



1

Our story begins, as most pirate stories do, in the dark.

The low glow of a lamp, running out of oil, was nearly the only light about. The stars and moon up above helped a bit, but its always darkest, as they say, just before the dawn. And this night was particularly dark.

The lamp shined its light on a little dirt path that ran between the rocks. This path wound its way up through the cliffs of a forlorn and bare little rock of an island. The cliffs, the rocks, the path, and some palm trees were about the only things on this island, apart from the treasure.

And it was because of this treasure that our pirate friend was here on this bare little island in this dark night. Though, friend might not be the word to use for such a mean figure as this one.

The little lamp she held gave a glimpse of her face. A jagged scar ran across it. Starting at the left ear, it painted a crooked Z across her eye ending at the side of her nose. She held up a map for a closer look at the markings on it.

Her mouth was turned down in a deep frown of concentration. Her eyes looked like two pieces of coal, black and smoldering, as they stared down at the scrap of paper. This map, she hoped, would soon lead her to the treasure that lay hidden on this island. As rare a treasure as anyone has ever known, and twice as mysterious.

Assured she was still on the right track, the pirate rolled up the map, checked over her shoulder again, and started back up the path.

This is our hero, as it were, Captain Sophia Zephyr, or *Captain Z*, as they call her.

Though Captain Z doesn't start this tale as a hero. She starts it, as you might expect from such a story, as a pirate! An especially crafty no-good villain of a pirate.

But, there is a chance she might not stay that way. Yes, there's a chance, ever so slim, that she might have a bit of good in her, and that good may come out and turn her into a hero.

Will she really turn the corner from villain to hero? Does she have it in her?

I don't know. All we can do is watch and listen together to find out.

2

Captain Z rested for a bit on one of the large rocks along the steep path shed been following and checked the map again. She made sure she was still on the right path, and then continued to trudge up the mountain.

The map in her hand was a treasure map of the very island she was on. The pirates called this place Castle Island.

The path she was taking ended at an X on the map, and you know that an X always marks the spot. The spot of the treasure that Captain Z was hoping to find and escape with before she was found out herself.

You see, Captain Z was not the only pirate walking about on this island at the end of a dark night. The Dread Captain Spears and his crew of scoundrel pirates were searching and scouting on on that island as well. Except they didn't have the treasure map, you see, as Captain Z had stolen it from them. Instead, they were searching for her!

3

Earlier, that same night, things were a different story altogether.

The Dread Captain Spears had the treasure map of Castle Island all locked up and safe on his ship The Sea Breaker. At least he thought it was locked up safe.

But he probably wouldn't have thought that if he knew Captain Zephyr was on her way to take it from him.

The Sea Breaker was moored up a stones throw from Castle Island. Captain Spears' plan was for he and his pirate crew to get a good night's sleep, and then have the whole next day to search for the treasure shown on his map. He had even made his crew go to bed early, much to their grumbling and complaining.

But as he and his crew were putting on their pajamas, a little boat slowly and quietly rowed its way toward their mighty pirate ship.

Captain Z was the only person in that little row boat, along with a hook and rope, her lamp, and of course her grand feathered captains hat. As the sky darkened into night, Captain Z rowed right up to the side of that big pirate ship. Swinging her hook and rope around, she threw it up and snagged the hook around the rail. Then Captain Z was up on the top deck - quick as a wink and quiet as a mouse.

She tiptoed across the deck, toward the door leading below deck. Carefully, she skipped over squeaky looking planks and tangles of rope that might trip her up.

The door gave a little squeak as she opened it, but not one of those scoundrel pirates stirred as Sophia slipped below deck.

4

What a commotion those pirates make when they are sleeping!

There was enough snoring down here to make you believe that someone really was sawing through lumber - as the expression goes.

Captain Z crept past the loud open bed rooms and shuffled into the cluttered and crowded map room. There were maps everywhere. They covered the tables and were rolled up and scattered on the floor. Maps stuck out of vases and pots and pans. They hung on every inch of the walls. But none of the maps laying out was the map Captain Z was here for.

