavern. It didn't take long to find; it was located right in the center of town. There were three ponies inside: a male unicorn getting intoxicated off salt at the bar, a female earth pony who was the bartender, and a pegasus with a long mustache and a broken wing slouched in the corner with a bottle of berry punch in his lap.

"You're not from around here, are you?" asked the mustached pegasus.

"Actually," Vyse began, "we just came into town and we were wondering if somepony here could help us."

"So you came to me... Well, that's just great... By the way, the name's Don. Now ask me your question and be on your way."

"You know that sky rift to the east...? How do you get through it?"

Don remained silent. After a few seconds, a large grin grew on his face, and he slammed his bottle onto the table. "SO, yer lookin' for a way to cross the Everfree Rift, eh?!"

The other two ponies at the bar turned to look at Vyse and Aika. For a few awkward seconds of silence, the two of them were stared at as if they'd said something horrible. They felt very uncomfortable.

"MWAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!" Don maniacally laughed. "So, the world is still full of foals..."

"What?" Aika asked.

"Are you two really serious?" the tavernkeep asked. "You're trying to cross the Everfree Rift?"

"They don't stand a chance," said the unicorn. "Somepony better tell their parents where they are."

"Kid," Don began. "That's no ordinary sky rift... The lands inside of it just ain't natural. Plants grow and spread... animals fend for themselves... and storms generate... ALL without the aid of ponies."

"What?!" Aika asked. "Those things just happen in there? All by themselves?!"

"During the war, this cape was discovered... And this city was built. This place is the edge of Equestria. If you try and go any further east, you'll be killed. Hundreds of ponies... good ponies... have died tryin'. But, there's always a few foals that don't heed the warnin's. The Everfree Rift usually claims `em..."

"Some of the best sailors from all over the world tried to cross the Everfree Rift. They came from everywhere... One by one, they tried to pass through. All of them failed. The ships that enter the Everfree Rift are either pushed away by the winds... or they get sucked in, never to return."

"My crew and I lost our ship. We were lucky to survive. After a while, sailors stopped comin'. All we do now is sit around here, and wait to die..."

"Some things are just impossible," the unicorn added. "Why don't you just go back to wherever you came from and have your mommy tell you bedtime stories?"

"What's wrong with you ponies?!" Aika shouted, furious at the nonsensical misery that surrounded her. "Vyse, let's go! We're just wasting our time here."

Vyse remained silent. He was just as angry as Aika, but he kept it contained. He stepped closer to Don and glared at him. "Thanks for telling me about the Everfree Rift..." said Vyse. "Before I go, I just want to say that I've never met a more pitiful bunch in my life. If you lose sight of one dream, you replace it with another. Think about how much you could have accomplished in the time that you've spent here."

"Just because you couldn't cross the Everfree Rift, are you going to sit here for the rest of your life? Because you tried something once and failed, are you going to throw the rest of your life away? There's a whole world out there to see! Don't you have any desire to sail again?"

Don remained silent. Vyse couldn't tell if he was hurt by those words, or just ignoring them. Don didn't get the chance to respond, because Fina came busting in, a look of worry on her face.

"Fina, what is it?" Vyse asked.

"Vyse! Aika!" Fina cried. "Come to the port! Quickly! The Armada is coming!!!"

"What?!" Aika shrieked. "What are they doing here?!"

"Aika, let's move!" said Vyse. "We should hurry back to the port."

Back at the port, Enrique had fully recovered from his airsickness, and was looking out at the horizon. "Ah, Vyse... you're back. I think you need to see this..."

Vyse used his glass eyepatch to look in the direction Enrique faced. Surrounding the city were two maroon-colored ships, led by a third very large one with a spiked shield attached to the front: the Auriga.

"That huge armored ship belongs to Admiral Gregorio," Enrique explained. "Gregorio is the best defensive tactician the Valuan Armada has ever seen. They even nicknamed him 'Ironwall'."

"Interesting..." said Vyse. "He's forming a blockade around the town."

"Prince Enrique!" called a voice from down the pier. One of Gregorio's personal guard ponies had come ashore. He saluted the Prince when entering his presence, for even though Enrique had turned traitor, his

subjects still had great respect for him. "I've come on behalf of Admiral Gregorio. He has an urgent message for you."

"I see. Well done," Enrique thanked. He levitated the message in front of himself, and read it out loud. "I hope my Prince finds himself in good health. I heard that you had a change of heart, or were perhaps brainwashed by the Air Pirates. Empress Teodora has sent me to escort my Prince back to Valua, so that he may recover. If my Prince refuses to comply, my ships will regrettably begin firing upon the city tomorrow at noon. Your Humble Servant, Gregorio.' ... Hmm... Uncle Gregorio is asking me to surrender."

"Uncle?" Vyse asked.

"Oh, Gregorio was an Admiral in the Armada even before my father passed away... He helped raise me when I was growing up... I even earned my cutie mark thanks to his training... He's always been like an uncle to me. I know that he doesn't want to fight, and he really does want me to surrender... But I can't go back. Not after everything they've done. Even if... even if it means I have to fight him."

"Enrique?"

"Let's rest up for tomorrow. Gregorio is the most honorable pony that I've ever met. He won't break his word."

"I understand. We should rest up on land tonight and keep you off the ship until tomorrow. The last thing you need is for your 'Uncle' to see you throwing up over the railing in the heat of battle."

"... Great... now you're starting to sound just like Aika."

"Haha, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Come on, let's stay at the inn tonight. We're gonna need our rest."

The next morning, the Blue Rogues all gathered at the pier, rested and ready for their next encounter with the Armada. "It's time to go fight Admiral Gregorio," Vyse announced. "It's going to be a tough battle. Give it everything you've got!"

"Aye aye!" Everypony else cheered.

"Hey..." came a familiar voice from behind them. It was Don. "You aren't actually goin' to fight against the Armada, are ya? You're planning to fight Admiral Gregorio by yourselves?"

"Yup," Vyse coyly responded. "That's the plan."

Don smirked and shook his head. "I don't doubt your abilities, but I used to be a Valuan Soldier. I know what the Armada can do. Going up against one of their Admirals is crazy."

"Our ship is the best there is. We're faster than Gregorio's ship, and I think we can match their firepower."

"But... even if you win... You'll never get through the Everfree Rift!"

"Like I said," Vyse began, "our ship is the best there is. Our engines are more powerful than you think. And it might just be powerful enough to get us through the Everfree Rift."

"Besides... Ever since I was a foal, I've always wanted to see what was beyond the edge of the world. That very edge is right in front of me. I have a chance to do what no pony else has ever done before. I have a chance to make history today."

"If I said that I'm not scared, I'd be lying. But, I won't let this opportunity pass me by. The chance to fulfill my foalhood dream lies right in front of me. You don't expect me to just give up, do you?"

Don was about to respond, his mouth holding the air with which he wanted to speak. But he couldn't come up with anything to add to his debate. He sighed, and laughed a little. "Heh heh... I suppose, then, no matter what I say, you're not goin' to listen... Alright, then at least listen to this:

"The Everfree Rift is a giant vortex. If you can get through one side, you'll reach the eye in the middle. It is rumored that the eye is calm. There are other calm pockets along the edges of the Everfree Rift. If you find one of the pockets, you might have half of a chance."

"I see... Thank you!" said Vyse, as he and his crew boarded the Delphinus.

"Heh... You're just like me when I was your age..."

"Admiral," Gregorio's Vice Captain reported. "The Delphinus is approaching. It is moving into attack position."

Gregorio was a very old earth stallion with a salmon-colored coat, a very short white mane, and facial hair. He wore a large, iron breastplate around his torso, and his cutie mark was a shield. "My orders were to bring him back alive, or kill him if he refuses. We must do everything in our power to take him alive. All ships, prepare to attack! The Delphinus is the Armada's most powerful ship. Our adversaries may be young, but we can't underestimate them."

"Vyse," Aika began, "the Armada is getting ready to attack us!"

"This is it!" Vyse declared. "Everypony, to your battle stations! We've got to get past Admiral Gregorio's defenses! We will defeat him! Then we'll get through the Everfree Rift and reach Yafutoma!"

"Aye aye!" they all saluted.

And so the battle began. The cruiser was the first ship to approach the Delphinus. "Air Pirate scum!" its captain shouted. "Give the prince over! You'll pay for foalnapping and brainwashing him!"

"Alright, Aika," said Vyse. "Time to see what the Delphinus is really capable of. Fire!"

Aika activated the cannons on the portside of the ship as they turned to face the cruiser. The cannons on the Little Jack weren't able to adjust their direction, so this was an incredible convenience for them. The Delphinus's massive cannons shot straight at the enemy ship, with a speed no cannonball had ever seen before. The shots ripped right through the cruiser, easily crippling it in one fell swoop. One down, two to go.

Meanwhile, the battle had attracted the attention of Esparanza's ponies. They had all come out to watch the battle, and as soon as they saw how powerful the Delphinus really was, they began cheering for it, a newfound happiness brought to their previously dull lives.

"Yeah! Go!" they shouted. "Turn!!! No, not that way!!!"

"You idiots! What are you doing? You're supposed to fire all your cannons right there!!"

"Yeah, get them!!! Hey, they're not that bad!!"

Don was watching the fight with a bit more serious attitude than everypony else. "They still need to get past two more ships... They have a long way to go!"

After the near instantaneous defeat of the cruiser, the battleship took the field. "You'll never defeat the 2nd fleet of the Imperial Armada!" shouted its captain.

Vyse thought that a few cannon blasts would be enough to finish it off. But the enemy battleship was heavily armored, as a ship in Gregorio's fleet would be expected to be. The entirety of the enemy ship's hull was heavily reinforced. Cannonfire wouldn't be enough, but Vyse didn't want to waste any energy firing the Gemstone Cannon.

There was only one vulnerable spot on the battleship: the deck, which was located on top and wasn't easy to target. Unlike the Little Jack, however, the Delphinus was equipped with torpedoes, missiles that could

fly high into the sky and then land on top of opponents. Vyse gave the order for one to be fired.

Firing a torpedo in this manner is extremely tricky business. It takes time for the torpedo to come back down, and when it does, the target needs to still be underneath it, which is nearly impossible when the target is moving. This is why knowing how long a torpedo takes to land, and predicting the enemy's movements are essential to their usage.

Because torpedoes were so difficult to use, most ponies didn't use them despite their power. But this was the Delphinus we're talking about. Its highly advanced torpedoes were capable of homing in on its targets, to the point where they could move while falling to ensure they struck their target. Vyse couldn't believe his eyes when the very first torpedo they fired shifted to a sudden angle to hit the battleship and blow it to smithereens.

"Alright!" Aika cheered as she galloped about in small circles. "We're doing great!"

"Gregorio's ship, dead ahead!" Fina reported, having been practicing standard sailor dialect. "He'll be in range shortly!"

"Uncle Gregorio..." Enrique said to himself. "I can't let you take me back!"

"Alright..." said Vyse. "Full speed ahead!!! It's now or never!"

"Prince Enrique..." said Gregorio as he brought his ship to a halt in front of the enemy. "Please forgive me for taking up hooves against you, but you leave me no choice. I will not allow you to escape! You will not get past the Auriga!"

As soon as the battle began, Vyse tried to move the Delphinus into a normal cycling formation, as was the standard practice for ship combat. But before he even realized what was happening, the entire ship began to violently tilt to the side. Gregorio's ship had actually rammed them with the spiked shield attached to its front! The Delphinus spun to the side as the Auriga passed by.

"Did he... Did he just RAM us?!" Vyse shouted as he got up off the floor. "That pony is freaking nuts!!"

"As I stated before," Enrique said as he too got up, "Gregorio has been nicknamed 'Ironwall' by his peers. He is the Armada's best defense tactician... By using the most indestructible parts of his ship as a weapon, he ensures that the more vulnerable parts are never exposed."

"Ugh, he's already moved back into position... He's getting ready to ram us again. I wonder if we can pierce his defense with the Gemstone Cannon."

"It's worth a shot. But Vyse... please, try to aim for just the shield."

"... I understand. I'll do my best to avoid destroying the ship."

Vyse took the helm of the ship and began steering it out of the Auriga's path. The Delphinus curved up and over the Auriga as it tried to ram them again, sending both ships flying in opposite directions.

"Okay, everypony," said Vyse. "Here's the plan. I want all of the ship's power to be redirected to the engines. We're gonna try to make a hard turn the next time he tries to ram us. And as soon as we do, I want the Gemstone Cannon ready to fire! Target: the shield at the front of his ship!"

"Aye aye!" they responded.

Both ships, now a ways apart, turned to face the other. Both headed in a straight line, like two magnets coming together. As soon as the Auriga powered up its engines in preparation for the ram, Vyse gave the order for the same to be done with the Delphinus. The Delphinus's sudden boost of speed let it slip to the side of the Auriga as it continued to turn around. The Auriga turned in its direction in an attempt to continue its assault, not realizing that it was putting its broad side in the range of the Delphinus.

"Gemstone Cannon... FIRE!"

The Gemstone Cannon fired straight at the front of Gregorio's ship, hitting it only from the side. Only the frontmost tip was struck, disintegrating the spiked shield while leaving everything else intact.

Gregorio was no foal. That spiked shield may not have been his only offense, but it was the most indestructible part of his ship. If the Delphinus could so easily destroy it, there'd be no chance he would survive a direct hit. The power of the Delphinus had no equal.

Gregorio surrendered. He immediately gave the order for his crew to wave the white flag.

The Auriga pulled up next to the Delphinus. The crews of both ships emerged to their respective decks, so that they might converse. Enrique and Gregorio took the leads, each staring at the other for a few silent moments.

"I always thought," Enrique began, "that if we were ever in battle together, that we'd be on the same side."

"Prince Enrique," said Gregorio. "Is there anything I can do to make you reconsider?"

"... No... I've made up my mind. I am not going back to Valua. I know that you've noticed a change in the Empire as well... They are headed down a dark path... Trying to rule Equestria with an iron hoof... It will be

Valua's downfall... This world... this sky... is not Valua's to rule. It belongs to the ponies.

"And to right the wrongs that Valua has committed, I have decided to travel with Vyse and his companions. Tell that to my mother. And also, that I pray every day for her good health. This is goodbye. I must go. Be well."

"Farewell, Young Prince."

The ponies of Esparanza danced and cheered and celebrated as they watched the Delphinus speed off toward the Everfree Rift.

"Those ponies are great!" they shouted. "They just took out the Armada with one ship!"

"HaHaHa! They make me feel like sailing again!"

Don took a sip of punch, and grinned at the vanishing ship. "Vyse... You put on quite a show... If you make it back from the Everfree Rift... I hope you come back here and tell me about it... I can't believe I'm saying this... You hear me, Vyse?! You better make it back!"

The center of the Everfree Rift was far to the southeast of Esparanza. The Delphinus flew alongside its walls, looking for one of the air pockets Don had told them about. At the westernmost edge of the Rift, they finally found a small opening that led inside.

"It looks like we can get inside the Everfree Rift through here," Vyse deduced. "Enrique, are you ready?"

"... Yes, I'm ready," Enrique answered. "I don't suppose I have much choice at this point. We must get through the Everfree Rift no matter what. Don't mind me... I will be fine. This is neither the time nor the place to be complaining about airsickness."

Vyse ordered that all of the doors leading outside be locked, and that each member of the crew remain inside at all times. The Delphinus slowly slid into the vortex. Just as Don had said, the area beyond the vortex was calm. The Rift appeared to be somewhat layered, with certain spaces between the layers being calm. But the inside was still almost completely pitch-black, the sun only dimly lighting the inside through the thick cloud ceiling. It almost felt as though they were flying through a massive cave with walls that would destroy them if touched.

The Delphinus sailed through various air pockets as they presented themselves. The rift was filled with floating islands upon which lied

countless shipwrecks. The dreams and lives of so many ponies ended in this terrible place. Vyse prayed that he would not end up joining them.

The Blue Rogues were trying to head east, so normally, they'd be keeping an eye on the compass to ensure they wouldn't get lost. However, the compass was spinning out of control. There was no way to tell which direction they were headed now, especially since the various pathways found in the rift seem to change location on a whim. Vyse was unpleasantly reminded of Discord's Island.

After some time of wandering around, Vyse found what was quite obviously the center of the vortex. The ceiling raised the highest here, and the layers of the Everfree Rift circled completely around it. Within this room were scattered several large rocks floating in the air. But they weren't simple islands. Upon closer inspection, they discovered that they were actually gemstones.

And every one of them was white in color.

"What the?" Vyse asked. "Those gemstones. They're white..."

"White gemstones?" Enrique asked. "But that doesn't make any sense. Gemstones come from the moons, and none of the moons are white."

"And look how many there are..." said Aika. "I don't think I've ever seen more gemstones in such a closed space before."

"Actually... I think you have," Fina added. "I believe you see large clusters of gemstones every time you look up at the sky."

"Wait. You mean the moons?"

"Fina has a point," said Enrique. "If there are white gemstones here, then there must have, at one point, been a white moon."

"What do you suppose happened to it?"

"I'm not sure. But I suspect its destruction has something to do with this Rift's existence."

"... That's incredible..." said Vyse. "That means Equestria actually had seven moons at one point?"

"I suppose it did."

"This is so exciting!" Vyse couldn't contain his happiness. His ears perked and his rear hooves kicked at the floor a little. He was learning things that nopony else had ever known before.

"So these gemstones..." Aika continued. "They're the remains of the white moon, huh? Doesn't that mean there must have been a White Civilization as well? Or a White Element?"

"Oh. Um..." Fina thought to herself. "I was only ever told about the Six Moons, and the Six Elements of Harmony. I'm afraid I don't know anything about a White Moon."

"If the theoretical White Civilization was wiped out by its Moon's destruction," Enrique began, "then any Element or Gigas it may have had may have been destroyed as well."

"Or, you know," Aika interrupted, "maybe there never were any of those things. Maybe this rift has always been here, devoid of ponydom. We don't have proof of any of our own claims."

"As much as I'd love to continue theorizing about a seventh continent," Vyse began, "because you know I really, really would... I think we should save it for after we escape from this place."

"Agreed," the others complied in unison.

The Delphinus wandered the Everfree Rift for what felt like hours. They had no indication of which direction they were headed, and far too often did they accidentally end up turning around, going in circles, or even finding their way back to the entrance. It was a natural labyrinth, the solution to which seemed impossible to find.

Vyse decided it was time to rest. He dropped anchor at a sturdy-looking island, and suggested that everypony take a break. Aika carefully opened the door to the bridge, hoping it was as calm in the air pockets as it seemed. To her relief, it was. Only a slight breeze was present, blowing from the nearby cloud wall. She trotted about the deck, taking in the surroundings, until a tall shadow formed over her.

The other Air Pirates heard Aika's shriek and immediately ran out to the bridge. "Vyse!! Help!!!" she cried. The ponies all bared their weapons at the creature that lived on the island, who had emerged from one of its rivers to attack Aika.

"Now just hold your horseshoes, you silly ponies, you!" said the creature as he flailed his claws around. "I absolutely did not mean to startle you. I just came to greet the first visitors I've had in centuries! It can get SO boring here by myself. Honestly, sometimes I feel as though I'm the ONLY creature in this entire Rift with any, shall we say, *CLASS*."

"Uh..." said Vyse, not sure what was going on. "Okay, then... No harm done, I guess."

Aika tilted her head as she looked at the strange, flamboyant creature. "Why is half of your mustache a different color from the rest of your hair?"

"Oh, well now THAT is a fantabulous story to tell! You see, I began dying it that way about a thousand years ago, after my encounter with..."

"Woah, woah..." Vyse interrupted. "You say you've lived here for a thousand years?"

"Indeed I have! And let me tell you, it has not gotten ANY less tacky in that time... Honestly, no other place in the world is in greater need of a few decorations."

"Yeah, that's great. Um, does that mean you know your way around?"

"Why, of course! This Rift shifts and turns and switches around more than a mare changes her mind!" Aika gave the creature a little sneer. "But I've had a millennium to learn how the whole thing works."

"Great!" said Vyse. "Could you tell us how to reach the eastern exit?"

"East? Well, what color was the entrance you took?"

"Huh? Color?"

"Yes, silly! Was it a Tangelo Orange? Or a Brandeis Blue?"

"Well, we came from the Orange civilization, so..."

"Then if you want to reach the other side, all you have to do is follow the blue-tinted tunnels! Here's a hint: they tend to be more pleasant to look at! Ohohohoho!"

"I see! Thank you very much!"

"Not a problem! Don't be a stranger now, cutie!" And the strange creature returned to the depths of the river it emerged from.