Over in the corner of the room was a small wooden chest, not taller than your knee. And in that chest, Sophia knew, was the lost map of the treasure buried on Castle Island.

The chest was locked. Captain Z knew that it would be. Such an important map wouldn't be just lying around. And she also knew that the only key was right now strung around Captain Spears' neck. But there is always more than one way to steal a map, and lucky for Captain Z, some pirates never think about these other ways. But she does.

Instead of trying to unlock the chest to get the map, Captain Z just grabbed the whole chest - with the map still inside!

Out of the map room and back down the hall went Captain Z and her new chest. The chest was heavy, but not too heavy to be carried for a few minutes, which is all it would take her to get back down to her ship. Yes, it would only take a few minutes and she would be safely away to the island to find the treasure, while the rest of this silly crew is still fast asleep in their pajamas.

But while Captain Z was smiling to herself and thinking of how smart she was, she forgot to watch where she was going. She reached the steps to the deck but missed the first one. BAM! She tripped on that first step and the chest came crashing down, with her behind it.

All of a sudden all the snoring stopped. Instead, out of the bedrooms came a bunch of shouts of "Avast!" and "Arrrr" and "Who goes there?".

The frightened captain grabbed her stolen chest and flew out the door on to the main deck, slamming the door with a BANG!

5

Captain Z scrambled as fast as she could toward the front of the boat.

The back and forth of the waves and the jumbles of rope made her almost lose her balance again and again as she looked for a place to hide. She had to get out of sight before the pirates saw her and her stolen chest.

Towards the side of the boat she found a loose tarp covering a few crates and barrels. She ducked under the tarp and squeezed herself between two of the barrels. Then she held her breath.

Almost immediately, a slew of pirates burst out of the doorway and onto the main deck. Still sleepy and confused, they stumbled about looking back and forth for whatever could have caused all the ruckus that woke them up.

Peeking out of her hiding spot, Captain Z had to cover her mouth to stop herself from laughing out loud at the way those sleepy pirates were dressed.

They were wearing footie pajamas, like a little boy or girl might wear. The feet on their pj's made them slip and slide around on the deck even more with each wave. The pajamas were all blue, or green, or even pink! And on each pirate's head was a little sleeping cap with a long tail.

They looked more like baby dolls than terrible pirates!

The biggest looking baby of them all, the Dread Captain Spears, finally appeared on the deck too, in bright red pajamas. He had ran from his captain's cabin in the back of the ship and was still holding one of his many cuddly stuffed animals. It was a little monkey, one of his favorites.

Hissy, his cat, trotted along beside him.

6

Now, there are a pages and pages of stories I could tell of the terrible Captain Spears. Everyone and their grandmother knows the story of how Spears, in a rage, threw two of his own men overboard just for playing cards in his sight. When the were dragged back on board, still spitting and sputtering, Captain Spears just snarled and said “Ye can play when the workin’s done.”

Then there was the time he poked a hole in another pirates brand new hat, just because Spears thought the other pirate looked at him funny.

Or the time he captured ten dolphins and tied their tails together. Then he spent a whole day skiing behind them as they pulled him through the water, shouting “Look at me! King o’ the fishes! King o’ the sea!” Though I have to hope he knows dolphins aren’t fish at all, some times pirates aren’t the smartest when it comes to that sort of thing.

Of course this is to say nothing of Captain Spears’ evil red eye. Some people say its a magic eye, and can kill a man just from its stare. Others say that Spears was cursed by a mean witch, and the red eye is a sign of the curse. Others say that he can’t see a wink out of it at all, and that its just for show.

I can’t tell you who’s right and who’s wrong, concerning Captain Spears and his red eye. I can tell you that the eye seems to glow in the night, like a flame. And that the eye only adds to the fearfulness of Captain Spears.