"... Did that guy just call me 'cutie'?"

Aika giggled. "I think you have another admirer, Vyse!"

Vyse did exactly as the odd creature suggested, following only the blue-tinted air pockets. He should've realized before that the tunnels were colored, but he was too busy trying to avoid the cloud walls. Following the blue tunnels made perfect sense too, as it meant they were reflecting the light of the Blue Moon.

After less than an hour, the blue tint of the cloud walls started to become more and more vibrant. The air pockets got bigger, and they could feel the Delphinus actually being pushed out of the rift in the blue light's direction. With a final, forceful push, the ship was shoved out of the Everfree Rift, and into the land of the Blue Moon.

"We did it!" Aika cheered. "We actually made it through the Everfree Rift!!"

"Well!" Enrique laughed. "I can't believe that we are actually going to be able to see what lies east of the Everfree Rift! We're making history as we speak!"

Vyse paid no attention to his crewmates. He was too excited. He continued to sail the Delphinus toward the light of Blue Moon, anxious to see what new and exciting things awaited him. He had discovered a new continent. He was beyond the edge of the world.

CHAPTER 7

Vyse and the rest of the Delphinus's crew had just arrived in the airspace of Yafutoma, and were the very first ponies to ever do so, so far as their knowledge of history was concerned. Although they had yet to see any land, it didn't look that different from back home. Well, maybe the sky seemed brighter, due to the light of the Blue Moon.

The longitudinal wall the Everfree Rift created still stretched eastward, and the latitudinal wall that separated Yafutoma from Nasr was still there as well of course, so heading south or west was not an option. They could only go northeast, and for the longest time, they didn't see any civilizations.

In the distance to the East, they could see what looked like the ruins of some giant stone walls. Fina explained to them that in the Ancient World (before the Old World), the walls were used not as a form of defense, but as a means of observation, to look out for intruders and spot them as soon as possible.

The Delphinus had been sailing north-northeast for a good few days, and still no sign of intelligent life. Until they eventually came to a small rock field...

"...Hey, do you hear anything?" Aika asked. "I mean, besides the wind..."

"Now that you mention it..." said Enrique. "I can hear something... I'm not sure what it is."

BOOM!

The side of the Delphinus had been struck by cannonfire, much to the surprise of everypony on board. From behind the floating rocks came a large group of small, wooden ships with what appeared to be sails made from colorful, folded paper. The one that approached them was what had struck them without warning.

"They just came out of nowhere and attacked us!" Aika shouted.

"It looks like we're going to have to take them down," Vyse declared. "Battlestations!!! Let's go!"

"Hahaha..." the captain of the attacking ship laughed. "Do you really think you can defeat us with that big block of steel you call a ship?! Prepare yourselves, strangers!!"

Both ships got into formation, and as soon as the battle began, Vyse ordered that some cannons be fired. The enemy ship was made from wood and paper; surely a single cannonblast would be enough to disintegrate the entire thing. The cannons fired, but the quick, agile ship quickly rose out of the way, and continued to rise. And rise. And rise. Until it was even above the cloud ceiling.

"What the?!" Vyse shouted. "How can their ships go so high??"

"Yafutoman culture is heavily involved in flying," Fina explained.

"Over the centuries, they have mastered its art, and have applied it to their technology. But because they can climb to such great altitudes, our cannons can't reach them..."

"Vyse, our cannons may not be able to reach them," Aika started, "but I'll bet our torpedoes can! We should try firing one of those!"

Vyse immediately had one of the torpedoes fired, and sure as Aika had suggested, the enemy ship blew up like a firework on Indeponies Day. Yafutoman technology, his plot! There was nothing the Delphinus couldn't handle.

Having seen one of its subordinates so easily defeated, another enemy ship headed for the Delphinus. "What appears to be the enemy's Flagship is approaching!" Enrique reported.

"There are two boats!" Aika reported, confused by the ship's appearance. "No... one boat! No... there's two... I think..."

The Yin Yang functioned as one ship, but it was created by fusing two identical ships together at the side. Each ship was shaped like a serpent, one red and one green, so it appeared as though it were a two headed dragon. The ship got up really close to the Delphinus and began to slow down.

"Looks like they're planning to board us!" said Vyse. "All hooves on deck!!!"

Vyse, Aika, Fina, and Enrique rushed out onto the deck, only to find no intruders waiting for them. That is, until they heard a voice from above.

"Westerners..." said a deep voice.

"We've been waiting for you..." said a light voice.

The two intruders were standing atop the bridge, looking down at them. They were not, however, anything they were expected to be. That is to say, they weren't ponies. They weren't dragons, buffalo, zebras... or even flamboyant sea serpents. They weren't like any creatures they had seen before.

They were the Yafutoman hybrids Enrique had told them about. Each had the lower body of a lion, and the upper body of a giant eagle. Their front legs were adorned with talons, (the "appendages" Aika had been so scared of before) and they had large brown wings on their backs. If anything, they most closely resembled pegasi, only with claws, paws, and beaks. There was no mistaking what these nearly-forgotten creatures from the depths of Equestria's mythology were.

They were griffons.

"What are you?!" Vyse interrogated.

"My name is Jao," said the light-voiced griffon.

"My name is Mao," said the deep-voiced griffon. Each of them leapt from the top of bridge, and landed on the deck, standing before their opponents.

"It is our mission..."

"... to collect 1000 weapons."

"So, you must pick one..."

"... of two choices."

"Surrender, and give up your weapons..."

"... or die, and we take your weapons."

"It is up to you..."

"... to decide your fate."

Vyse rolled his eyes not only at the cheesy sentence-finishing the twin griffons were engaged in, but also the idea that they'd honestly expected them to just give up and surrender. As if that would ever happen.

"Tell you what," said Vyse. "How about we kick your plo-- er, butts and toss you overboard? Besides, you guys are unequipped. What can you possibly do to us?"

"If that is your decision..." Jao began.

"... then we must kill you now," Mao finished.

Vyse drew his sword and was the first to make a move, diving headfirst at Jao, who flew into the sky to dodge him. Vyse, having wings as well, flew after him to do battle in the air. Fina flew after them both as well, not wanting Vyse to have to fight alone.

Aika and Enrique bared their weapons as they held their ground on the deck of the ship. Mao stood on his hindlegs and outstretched his wings in an attempt to look intimidating. But this only made Aika giggle, for where she came from, randomly erect wings had a totally different meaning. Mao simply thought she was laughing to hide her fright.

Vyse and Jao flew around each other several times, each trying to hit the other; Vyse with his sword, and Jao with his claws. On occasion, Vyse

would get lucky and have a clear shot, but Jao's strong talons could grab the blade and shove the pegasus out of the way. On the off-chance that Vyse's luck had run out, giving Jao an open shot, Fina would put up a barrier around Vyse to deflect the blow. She stayed on the sidelines in order to help her captain out while he battled his foe.

Meanwhile, on the ground, Aika and Enrique were having similar troubles fighting Mao. Enrique used his magic to levitate his rapier and duel the opposing griffon. But levitating something with magic and holding it with your body were very different. Rapiers are thin, piercing weapons, and too much force could probably break it. Which is where Aika came in, as she was using her boomerang to keep Mao distracted. This didn't stop Mao from throwing blind punches and kicks, so he was still very difficult to actually harm.

The fight with Jao seemed to be at a standstill, until eventually, Fina got the idea to fool Jao with the barriers she'd been making. The next time Jao received the opportunity to throw a swipe at Vyse, Fina put up a barrier, but got rid of it as soon as Jao was about to strike. Even though it was only for a second, Jao had been expecting himself to hit a barrier, and when he didn't, he lost his balance and stumbled, giving Vyse ample opportunity to get above his back, and dive bomb him into the deck of the ship, right on top of Mao, who'd still been aimlessly throwing blows.

The twin griffons got back onto their legs, and stood at the railing of the ship. "Westerners..." Jao began.

"... you are stronger than we thought," Mao finished.

"We must report this..."

"... to our Commander."

The two twins leapt from the side of the Delphinus and into the clouds below. As the ponies rushed to see what had happened to them, the Yin Yang rose from beneath the cloud floor, Jao and Mao perched on its deck.

"We rule the skies of Yafutoma," said Jao.

"And we are known as the Tenkou," said Mao.

"Westerners..."

"... we shall meet again." The Yin Yang continued its ascent, until it was high above the clouds, further than they could possibly reach, or even see.

"Well, looks like we chased them off for now," said Enrique. "We should continue trying to find Yafutoma. Since we just encountered intelligent life, civilization can't be far."

After about another few hours of traveling north, Vyse finally reached what looked like a small nation, surrounded almost entirely by floating stone walls. In the northwestern corner of the nation was an enormous blue mountain whose summit rose above the clouds. And in the center was a small city, built upon several small islands connected by bridges and the like. the Delphinus docked at the city's pier, and the crew disembarked.

The city looked extremely decorative from up close. The streets were carefully crafted with white, patterned stone, and the walls that filled the city were adorned with small, religious-looking statues of various animals, namely dogs and turtles. The trees were much thinner, taller, and smoother than the ones back home, and the houses appeared to have been made by tying these pole-like trees together to form the walls. There were some regular-looking trees as well, but they blossomed with bright pink petals that looked hauntingly like snow as they slowly fell from their branches. It was all very beautiful.

"Wow..." Aika said in awe as she looked around. "The water is so clear... I wonder where we are."

"Huh?" Vyse blurted as he noticed a group of townsfolk gathered at the end of the pier. They were all griffons, of varying ages and genders, and had come to gawk at their first visitors in centuries. All of the griffons looked identical to Vyse, but then he wondered if the griffons thought the same about ponies. Either way, he couldn't tell them apart other than from their sizes.

"That ship!" said one townsgriffon. "It's huge!"

"Are those Westerners? They look kinda funny..."

"How come they don't have claws? How do they pick stuff up?"

"Look! Two of them lost their wings! And two of them have horns on their foreheads!"

"I wonder what they eat to get their fur that color?"

"Haha..." Aika nervously laughed. "My mane is really going to stand out over here."

"Invaders!" came a voice from behind the crowd. The griffon was wearing a suit of light armor, and carrying something similar to a spear in one of his claws. He flew over the crowd and stood before the ponies. "Why have you come to Yafutoma?! These lands are protected by Mount Kazai and the Blue Moon! Under the sovereign reign of Lord Mikado, invaders will be punished!"

"Yafutoma?" Aika asked. "Is this really Yafutoma?"

"Yes... you have invaded Yafutoman Lands."

"We did it! We did it!" Aika and Fina held each others' hooves and bounced repeatedly into the air. "We're in Yafutoma!!!!!"

"Well done, Vyse!" Enrique congratulated. "This will be recorded in the history books!"

The griffon soldier pointed his spear at them. "How dare you invade our lands! I shall strike you down where you stand!"

"Wait! Don't attack them!" came the voice of another griffon soldier who'd come rushing to the scene as well. "Visitors, our primary responsibility is to defend Yafutoma. Please forgive our harsh welcome. Lord Mikado has said that he would like to speak with you. Please, if you would follow me."

"Lord Mikado?" Vyse asked. "I suppose that he's probably the king of these lands. We should follow him."

The Blue Rogues were led to the very top of Yafutoma, at the northernmost point on the highest island. On the way there, they got to see the inner walls of the city. There was water everywhere, so much so that tiny bridges made up a large portion of the roads. The griffons seemed as though they were content with simply building around the rivers rather than obstructing them with dams, as if to say the water was there first and shouldn't be forced to leave. A lot of the houses and buildings were even constructed on small piers not made for docking ships. Vyse wondered what they did should a pier ever collapse, but given the material the houses were made of, they'd probably just float until repairs were made.

The Yafutoman palace was strangely tiny compared to the other palaces Vyse had seen. This one was no bigger than many inns he'd been to. It wasn't even that much bigger than his own house back on Pirate Isle. But the palace didn't need to be huge, for it only served two purposes: audiences with the royal family, and living quarters for them as well. The servants all slept in their respective homes.

The Air Pirates were led into the audience chamber. Before them, sitting on the throne, was the Yafutoman king, Lord Mikado. To his left stood a young, female griffon dressed in blue clothing. To his right, two advisors: a short one named Muraji, and a tall one named Kangan.

"So, you came from the land where the sun sets," the king began. "Welcome to Yafutoma. My daughter, Moegi, has always been intrigued with the West. Haven't you, my dear?"

"Yes, father," she politely answered. "Please, I would love to hear all about your homeland. And if there is anything we can do for you, just ask." The griffons were unable to visit the West for the same reason the ponies

couldn't visit the East: they were separated by impassable walls. Yafutoma was surrounded on all sides by dark sky rifts, except to the East, which lied an impenetrable white stone reef, much like the one to the west of Ixa'taka.

"Sure," Aika accepted, "but I don't want to be too much of a burden."

"King Mikado..." began Kangan, the tall griffon, who stroked the long feathers `neath his beak as he spoke. "As an advisor of the Royal Court, I must say that I am opposed to the idea of foreigners entering our lands. Foreigners have only brought us disaster. We must cleanse them from our lands immediately!"

"I agree with my father!" said Muraji, the short griffon. "The Westerners can only bring us trouble. We should dispose of them at once."

"They are our guests," Mikado insisted. "We must welcome them. They can teach us a great deal about the West. And there is much we can teach them as well... But I would like to know why you have traveled to Yafutoma."

"We're searching for the Elements of Harmony," Vyse began, "to prevent our enemies from using them to destroy Equestria. It's rumored that here lies the Element of... uh..."

"Laughter," said Fina.

"Element of Laughter?" asked Lord Mikado. "Hmm... I think you may be referring to the jewel that grants its power to the Blue Moon. The object that you are searching for lies underneath Mount Kazai. Here in Yafutoma, we refer to the object as the Warai Sphere. Mount Kazai is considered by us griffons to be a holy mountain. And deep within the mountain... lies an azure-colored jewel. After the cataclysm, the jewel was entrusted to us by ponies from the West, and sealed inside Mount Kazai as a symbol of royal succession."

"An azure-colored jewel?" Aika asked. "Vyse! That has to be the Element of Harmony!"

"At one time, Mount Kazai was a volcano, and there is no known way inside. The Warai Sphere has been lost since the days of the Old World... If you were to retrieve it for us, we would be eternally grateful..."

Vyse beat his hoof against his chest. "So, the Warai Sphere is at the bottom of that huge mountain? Leave it to us. Don't worry... we'll get it back for you!"

"You'll want to speak with the owner of the ship maintenance store. I'll send an order to have him escort you to the summit of the mountain, since your ship is incapable of flying that high."

After traveling back down the many islands that made up the staircase-shaped city of Yafutoma, Vyse finally found the ship maintenance store near the docks where they'd arrived. A particularly fat, but strong-looking griffon stood behind the counter. Strangely, he reminded Vyse of his former captain, Drachma.

"I understand that you wish to go to Mt. Kazai?" the merchant asked. "Lord Mikado has commanded me to escort you. I'll get the ship under way, so you guys can just sit back and take it easy. Oops, I almost forgot. If we're going to go inside Mt. Kazai, I'd better take these along." The merchant reached behind himself and grabbed what looked like a large, yellow, rubber suit with an air-tight, steel helmet adorned with glass windows for vision. Nothing would be able to get in or out of that when all strapped in. "Deep inside Mt. Kazai is a cavern, and in some places, there will be water. These Underwater Suits should prove useful."

"What?!" Aika shrieked. "We have to go underwater?! But I can't swim!!!"

"Do not worry... As long as you are using the Underwater Suit, you should be fine. Just be sure to breathe normally. Well then, shall we get going?"

The trip to the mountain took quite a few hours, for it was much larger than the horizon made it seem. The summit of Mount Kazai lied only just above the cloud ceiling. Had the Delphinus been just a bit more powerful, they probably could've reached it themselves. Within the flooded crater atop the mountain, what was clearly a means of entering the temple within had been built much like a pier, and it is here that the merchant docked the small ship.

"Wow!" said Aika as she got off the boat. "The water here is so calm... it looks like glass." The water in the summit was above the clouds, so it was never subjected to rain or storms. And the walls surrounding the summit shielded it from the wind, so ripples, tides, and waves were all alien to it. This water was pure, clean, ancient, and untouched.

Enrique took in a deep whiff of the water's soothing fragrance. "It's hard to imagine that this was a volcanic area covered in lava at one time."

Aika gasped as she noticed something horrific in the corner. "What is that thing?!"

Everypony turned to see what she was looking at. On the side of the lake was an enormous statue of bird. A regular bird, not a griffon, but a giant one nonetheless.

"That must be the Roc."

"The Roc?"

"Yes, the Roc is the Blue Gigas. I've heard many myths about its origin. It is said that the member of the Mane Six who came to protect the griffons did so out of a favor to a friend, who'd wanted to protect these lands herself. When she chose the creature to become the Blue Gigas, her choice was apparently made out of humorous reasons... I even recall her giving a name to it... Was it... Tom, I think? Either way, it looks like the Roc was trapped in the lava and encased in stone."

"If that thing ever got free, we'd be in trouble," Enrique shuddered. "The Gigas that you've faced so far couldn't fly. I can't imagine how tough this one would be."

"We should secure the Element of Laughter as soon as we can!" Vyse declared. "Let's go!"

The Blue Rogues entered the temple, and inside found a rope that stretched dozens of yards down. Rather than waste time climbing down it, Vyse and Fina simply carried Aika and Enrique, quickly descending down the hole. Fina was physically stronger than she'd appeared. Perhaps being an Alicorn also gave her the natural strength of earth ponies?

After several minutes of descent, they finally reached the bottom and came to a large room with a deep-looking pool in the center. It appeared to have been a dead end.

"Well, now what do we do?" Aika sighed.

"We go down, of course," Vyse answered.

"Huh? Down? Down where? You don't mean..."

"Yup. That is why we were given these Underwater Suits, after all."

Aika moaned, but knew there was no arguing with him. Like several times before, the threat of being left alone there was clear as day, so she had no choice but to comply. Each Air Pirate struggled to get their suits on. Luckily, their shapes were still somewhat similar to that of griffons. The sleeves had bits of loose material on the ends, but those were where the claws and toes would normally go. Fina and Enrique had the most difficulty, trying to fit their horns into their helmets.

With everypony buckled up and tightly sealed within their suits, each jumped into the pool and began to sink. Aika jumped in last, of course. They sunk deeper into the water for what felt like a few minutes. They were

scared, but they each did their best to continue breathing at a normal pace. Heavy breathing would make them run out of oxygen very quick.

At last, they reached the floor, and continued walking through a small tunnel that presented itself. Their movements were slow of course, as moving through the water required them to push several million tiny particles out of the way with every inch. They trudged through the deep, dark, tunnel for only a few minutes, but they were starting to run out of air, and in their panic, felt as though it was taking longer. Eventually, a light showed itself.

An opening above the end of the tunnel marked the end of their underwater escapade. They each rushed to the end of the tunnel in order to emerge from the surface and, quicker than they had put them on, removed their underwater suits. Each breathed deeply as they wiped the sweat from their foreheads. No pony admitted it, but each of them were afraid the tunnel would never end.

They had succeeded. They had managed to reach the chamber where the Element was kept: a small shrine surrounded by water and glowing lights. In the center stood a small pedestal, and on it lied a blue, balloon-shaped crystal.

"So this is the Element of Laughter..." said Vyse. "We've finally found it."

"It's so beautiful..." Fina whispered as she lifted it from the altar. "It is said that whoever holds the Element of Laughter is gifted with intense optimism and a great sense of humor. Well... I do feel really happy right now..."

"Vyse," said Aika, "that's another Element of Harmony. You know what that means... it's time to celebrate!"

"Yes!" Vyse replied, knowing exactly what Aika was talking about. They hadn't done THAT since they defeated The Great and Powerful Baltor. "Actually, let's include Fina on this one!"

"What?" Fina asked, confused. "But I... I don't know what to do."

"Aww, don't worry about it!" said Aika. "Just give it a try!"

The three of them attempted to perform Vyse and Aika's victory hoofshake together. They slapped Fina's hooves down low, slapped them up high, and then they all put their hooves together in the air and jerked them away, as if tracing a firework. "Yay!" they all shouted.

The trip back up the mountain was about the same difficulty as their descent. All they had to do back in the pool was float to the surface, but getting back up the shaft with the rope was quite painful. Back at the

summit, the merchant had been waiting patiently, ready to escort them all back to Yafutoma.

"You have done exceptionally well!" congratulated Lord Mikado as he held the Element in his claws. "No griffon in Yafutoma has seen the Warai Sphere since the days of the Old World. You are the first to make it back alive from the depths of Mount Kazai. How can I repay you for risking your lives to recover it?"