For every terrible Captain Spears story, there’s a just as terrible story about Hissy, that cat that sails about with Spears, like one of his own pirate crew.

Its said that when Hissy catches mice, it makes them walk the plank and pushes them overboard one by one to watch them fall into the water.

Hissy also likes to grab seagulls out of the air as they circle the ship. It rips out all the feathers from the heads of these poor seagulls, and then lets them go. As such, the only seagulls that still fly around The Sea Breaker are bald.

The only person that can pet this mean old cat is Captain Spears himself. Anyone else who tries will get a scratch and a hiss.

Yes, there isn’t a more terrible pirate on these seven seas then the Dread Captain Spears. And there isn’t a more fearful cat aboard any ship on earth then Hissy.

And both of these villains were looking for Captain Zephyr.

7

Captain Spears' eyes darted back and forth and all around his boat, looking for something out of place. He had just woken up out of a wonderful dream, and hadn't cleared his head yet. He certainly hadn't thought to check the map room to find out if anything was missing.

When Captain Z saw Spears and his cat, she scooted back under the tarp as far as she could go. It would be an awful thing to be caught on board The Sea Breaker with something belonging to Captain Spears.

She had to escape, but how?

Suddenly, a great commotion broke out, and gave her a chance. One of those sleepy pirates had gotten himself all tangled up in some of the loose rope on the deck. While it was just rope wrapped around his legs and arms, this pirate thought it was the tentacle of a giant octopus - up from the depths to drag him into the sea!

"Oh Help! I'm done for! Tis a great Kraken come to swallow me whole!" The pirate shouted and threw his arms about. His pirate companions rushed over to help - but fearing such a beast could grab them too.

When they found this screaming pirate was battling nothing more than a piece of rope, they all broke out laughing at him (pirates are mean like that, always laughing at their mates).

"Pray, grab my hand to save you from this monster!" one of the other pirates called out. The tangled pirate grabbed for a hand, and all the others fell to the floor from laughing so hard.

With all this tomfoolery going on, now was the chance for Captain Z to escape unnoticed.

She crept out from under the tarp with the chest and headed for the side of the ship. Looking over the railing, she saw the little row boat that carried her here still where she left it down below.

As she turned back around to check that no one was watching her, she smacked face-to-face with that nastiest of cats, Hissy!

Hissy had jumped up on the railing next to her and stuck its face out to scare her. Hissy started up a terrible fit of hissing and meowing. This startled Captain Z such that she stepped backward, tripped over the railing, and went falling head first over the side of the boat.

8

Captain Z would be dead and drown, her stolen chest lost for certain, if it weren't for that great tangle of ropes aboard The Sea Breaker.

The same ropes that had nearly tripped her on the deck and had nearly allowed her to escape by tangling up that sleepy pirate, had now narrowly saved her life.

As she fell off the side of the ship, some of that rope had wrapped around her left foot. Now Captain Z was dangling by her leg. Twenty feet below where she started on the deck and upside-down. But hanging right above her own little row boat.

What luck!

But time stays still for no man, or woman, as it were. She had to move fast to take advantage of that lucky tangle.

Captain Z dropped her stolen chest into the row boat, which landed with a THUD. She reached up and unloosed the rope coil around her ankle. With this, she dropped down and hit the row boat with a THUD herself.

Sore, but with no bones broken, she put her oars in and started rowing fast.

She had just started to slip away when a few of the pirate crew poked their heads over the railing above to look down at whatever it was that had just fallen off their boat.

They shouted and waved their arms to bring over the rest of the crew.

Captain Z looked up just in time to see the Dread Captain Spears glaring down at her. His red eye blazing like a bright fire - stoked by his anger.

He stood there and scowled at her for a time, no doubt thinking and trying to figure out what to do next. Then he turned and started shouting commands at his crew. "Avast, ya sea dogs! To the aft, double time!" His crew all started running to the back of the ship, quickly disappearing from Captain Z's view.

Captain Z focused on her rowing.