"Well..." Vyse began. "As we mentioned earlier, we were wondering if it would be alright if we borrowed it."

"Hmm... But it is the symbol of royal succession... I would like to keep it in my possession at least while you remain in Yafutoma."

"Umm... Sure..." Vyse was not without suspicion, but he didn't want to throw accusations. It's just that he'd been betrayed many times in the past, usually when it came to the Elements, and even by a nation's king.

"Symbol of royal succession, huh?" asked Aika. "That makes sense why they want to keep it. Moegi... you're Lord Mikado's daughter, right? So does that make you the successor to the throne?"

Moegi froze up, and then turned her head away, remaining silent for a few seconds. To hide this, Mikado quickly put on a fake smile and changed the subject.

"Well, thank you retrieving the Warai Sphere!" he yelled. "Let us begin the preparations for the feast! Make yourselves at home and enjoy the festivities!"

"Alright!" Aika cheered. "That's more like it! I can't wait to try the gourmet cooking of Yafutoma!"

"We would be honored to join you," said Vyse. "Especially Aika."

Enrique, however, was not interested in the celebrations. He was too occupied with how strangely Moegi was acting. He couldn't help but wonder if something horribly wrong was bothering the Yafutoman princess. He was extremely worried about her.

Later that night, after all the festivities were over, Princess Moegi escorted the Blue Rogues to a small hut northeast of the palace. "You must be very tired," said Moegi. "You are welcome to stay in the Royal Guest House tonight."

"Thank you for escorting us," said Fina, her manners on the same level as the princess.

"That was some of the best food I've ever had," Vyse praised.

"And for some reason," Aika began, "I just could not for the life of me get used to those weird eating-sticks. I think I'm better off just eating with my hooves."

Moegi giggled. "I am very happy that you enjoyed yourselves."

From behind them came a very high-pitched chuckling. It was Muraji, son of Advisor Kangan. "So, the Westerners do have a sense of taste, after all... I came here to personally thank you for retrieving the Warai Sphere. I will be sure and take care of it when it is passed on to me as soon as Moegi and I are married..."

"I will never marry you!" Moegi shouted, showing an anger previously unseen. "And as long as Daigo is alive, you'll never be king!"

"Have you forgotten that 'Prince' Daigo has been exiled for treason? Heh heh... I find it very unlikely that a traitor could ever become king."

These harsh words struck a chord with Moegi, causing her to turn away in silence.

"Moegi...?" Fina said sympathetically.

"Okay, that's it...!" shouted Vyse as he stepped forward. But before he could do anything, Enrique stuck his hoof in Vyse's way. "Huh? Enrique?!"

"I don't know your motives," Enrique said whilst glaring deeply into Muraji's eyes, "but this is NOT how a noble treats a lady. If you insist on insulting her, then you will have to deal with me!"

Muraji was cowering in fear, slowly backing away from Enrique, unable to break away from his piercing stare. "Y-You think you can push me around just because you got the Warai Sphere back...? I'm going to tell my father on you!" And with that, he flew away, almost tripping over himself as he took off.

"Prince Enrique..." said Moegi as she approached him. "I... I'm terribly sorry... I'm sorry you felt that you had to defend me like that... I didn't mean to put you in that position..."

"No, no... That's quite alright," Enrique said with a smile. "Where I come from, we have codes of honor on how a gentlecolt should treat a lady, such as yourself. Well, honestly, not many ponies follow that code anymore."

"Prince Enrique..."

"But, Muraji spoke of an exiled prince... Do you know what he was talking about?"

"..... It... it is nothing. If... if you'll excuse me, I will be returning to my quarters. Pleasant dreams..."

Moegi bowed to her guests, and quickly began walking away. Enrique continued to stare at her with concern until she was no longer in sight. Aika couldn't help but giggle. She nudged Vyse's shoulder and looked over at Enrique, bringing a silent grin to Vyse's face. They could both totally see what was happening here.

"Those Westerners..." grumbled Muraji as he landed in a deserted part of the city. "They'll pay for speaking to me like that."

"Hahaha..." came a giggling voice from the shadows. "Well, what have we here?"

"Eek! Who... who are you?!"

A pink unicorn with a long brown mane stepped forth from the shadows. Somehow, somehow, the Armada's 4th Admiral had found her way into Yafutoma.

"Shh..." she hushed. "I heard everything. My name is Belleza, and it appears we have a common enemy. Hahaha..."

The next morning, the Blue Rogues were summoned to the palace in order to meet with the king. It was time for them to be leaving Yafutoma now, but they couldn't without getting the Element of Laughter back first.

"Good morning, Vyse," greeted Lord Mikado. "Did you rest well?"

"Yes, I slept like a rock," Vyse responded. "That was my first time sleeping on a... floor... mattress... thing."

"Hahaha, I see. I'm glad you were comfortable."

"Lord Mikado!" interrupted the sound a soldier griffon, who'd come bursting into the palace. "It's an emergency! Black ships have surrounded the city! And what appears to be their flagship is attempting to dock in our harbor!"

"What?!"

"Black ships...?" Vyse whispered. "Oh no..."

"It must be the Armada!!" Aika deduced. "Vyse, let's hurry back to the port!" The Blue Rogues darted out of the room, and as they did, Kangan and Muraji whispered and chuckled amongst themselves.

It was a sight none of the Blue Rogues would have ever anticipated. Two whole Valuan fleets had docked at the Yafutoman pier, and several guard ponies had commandeered the Delphinus, keeping Marco hostage

on board. And approaching the entrance to the city were the Admirals leading the fleets...

"Belleza!" Vyse shouted in shock. "... And Vigoro?! How did they even get here?!"

"Well, well... hello there, handsome," Belleza seductively greeted. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Hey, Red!" called Vigoro to Aika. "It looks like fate has brought us together again!"

"Oh, no!!" Aika cried. "What's HE doing here?!"

"It's so cute how she pretends that she doesn't want me. Come aboard my ship. Maybe the two of us can rock the boat!"

Belleza lightly shoved her elbow into Vigoro's chest. "Vigoro, please mind your manners... We are in the presence of Prince Enrique." The two admirals bowed to their prince, who was still surprised to see them. "Prince Enrique, I trust you are in good health. If you are wondering how we got here, we blasted a hole in the stone reef near Ixa'taka and traveled west. Our goal is the same, my Prince. We also seek the Element of Laughter."

"Belleza..." Vyse growled. "Do you plan to burn down Yafutoma as well?!"

"Relax, handsome. As I told you before, I am against unnecessary destruction. We have no intention of fighting you. We were merely planning to dock and speak with the king of these lands."

"You're wasting your time! King Mikado is an honorable griffon. There's no way he would strike a deal with the Valuan Armada."

"We'll see about that... Everyone has their limits, their codes, and their morals. But everyone also has a weakness. If you find that weakness and exploit it, those limits, codes, and morals seem to... fade away. I'd love to chat longer, but I have an appointment with the king. Stay out of our way." She blew a kiss to Vyse, and with Vigoro and several guards at her side, headed for the palace. "See you around, handsome..."

"Vyse!" Aika shouted as soon as the Admirals were gone. "Shouldn't we stop them?!"

"Sorry, but there's nothing we can do right now," Vyse admitted. "There's no way we can take on all of these soldier ponies, and that means we can't get to the Delphinus, either."

"Belleza and Vigoro are here as Imperial representatives," Enrique explained. "Attacking them during a diplomatic meeting would make us criminals in this country. Let's return to the guest house. Nothing we can do but wait until they have concluded their talks."

The Blue Rogues had returned to their quarters, while Belleza and Vigoro met with the king of the griffons. The conversation started out welcoming and civil, but a few verbal slip-ups eventually made Lord Mikado realize that the Valuans were after a bit more than just the Element of Harmony.

"No!" he yelled. "I will never let the Valuans occupy Yafutoma!"

"But, King Mikado..." Belleza tried to reason. "You do realize that your country's pitiful army wouldn't last a day against the Armada. To prevent unnecessary bloodshed, I recommend that you surrender."

"We will never surrender! We will never give Yafutoma over to a band of bloodthirsty warlords like yourselves. We are protected by the Blue Moon. In the past, whenever our country was threatened, the Rainbow Storm came to our aid and saved our lands. If you attack us, the Storm will blow you into the Everfree Rift. Valua will never occupy Yafutoma. Do you hear me? Never!"

"I'm sorry you didn't see things our way. It appears that this meeting is at an end. Then... I will gain possession of Yafutoma... by my own means." Belleza raised her hoof into the air, signaling a group of Valuan soldiers from just outside to storm the palace. The Yafutoman guards did nothing to stop them as they placed their swords to Mikado's throat.

"What sort of treachery is this?!"

"Heh heh heh..." Muraji cackled. "If you do not keep quiet, you'll be a head shorter!"

"Muraji... you traitor!"

Kangan turned and bowed to the scheming mare. "Belleza, in accordance with our agreement last night, this country will fall under the rule of the Valuan Empire."

"Kangan!" Mikado shouted. "What are you saying?!"

"King Mikado... as Miss Belleza stated, we have no hope of winning a war against Valua. To save the griffons, I shall usurp your throne and assume my role as leader of Yafutoma."

"Wow!" Vigoro cheered, impressed with his partner's work. "Belleza... I'm glad we're on the same side!"

"Don't relax yet, big guy," Belleza warned. "Not while the colt is still around. Take King Mikado prisoner and find those Air Pirates!"

The Yafutoman and Valuan soldiers alike headed out to begin combing the city in search of the Blue Rogues. And during this commotion, no one ever noticed Princess Moegi sneak out through the back.

"... It seems like they've been talking forever!" Aika moaned back at the guest house.

Vyse sighed along with Aika. "Well, you know how formal those diplomatic talks are. It takes forever for them to decide who gets to sit down first."

The painful silence was interrupted by the sudden intrusion of Moegi, who'd just burst open the front doors. "Everyone! Quickly! You must get out of here!"

"Princess Moegi?!" said Enrique with a worried look on his face. "What happened?!"

"Kangan and Muraji have betrayed us! My father... has been taken prisoner! It was Belleza's doing..."

"Belleza! It figures. She probably met with those two before the meeting and had the whole thing planned out."

"Vyse!" Aika shouted. "What should we do?!"