The water was too shallow to allow that great giant of a boat, The Sea Breaker, to reach her. Instead, they would have to lower their own row boats if they wanted to chase her. And that is most certainly what Captain Spears wanted.

Captain Z cursed her luck and her clumsy feet for such a disastrous get away. Still, she had the chest, which meant she had the map.

She had the map, once she got the chest open, that is.

Smiling, Captain Z rowed straight for shore. There's more than one way to open a chest, she thought again, and she had the perfect sort of key to do just that.

9

Back on the deck of The Sea Breaker, Captain Spears and his men were running to their row boats, which were docked on the back of the ship.

Three steps in and two of them had tripped and fallen over even more ropes.

“Blast this darned rope!” Captain Spears yelled. “One of you sea pigs best be cleaning up this mess of a ship.”

“I’ll tend to it right this moment Captain,” one of the pirates replied. It was old Jon Thumb, always looking to make things right with the boss.

“Not now, ye meat head,” the captain said. “We’re after the intruder.”

The pirates had stopped running to help those that had fallen back on their feet. Sally Snake Eye stood there with a confused look on her face.

“But captain, why was our intruder... intruder?” She asked.

It was a good question. Captain Spears just stood there scratching his beard. His red eye now a pale purple hue. Truth be told, he didn’t know what Captain Zephyr had been doing on his ship. With all the commotion, he had forgotten to think.

But thinking now, he knew that her being there was certainly nothing but trouble for him. But what kind of trouble, exactly?

“Me thinks she be spying on us whilst we sleep,” Golden George offered as an answer.

“You always be thinking someones ah spying on you,” responded Captain Spears. “Ain’t no one wants to see your ugly face. Be it awake or sleeping.”

Golden George felt hurt and put on a sour face. *Plenty of people liked the look of me*, he thought. *Spears is just jealous.*

“Perhaps she was in the kitchen, stealing our grub,” another pirate suggested.

“Perhaps she be stealing our gold. Though she found that we ain’t got any, and left.”

“Mayhap she came to steal your cuddly toys.”

That last remark came from Barnacle Bill. He got an elbow and a shush from Sally Snake Eye. Any talk of Captain Spears’s stuffed animals always ended in nothing but shouting and kicking from Spears. His crew weren’t supposed to know about his embarrassing collection, though it wasn’t a secret to anyone.

Everyone looked at Captain Spears. He was getting mad alright, but not because of the mention of his cuddly animals. He was thinking about Captain Zephyr, and his eye went from purple to a bright hot red.

Sophia Zephyr was there to steal something, alright, he thought. But it wasn’t food, nor gold, nor his cuddly monkey. *The what?* The thought was almost in his head.

“The map!” He cried, turning around with a twirl. He shot out like a bullet toward the map room. His scoundrel crew followed along at his heels to see if he was right.

10

The map is safe, I've got the key. The map is safe, I've got the key. This is what Spears told himself as he hustled down the stairs towards the map room.

The only key to that chest that carried the map was indeed still around his neck. He could feel it swinging back and forth as he ran.

He burst into the map room. Looking at the corner where the chest should be, he let out a groan.

"She's grabbed the map, chest and all!"

None of the pirates had thought of that as a possibility.

"But Captain. It's still locked," Golden George said. He was most likely right, but no one would steal a chest without an idea about how you would open it. Captain Spears knew that much.

"Blast that Zephyr," Spears sputtered. "Let's get to rowing. We'll track her down on the island."

"In the dark?" Asked Barnacle Bill, looking a bit sheepish and scared.

"The dark matters not. What does matter is that map," Captain Spears replied. "Her with the map means none of the treasure for us, savvy?"

Captain Spears was thinking about the map, but he was also thinking of the other piece of paper in that stolen chest. That letter that he was certainly a fool to keep. A fool for reading it, but read it he had.

There was a chance she would never crack the code, leaving the plan unknown. Yes, there was that chance, but knowing that wily Captain Zephyr, it was a pretty small chance indeed.