Vyse's mind began to race. There were a large number of options available, but with the current situation, most would be futile. The palace, no, the entire city was flooded with guards, of ponies and griffons alike. The docks where the Delphinus was lied on the opposite corner of the whole city, so there'd be no way they could get back to it, and attempting to fight all of the guards would be suicide. As much he hated to admit it, there was only one plausible option.

"I'm sorry," Vyse began, "but we have to run and hide for now. Belleza has probably already convinced the Yafutoman Guards that we're criminals."

"I agree," input Enrique. "We should run for now and figure out what to do next."

"Very well, then," Moegi condoned. "Quickly, follow me!" Moegi headed over to the one wall of the guest house that was colored differently than the others, and found four holes behind one of its paintings. She inserted all four of her claws into the holes, and the wall began to rotate like a revolving door, revealing a hidden passage behind it. "We can escape from the city this way. Hurry!"

At the end of the secret passage was a very tiny dock with a small escape pod. At first, Vyse was put off by the unlikely convenience of the escape pod's location, but realized after some thinking how much sense it made. If they were to have an escape pod, the first place the enemy would look for it is in the palace itself. Keeping it in a nearby building would better conceal it.

Vyse, Aika, Fina, Enrique, and Moegi all boarded the tiny ship, and it began to rise higher and higher into the sky, until it was above the clouds. No one saw them due to its tiny size. "Wow!" said Aika. "Incredible! I can't believe how high we are..."

"We will be safe here," Moegi assured.

"It's great that we escaped from the guards, but now what do we do?"

"... There is an ancient temple on a small island to the North. My brother... Daigo should be there."

"What?! You have a brother?!"

"... Yes. He is the true heir to the throne. A long time ago, my brother directly disobeyed my father's orders. He was exiled from Yafutoma, and sentenced to live on the island."

"Marooning him on an island was kind of harsh, don't you think?"

"My brother had a tendency to go out sailing on his own and disregard his duties as Prince. But, I don't think that my father should have disowned him. I think that Muraji and Kangan convinced my father to exile him... With my brother out of the way, they had a chance of taking over Yafutoma."

"That makes sense," Vyse pondered.

"Vyse," Enrique began. "It looks like we have no other choice. We're going to have to rely on this Daigo. Princess Moegi, do not worry. We will save the griffons... including your father!"

"Prince Enrique..." said Moegi. "Thank you."

The escape pod was very slow, and Exile Island was a lot further north than Vyse expected. They were forced to spend the night aboard the tiny ship, with Moegi and Vyse taking turns at the controls. Late into the next morning, they reached the so-called "island". What was known as an island was more like a few small boulders all connected with thin walkways. The largest boulder laid at the top of the walkway, and had a small temple built into it. Upon reaching this temple however, they were halted by two familiar voices at its entrance...

"Westerners..." said Jao.

"... It appears that we meet again," said Mao.

"Aww, not them again!" groaned Vyse. "What are you doing here?!"

"This is the headquarters..." began Jao.

"... of the Tenkou," finished Mao.

"It was very foolish..."

"... for you to come here."

"The time has come..."

"... for us to finish you!"

"Halt!!" came a voice from inside the temple. The doors burst open to reveal a strong, young-looking griffon. He had a large scar going down his shoulder, and wore a thin, curved sword at his waist (a weapon Vyse recently learned was called a katana). "Jao, Mao... Who's there?"

"Lord Daigo..."

"These are the Westerners..."

"... that dared to defy us."

"They came through the Everfree Rift..."

"I'm Vyse of the Blue Rogues," Vyse stated with a snarl. "Are you the leader of the Tenkou?!"

"Daigo!" Moegi gasped.

"What?! He's your brother?!"

"Moegi!" Daigo chuckled. "How have you been? I never would have thought that you would bring foreigners to my temple."

"I never thought I would, either," Moegi replied. "But what are the Tenkou doing here?!"

Daigo sat down and began to explain. "A long time ago, these twins here challenged me to a fight. They wanted my sword, so I beat them senseless. And for some strange reason, they pledged their loyalty to me. I've been their leader ever since. And I figured, as their leader, I could control them a little, so they'd stop attacking everygriffon. Besides, who else do you know that has twin bodyguards?! Hahahaha!"

"Moegi..." Aika moaned. "Is he really your brother? It's hard to imagine that the two of you are related."

"I know he is a Prince... like Enrique..." Fina mused, "... but it seems that Princes in Yafutoma act differently than Princes in Valua."

"... But what is the purpose of your visit, Moegi?" Daigo asked. "Has Father changed his mind?"

Moegi lowered her head. "Daigo... he..."

"... What's wrong? Did something happen to him?!"

Vyse and his friends explained the situation in Yafutoma: that the griffons were now working for the Valuans, and that Kangan had overthrown the King.

"Kangan..." Daigo growled. "That little runt! How could he backstab our father and give our country over to the Valuans?! Moegi... I'm sorry. If I was still there, this would never have happened. When I was exiled, I

welcomed the freedom! I disregarded all of my duties and did whatever I wanted, here in this temple. But, now the griffons need me. I must go back there and reclaim my title as Prince of Yafutoma!

"Vyse, I can't thank you enough for saving my sister. Now, I must get ready for battle. I will fight against Valua and give Yafutoma back to the griffons! I would be honored if you'd fight alongside me."

"Of course we'll help!" Vyse agreed. "We share the same enemy."

"Excellent! We will fight together and reclaim Yafutoma and the Warai Sphere! Also, Prince Enrique... As Vyse just told me, I am to understand that you defended my sister from Muraji, am I correct? My family thanks you for your bravery."

"I only did what is expected of a gentlecolt," Enrique modestly thanked. "Think nothing of it... And, Prince Daigo, I know how you feel. I, too, have been exiled from my lands. I wish to change the views of my country by changing the world around it. And that is why I wish to aid you... from one exiled prince to another."

"Also, the fleet that you are about to face... the Armada... was sent here by my mother, Empress Teodora. As a Valuan Prince, it is my duty to stop them. This is not only your battle... it is mine as well."

"... I understand," Daigo smiled. "I will gladly accept your aid. Prince Enrique... you are a very noble stallion. Much more noble than I. If a stallion such as yourself were to be at my sister's side, I would sleep well at night."

"Um... I... um..." Enrique and Moegi both began to blush heavily. The idea of being with one another hadn't completely sunk in until just now. What's more, the thought that they were also of different species never once even crossed their minds, nor would they care should it do so.

"And from the looks of it," Daigo added, "the two of you wouldn't mind, either!" Everyone laughed as the pony prince and the griffon princess suddenly became even more sheepish. "Now then... Vyse. I need to prepare for the battle... Meet me at the port. We will depart for Yafutoma as soon as you are ready."

Vyse and his allies returned to the tiny escape pod in which they arrived, but before they could take off, Daigo's voice came from above them. "Hey! You can't expect to fight in that ship! Come ride with me on my ship!"

Daigo's large wooden ship pulled up next to the Blue Rogues, and they all hopped on board. Daigo gave a signal, and from beneath the clouds, what looked like an entire army rose from the mists. Jao and Mao's ship, the Yin Yang, as well as dozens of other ships flew into formation.

This army made up the entirety of the Tenkou; they had all been assembled so that they might take back their homeland. War was upon them.

"Our scouts have reported that the Armada and the Yafutoman fleet are patrolling Kazai Lake," Daigo explained as they neared the mountain. "Vyse, your ship is also patrolling with the Armada."

"Now it's personal!" Vyse snapped.

"Hahaha... I understand your frustration... If we can get your ship back, we can win this battle. The Tenkou will attack the Armada from the front and keep them distracted. While they're keeping the Armada busy, I want to get the Delphinus back. Without it, we don't stand a chance."

"Sounds like a plan!"

"Alright, griffons! Get ready! Let's show them what the Tenkou can do!"

Among the Valuan fleet were three notable ships. The first was Belleza's ship, the Lynx. The second was Vigoro's ship, a giant mobile cannon known as the Draco. And the third was, of course, the Delphinus, which had shamelessly been put in Muraji's care.

"HAHAHA!" Vigoro bellowed as he spotted the approaching army. "It looks like our pirate friends want some action. Things just got a little more interesting. I'm coming for you, Red. Soon, you'll be all mine..."

"Hehehehe..." Muraji chuckled aboard the Delphinus. "The Westerners' ship is nice. Very nice. I think I'm going to enjoy this! But, I never dreamed that I would be able to kill Prince Daigo so soon. Now, Moegi will be mine for sure... as well as the throne! Hehehehehehehehehehe!!!!"

"I'm sorry, handsome..." Belleza said to herself. "I didn't want to have to fight you... But, for Valua... and Lord Galcian... I must."

"Tenkou ships, straight ahead!" reported one of Belleza's unicorns. "They are in range of our cannons!"

"Alright everypony, listen up! This is it! If we win this battle, we will rule the East! Let them feel the power of the Valuan Armada. Fire at will!"

The battle began without hesitation. Cannonfire and explosions flooded the sky, and anyone watching from a distance could easily mistake it for a massive firework display. A mere five minutes into the fight, several

ships had already been sunk, and an unknown number of lives may have been lost, sacrificed for the fate of Yafutoma. Such is the nature of war.

"So far, the battle is even," Daigo reported. "We're more maneuverable, but we can't seem to break their lines. Vyse, keep an eye out for your ship! It's got to be around here somewhere."

"Alright, everyone!" Vyse announced. "Be ready for action! When we find the Delphinus, let's take it back... Air Pirate style!"

"How fares the battle?" asked Kangan. The advisor had been safely hiding within the summit of Mount Kazai, and was making his own special preparations.

"My Lord..." the guard griffon reported. "The Tenkou are swarming all around the Valuans, but the Armada is holding their position. We seem to be at a stalemate."

"Heh heh... I see. Very well. It is time for me to join the battle and end this... once and for all!" Kangan found it a strain not to laugh as he turned to face the giant statue that sat at the edge of the summit...

Daigo looked on in worry at the ensuing events of the war. The Tenkou ships may have been fast, but they couldn't match the combined defense and offense of the Armada. "Hmm... We can't break their lines, and our ships are taking serious damage. I don't think we can take much more of this. I'm going to give the signal to retreat. Today... Valua has won."

Vyse growled as he stomped a hoof into the floor. He was faintly reminded of how Drachma would do that when he was angry, and wondered if he'd picked it up from him.

"My lord!" reported Daigo's watchgriffon. "A ship fitting the description of Captain Vyse's ship is heading our way!"

"What?!" Daigo asked. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, my lord! I'm positive it's the Delphinus!"

"Daigo!" Vyse began. "If you can get us close to the Delphinus, we can take it back and win this thing! We're Air Pirates, remember? We do this stuff all the time. All you have to do is get us close!"

"Hahaha... I see," Daigo laughed. "Okay, Vyse... You got it!"

Daigo's ship pulled up to just above the Delphinus's deck, and the Air Pirates all leaped onto it. Vyse and Fina could easily soar down to it with their wings, and Aika was experienced enough to leap to it on her own. Enrique, on the other hoof, fell flat on his face.

The Blue Rogues quickly helped Enrique to his hooves, and the four of them raced to the inside of the ship. Muraji was in the bridge, just as expected, surrounded by Yafutoman guards. "Muraji!" Vyse shouted. "We'll be taking back our ship now..."

Muraji began to cower in fear, shaking and flailing his wings awkwardly. "Do... do you think I'm afraid of you? You aren't so tough! W-Why are you fools just standing there? Get them!"

The Yafutoman guards all sprung to action, but they could never match the experience the Blue Rogues had, not after all they'd been through in their travels. Fina cast a spell to trap them all in a bubble, Aika used her boomerang to cut the griffons' spears (called naginata) in half, and Vyse flew around them in a circle to tie them together with a rope.

Enrique slowly approached a cowering Muraji as he levitated his rapier out of its sheathe and bared it. "You betray those that trust you and needlessly endanger the lives of innocent griffons... all for your own personal gain! For the honor of Princess Moegi... and for the griffons of Yafutoma... I will strike you down! Face my blade, coward!!"

Muraji stumbled backward and crawled into a corner as Enrique neared ever closer to him. "Um... I... no... um... help...! I, I... I'll give back your ship! Just... just spare my life! Please... let me live...!"

Enrique glared at Muraji, rapier pointed at the griffon's throat, and began to scowl. Muraji probably deserved what was coming to him, but Enrique was too merciful to exact such petty vengeance. "You're too pitiful for me to run you through... I'll spare you, but you'll pay for all of your treachery!"

Aika and Fina found where Marco had been held captive on the ship and released him, replacing him with Muraji, who'd remain bound until the war was at an end. Meanwhile, Vyse was reconfiguring the settings of the Delphinus's control panels, which had been customized to suit Muraji's inexperience. Once done, the Blue Rogues were back in business.

"Alright!" Vyse cheered. "We got the Delphinus back! Now, let's even the odds!"

Aika returned to give a report to her captain. "There's a ship coming in fast from the starboard side! And... there's something about it... that really disgusts me..." Vyse looked out to his right, and saw what looked like a giant cannon made to be a ship coming their way.

"That ship..." Enrique observed. "It's the Draco... Vigoro's ship!"

"Talk about trying to compensate...! That stallion's got an inferiority complex."

"The Armada is being led by Belleza and Vigoro," Vyse explained. "If we can take out their ships, the rest of them will fall! Our first target... the Draco!"

The Draco and the Delphinus moved into battle position in a wide open space away from the other combatants so that they could fight each other without interruption. "Hey Vyse!" Vigoro shouted. "My cannon's bigger than yours! Hahaha! Now, feel the destructive power of my ship, the Draco!!"

Vigoro immediately gave the order to load his ship's gargantuan cannon. The barrel looked large enough for a small ship to fit inside, and it was no doubt powerful enough to destroy one in a single shot. Even with the Delphinus's size and defense, a lone blast from that thing may very well be enough to split the ship in half.

Remembering the strategy he'd recently used against Admiral Gregorio, Vyse ordered that all the power in the Delphinus be redirected to the engines. As soon as Vigoro's cannon was fired, the Delphinus dodged out of the way with its boost of speed, and then resumed its own assault during the Draco's cool-down period.

"Now this is more like it!" Vigoro cheered. "A face-to-face confrontation! This is how REAL stallions should fight!"

Vigoro's cheering came to an abrupt end as the Delphinus unleashed its own artillery on the recovering Draco, violently shaking the ship and surprising its captain. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "I knew the Delphinus was powerful, but... Damn! That thing's strong! But that will make my victory all the sweeter! I will prove that I am the strongest stallion in the world!"

The Draco's cannon had fully recovered from its previous blast, and borrowing a tactic from Admiral De Loco, Vigoro brought his ship to a complete stop in order to improve their accuracy. Not even the Delphinus's top speed could get it away from the blast this time.

Remembering this tactic from his previous encounter with De Loco, Vyse followed suit and applied the same counter-strategy. He gave the order to begin charging the Gemstone Cannon, but they wouldn't fire it until the opportune moment. Once the Draco's cannon was fully loaded, the attached mechanisms pulled back and prepared to launch it.

Vyse gave the order. Much to Vigoro's surprise, the Delphinus actually turned straight toward his own ship's cannon, and began charging

its own. The Gemstone Cannon unleashed its electric blast of pink energy directly into the barrel of the Draco Cannon, blowing up the shell that had been loaded and crippling the entire ship from the inside.

"I... I don't believe it!" Vigoro yelled as the Draco slowly began to descend toward Deep Sky. "They survived my Draco Cannon! ... Belleza! Get me out of here!"

Belleza had seen Vigoro's ship explode, and was already on her way to assist him. Vigoro boarded the Lynx, and joined Belleza on the bridge.

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you, handsome," said Belleza. "Not even Vigoro could stop you! As an Admiral in the Valuan Armada... I shall be the one to defeat you."

"Yeah," Vigoro added. "We can't let these punks take back Yafutoma. And we've got them totally outnumbered, anyway. I've got a good feeling about today. I just know that whatever happens here... will open the path toward my destiny!"

Before the battle could continue, however, a large explosion erupted from the direction of Mount Kazai. What looked like a white beam of light shot skyward from the summit of the volcano. Belleza had seen this happen before, and that went double for the Air Pirates... Flying down from the mountaintop to join the ongoing war... was an enormous eagle. The Roc, the Blue Gigas.

"A ROC?!" shouted Vigoro. "My destiny is a ROC?!?!"

The Roc was followed by he who'd awakened it: Kangan, holding the Element of Laughter in his claws as he rode his ship into the war zone. "Hehehe..." he chuckled, barely able to contain his maniacal laughter as he held its respective Element. "Soon I shall be rid of both the Westerners AND the Tenkou! Go, Blue Gigas! Blow them out of the sky! HAHAAHAHA!!!"

Following its orders, the Roc rose high into the sky, higher and higher until it could no longer even be seen. And with a quick arc, it began dive-bombing, faster and faster until it was falling quicker than a bullet could be shot. And when it passed the war zone, the sound barrier broke, and a disc-shaped typhoon of countless colors erupted from that point, expanding and destroying anything it hit. Everything it missed was blown away, causing several ships to crash into one another and explode from the strength of the impacts.

Belleza looked on in horror. Her ship and Vyse's were far enough away the center of the burst to avoid most of its devastating effects, but it

didn't mean her ship was immune. "This must be the 'Rainbow Storm' that the King was warning us about!"

"The winds are too strong," reported the Vice Captain. "Our ships are losing control... We can't hold our formations!"

"If this keeps up, all of our ships will be destroyed... I didn't want to do this, but we have no choice. All ships retreat!" With the order given, all that remained of Belleza and Vigoro's fleets began to retreat to the East, while the Yafutoman ships returned to the city. The Tenkou stayed to watch the war conclude, as the skies had been cleared for the Delphinus to take on the Blue Gigas.

"It's the Roc!" Fina exclaimed.

"What WAS that?!" Aika asked. "What did it just do?!"

"That explosion was called a Sonic Rainboom. In the Old World, a member of the Mane Six used to be able to create them all on her own. She was quite famous for it."

"And that's the member of the Mane Six who made this Gigas, right?"

"Not quite. It was a different member, one who'd elected to protect Yafutoma as a favor to a griffon she knew. She gave the Blue Gigas the power to perform Sonic Rainbooms in honor of that griffon's best friend. Although, it appears that these Rainbooms have been amplified to act as a weapon."

"Anyway, I think we might be able to take him on with the Delphinus!"

"I really hope so..." Vyse moaned. "It doesn't look like we have much of a choice. Alright everypony, let's go! It's up to us! We don't have time to think of a plan at this point, so we'll just have to look for a weakness as we fight it!"

The Delphinus began to fly toward the Roc, prepared to do battle against it. Chuckling to himself, Kangan used the Element of Laughter to command the Roc to charge into battle as well. Vyse, too used to fighting ships (which have their cannons on the side), turned hard to starboard in order to dodge the enemy. But this was a living creature, one that had little limit to how it could move about.

The Roc stretched apart the talons on its legs and grabbed the Delphinus as if it were a twig. The claws dug into the steel hull of the ship as it was flailed around like a fish trying to escape its captor. All of the crew members on board were thrown around, crashing into walls and sustaining many injuries. By the time the Roc finally let go, Marco and Muraji had been knocked unconscious, and the ship was flying crooked.

"Ugh..." groaned Vyse as he got back to his legs and grabbed the helm in order to straighten the ship. "Is everypony alright?"

"Y-yeah..." grunted Aika. "I think so. Marco's out cold, though."

"Alright. Note to self: keep our distance from that thing!"

"Speaking of which," Enrique began. "Where did it go?"

The conscious crew members began searching all around them, trying to find where the Roc had flown off to. Eventually, Fina decided to look up. "There!" she shouted. "Above the clouds!"

"No! It's going to make another Sonic Rainboom!"

"Everypony!" Vyse called. "Redirect all the power to the engines! We can't get far enough away in time, but maybe if we tried to resist the blast by flying against it, we won't be thrown off-course!"

Down the Roc dived, faster and faster, picking up speed as it plummeted toward the middle elevations. And as it shot past, the sheer force of the speed erupted into another rainbow explosion. The Tenkou watching from a distance only felt some minor vibrations, but the Delphinus was almost in the eye of this storm. The engines shot to full power and pushed against the forces of the sound waves, with everyone on board holding on as tight as they could. After only a few seconds, it passed, and the Delphinus sustained no damage.

"Alright!" Vyse cheered. "We got thrown back a little, but we're still in attack position!"

"Yeah!" said Aika. "It looks like this ship can handle Sonic Rainbooms if we just brace ourselves for them!"

"Enough talk!" Enrique insisted. "Now's our chance!"