Captain Spears needed that letter and that map before everything was ruined. He couldn't bear to think of the trouble he'd be in if it was found out he let it all get stolen. Just the idea sent shivers down his back.

11

The row boat skidded into the shallow water near the beach. Jumping out into the shallows, Captain Z pulled the little boat up on the shore. Her arms were tired and sore from all that rowing. She grabbed the chest from the boat and walked up the beach.

She made it to the first palm tree that was growing out on the beach, then she turned around and gave a little whistle and two clicks.

Out of the black sky swooped a big black bird. It cawed as it flew up to the palm tree. It perched in the tree and peered down at the chest in Captain Z's hands.

This was Muddle, the crow. Captain Z's friend and companion.

Some pirates have parrots. Others cats, or rats, or dogs. Captain Sophia Zephyr was partial to crows, and to Muddle in particular.

Captain Z had rescued the crow when it was just a baby. Blown out to sea and tossed among the waves, Captain Z had found the little Muddle in an empty bread basket. She raised her on fish, clams, and shrimp, and had taught it all manner of tricks and skills.

The name Muddle came from the crows bad luck. It just as often messed things up as make them better, but Captain Z loved her just the same.

And at this moment, Muddle was to be the key to opening that chest.

Captain Z dropped the chest on to the sandy ground. She called up to the crow. "Away to it Muddle. Crack that lock."

The big bird knew what those words meant. She flew down to the ground and hopped over to the chest. Cocking her head to one side, she looked up and down and all over this chest and its lock. Then she gave another caw.

Off Muddle went into the night. Flapping slow and low to the ground, around the trees near the beach. Here and there she stopped and picked something off the ground. When she returned, her beak was full of sticks that she dropped in front of the chest in a pile.

Some of the sticks were short, some long, some fat, and some skinny. Muddle eyed the lock on the chest again and then grabbed one of the shorter fatter sticks and went to work.

Up she flapped to perch on the top of the little chest, holding the stick in her beak. Then, she stuck the stick into the keyhole along with the tip of one of her claws.

In the dark, it was hard to see what was going on, but after a moment or two there was a soft click noise. Muddle had unlocked the chest.

12

Smiling, Captain Z brought out a piece of clam from her pocket. “Good work my pretty bird,” she said as she threw her the clam. Muddle flew up to perch on a palm tree to enjoy her treat.

Captain Z turned back to the chest. She lifted its lid up. The chest opened with a creak. Captain Z quickly looked up and down the beach to check for trouble, then brought her lantern in close.

Even for such a small chest, there wasn’t much inside it. Captain Z only saw the map, rolled up and tied with a bow. Seeing this bit of paper took her breath away. Finally she had a way to the treasure on this fabled island.

Carefully she picked the map up, untied it, and rolled it out on the sand.

In the low lantern light it was hard to make out the words, but that was Castle Island all right. The very island she was on now. The very island she had searched three years to find. The cliffs on the map were the same shape as the cliffs she could see, just barely, down the beach. Their jagged edges cutting across the paper and the dark sky.

The markings on the map showed a path that led up into those cliffs. A path where at the end, Captain Z would have her treasure.

Time to start the search, she thought to herself. Captain Z got up and dusted the sand from her knees. She was just about to start off toward the cliffs when Muddle gave a puzzled squawk from above.

Captain Z looked up at Muddle, then back down at the chest. There was something else inside.

Bringing the lantern up close again, she looked in and pulled out a small yellow envelope with a piece of paper inside.

She opened the envelope and unfolded the paper.

On it, was written a whole jumbled mess of letters. Captain Z couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Were these words? Did it say something? Where was the start? Where was the end?

And why would such a mess of letters be so important to Captain Spears that he would want it locked up?

Such questions, that didn’t concern the treasure on Castle Island were best held for another time. Captain Z folded the paper and put it back in the envelope. Then she put that envelope in a small pocket on the inside of her vest. That should keep it safe till there’s more time, she thought.