With the Roc at a reasonable elevation and a proper distance from its adversary, the Delphinus let loose with all of its cannons, subcannons, and torpedoes. Amazingly, the Roc managed to dodge every single blast, spinning, twirling, and flipping through the air to do so.

"I can't believe how quick that thing is!" Vyse exclaimed. "I never thought something so big could move so fast!"

"Urgh!" Aika groaned. "How are we supposed to hit something that agile? It's much faster than the Hydra or the Manticore! And it doesn't have movement limitations like ships do!"

Movement limitations? Vyse thought. And that's when an enormous grin grew upon his face. There was one way to completely ensure that the Roc would get hit, but it would certainly be risky, and possibly fatal if it didn't work.

"Alright!" Vyse happily shouted. "Begin redirecting all power to the Gemstone Cannon!"

"Are you out of your little pony mind?!" Aika asked. "The Gemstone Cannon is our slowest weapon! How do you plan on hitting it with THAT??"

"Just do it! Oh, and find something to hold onto!"

Aika, Fina, and Enrique all looked at each other, puzzled. Nevertheless, they immediately did as they were ordered.

"Hehehe... Well, this was fun," Kangan mumbled to himself. "But I'm aching to sit upon my new throne, so I think it's time I ended this. Roc! I command you to perform your ultimate attack: the Sonic Rain Nuke! Evaporate those pesky ponies from the sky!! HAHAAHAHA!!!"

The Roc let out a high-pitched shriek before beginning another forceful climb into the sky. "This is it!" Vyse shouted as he began flying toward where the center of the explosion would be. "Get ready!" When the Roc reached the absolute highest altitude it could reach, it began its high-speed dive. Sparks of electricity began to form around its body as it gathered the energy necessary to form a nuke. It began to spin like a drill as it continued its perfectly straight descent.

"NOW!" screamed Vyse as he pulled the bowsprit of the ship into the air. Everypony on board held on tight as the entire Delphinus turned up to a 90-degree angle, aiming the fully powered Gemstone Cannon at the Gigas diving straight towards it. The cannon fired upwards in a pillar of exploding light, much like what appears when a Gigas is awoken.

The Roc was diving at far too great of a speed for it to even consider dodging out of the way. The cannon's blast of energy pierced right through it, allowing all of the Roc's built up energy to erupt from its body, causing a premature Sonic Rain Nuke high up in the sky and almost completely disintegrating the Blue Gigas. Defeated, what remained of the Roc unconsciously glided toward Mount Kazai and crashed into its base.

The Delphinus managed to flip itself back onto a flat angle. All of the supplies onboard the ship had fallen off their shelves, a mess Marco would not be pleased to see once he woke up. After everypony had finally caught their breath, the realization of what had just occurred dawned on them. The Hydra had to be called back into its slumber, and the Manticore needed to be trapped in a canyon. The Roc, the most dangerous Gigas they'd fought yet, had actually been defeated for good.

The Element of Laughter fell from Kangan's claws. "I... I can't believe it... The Air Pirates defeated the Roc! I need to get out of here!!!"

But before Kangan could get back to the helm of his ship, he was boarded by Daigo and a group of Tenkou. "Kangan!" Daigo shouted. "You have nowhere to run! Surrender or die!"

"I... I... surrender..."

The war was finally over. The Armada was gone, the Gigas was defeated, and as thanks for helping save Yafutoma, the Tenkou were given a full pardon, allowing them to roam the skies freely once again. Back in the palace, Mikado sat at his rightful place on the throne, with both Daigo and Moegi at his side.

"Brave ponies from the West..." Mikado began. "I thank you, on behalf of all the griffons, for saving Yafutoma."

"But..." Enrique interrupted, "... it was my country that caused all of this... I am terribly sorry for all of the trouble wrought by the Valuans... I don't know how I can make it up to you."

"Prince Enrique, please... raise your head. Daigo has explained everything to me. You feel responsible because you are a Valuan Prince, but it is not your fault."

"Thank you for understanding... but we have only won the battle. As we speak, the Armada is regrouping... Until Valua sets itself back down the path of righteousness, I will continue to fight them."

"I see... very well then. I will pray for your well being. And perhaps the Warai Sphere will aid you in your fight. Please, take it with you."

"Really?" Aika asked. "Are you sure it's okay? Didn't you say it's necessary in appointing a successor to the throne?"

"Hahaha... we never needed it before now, did we? Even without a symbol, I have such an accomplished successor already."

Daigo smiled, knowing it was he his father spoke of. "I've decided to return to my father and accept the responsibility of defending the griffons."

"That's great!" Vyse congratulated. "Hey, whatever happened to Kangan and Muraji?"

"They were exiled to Tenkou Island. We figured that if they spent some time in exile, they'd realize what they've done and become better griffons. Or, you know, kill each other."

"Ahahaha!" Aika bellowed. "I like that plan! It serves them right!"

"That reminds me, I noticed that your ship isn't capable of going to great heights or depths. Here, take this with you." Daigo gave Vyse a scroll with what looked like engine schematics drawn all over it. "This is from us griffons. It contains all of the knowledge necessary to enable your ship to fly higher or lower than you've ever thought possible."

"Wow!" thanked Vyse. "I'll make sure we put it to good use!"

Princess Moegi had remained silent during the entire meeting, deeply lost in her own thoughts. At last, she spoke up. "... Father. I have something to ask of you. I... Please, let me go with these ponies."

"What?!" yelled Mikado, taken aback by what his daughter was saying.

"If what they say is true, then there are matters of great importance occurring in the West. You and Daigo both said that you will stay here to protect our country. But I am helping to defend our country... by helping these ponies on their quest."

"Well said, Moegi!" Daigo commended. "I am proud to have you as a sister. Prince Enrique... I speak to you not as a fellow prince, but as a brother concerned for his sister's well being. Please, take care of her..."

"You have my word," Enrique assured. "I will defend her with my life. Princess... Let us join forces and return peace to Equestria."

"Yes," said Moegi. "Prince Enrique... I entrust my life to you."

"... Very well, then..." mumbled Lord Mikado. "It appears I do not have much say in this matter, anyway."

"Wow, Enrique!" Aika exclaimed. "You're getting much more reliable by the minute! You seem like a different pony! Just until recently, all I ever saw of you was the back of your head leaning over the railing of the ship!"

"AIKA!!!" Enrique snapped. "Do you have to constantly remind me about that?!"

Once repairs were made, supplies were restocked, and Marco had finished cleaning up the lovely mess, the Air Pirates returned to the bridge of the Delphinus along with their newest crew member: the griffon, Princess Moegi. As a sheltered princess, she wouldn't be much help during battle, but as royalty, she could represent the Blue Rogues as an ally of the country of Yafutoma. And so, Moegi was hired as Vyse's personal delegate.

Back on the bridge, the Air Pirates stood around the meeting table as they planned their next course of action. "It's great that we got the Element of Laughter and all..." Aika began. "But where do we go from here?"

"Perhaps we should return to Crescent Isle," suggested Enrique, "and study that Scroll on Ship Polarity in order to modify the Delphinus."

"Go home? But that's to the west of here... How are we supposed to get back?"

"Hmm..." Vyse thought to himself. The west, north, and south were blocked by cloud walls formed from the Everfree Rift, which was a one-way trip the first time around. The winds of the Rift blew strongest to the east, so trying to go through from this end would be suicide. The only other direction was further east, where a white stone reef, like the one to west of Ixa'taka, blocked the path. And that's when something Vyse heard earlier popped into his mind. "Maybe we can try to go east from here."

"Wait a second!" said Aika. "We'll just be getting farther away from Crescent Isle!"

"Umm..." interrupted the normally silent Fina. "Didn't Belleza say that she came here by going west from Ixa'taka? If that's true, then if we go east from here, we should reach Ixa'taka, just as she said!"

"What?! So, you mean that the eastern and western ends of Equestria are connected?!"

"Hmm..." Enrique pondered. "I seem to recall hearing legends about the world being round. According to the geological studies of Valua... the world is a sphere. That means that the East is connected to the West, and the North is connected to the South. Of course, nopony has ever proven this... and those that believe it to be true are branded as heretics."

"That's interesting..." Vyse smiled. "Well, it looks like we're going to see if Belleza was telling the truth or not. We came to Yafutoma from Crescent Isle by heading east. We'll continue sailing to the east. And if we reach Crescent Isle... we will prove that the world is round!"

"Wow!!!" Aika cheered. "You mean we're actually going to try to sail around the world?!!!"

"Alright, everypony! Prepare for departure! We're going East! Destination: Crescent Isle!"

After a couple days of sailing east, the Delphinus at least reached the white stone reef. Near the southern corner of it, where it interlocked with a dark rift wall, a gargantuan hole had been blown right in the reef. Vyse could only imagine how many explosives it must've taken.

Flying through the hole, the Blue Rogues were met with the sights and smells of seemingly endless rainforests. There was no question; this was Ixa'taka. The crew of the Delphinus waved to the zebras of Horteka Village as they passed by. The King, Isapa, Centime, and Hans all waved back along with the villagers.

They continued sailing to the east, and passed through Middle Ocean, where Vyse and Aika's old home was... Pirate Isle. Vyse waved to his parents and old crewmates, who were busy overseeing the construction of a new airship, as the previous one had been destroyed when Galcian attacked. Even further east, they passed over the hot deserts of Nasr, waving Hi to the buffalo of Maramba, and to the survivors of Nasrad. Moegi couldn't believe how much of the world she and her fellow griffons had been missing. It was so huge, so diverse... so beautiful.

After about two weeks of non-stop sailing, they finally reached the Frontier Lands, where Crescent Isle was found. "Vyse!" called Fina. "Straight ahead!"

"Yup," said Vyse. "That's Crescent Isle alright. But it looks... different."

"If we reached Crescent Isle by flying east from Yafutoma, that means..."

Aika leaped into the air. "We sailed around the world!!! Hey, Vyse! How does it feel to have sailed around Equestria with your very own ship?!"

Vyse thought about all the amazing things he'd seen since his life on Pirate Isle. Valua, Nasr, Ixa'taka, and Yafutoma. Shrine Island, the Temple of Pyrynn, Gemstone Mountain, Rixis, Chaos Island, the Everfree Rift, and Mount Kazai. His encounters with Galcian, all six of the Valuan Admirals, and three of the legendary Gigas. And all of the friends and allies he'd made along the way. Vyse closed his eyes, and drew a deep breath. He looked straight ahead, and with a look of the fiercest determination, exclaimed...

"I want to see more!"