Right now, I need to find that path.

13

She blew out the flame in her lantern and headed up the beach toward the cliffs. Muddle followed, silently flying above.

The other pirates might be close now, so she needed to make sure to keep hidden and stay in the dark.

The cliffs loomed high above as she got closer. If you squinted, you could probably imagine why someone thought to name the place Castle Island. But to Captain Z, the cliffs looked more like the tallest fence in the world, covered with spikes and impossible to climb.

And yet, there was a way up. There had to be. A hidden path through those sharp rocks. She just had to find it, and that is why she needed that map. For at the end of that path was a treasure more wonderful than you could ever imagine.

Well, at least that was what Captain Z hoped for. What she had heard, and what she had told herself.

Truth be known, she didn't really know what was waiting at the end of that path to be found. In fact no one really knew the truth of the treasure of Castle Island.

14

Three years ago, almost to the day, Captain Z had first heard the tale of this mysterious island and its wondrous hidden treasure.

The storyteller had been another pirate, the friendly Sammy Two Toes. Sammy had told the story of the treasure so well that Captain Z knew she would have to try to find it.

Of course at that time, Captain Z was no captain, as she had no boat of her own to search with. But that didn't stop Sophia Zephyr from plotting and dreaming. All things change with the times and the tides, as they say.

And by the time Sophia Zephyr became Captain Z, she had heard the story of Castle Island a hundred times or more. And each time, it ended with a different surprise. A different name to the treasure to be found.

Some, like Sammy Two Toes, said it to be a huge diamond. As large as your fist, and as heavy as your head. Sammy had said it shone like a star in the sun.

But other folks had different ideas about what was hidden there. Some said gold or jewels. Others said magical bells, wands, or books. One old man even thought there to be a room full of the tastiest meats and pies ever to be found. Never mind how such a room could be kept stocked with such treats, or why this food would be on an island with no one on it.

Captain Z didn't know which of the stories to believe, but she believed Castle Island to hold something worth searching for. And that's why she kept on searching for a way to find this island and a way to find the treasure hidden here.

15

Captain Z was at the base of the cliffs, looking back and forth for a path. The cliffs were so steep at the bottom that no one would be able to climb them.

Though she looked all around, nothing looked like the start to a path to her.

Well, it wouldn't be a very good hiding spot if I would be able to find it so easily, she thought.

She ducked behind one of the many big rocks about and lit her lantern again to take a closer look at the map.

On the map, there was a little arrow that pointed at the base of the cliffs. Next to the arrow, three triangles were drawn. Under them were the words *Demon's Hand*.

Captain Z looked up again and walked further away from the beach. The trees and bushes here kept her lantern hidden.

She walked along the rocky steep side of the cliffs. It was slow going.

The bushes and trees blocked her way, making her go around. Large rocks and boulders were everywhere. More than a few times, the way was blocked by one of these big rocks and she had to backtrack to find another way around.

She was walking alongside one of these boulders when a root caught her foot and sent her sprawling to the ground.

She crawled to her knees and sat down. Her leg hurt now from the fall and her arms were sore from the rowing and scratched from the bushes and trees. She had the feeling of wanting to give up and row away. Maybe the treasure wasn't even here anymore. Maybe it was all just a made up story.

Sitting on the ground with these thoughts in her head, she finally looked up as the clouds parted for a few minutes to let the moon shine down. She saw something that made her heart skip a beat.

In fact it was three somethings. Three big rocks broke out of the ground, bent and pointed like claws. That was the spot on the map that she had been looking for.

She jumped up and ran as fast as she could in the dark to the three big stones.

At first, it didn't look like any path was around. But then she squeezed her head behind the claw closest to the cliffs and saw a crack in the rocks. You wouldn't see it if you didn't know where to look, but that was the start to the path to the treasure.

Captain Z squeezed her arms in past the rock and then pulled the rest of herself into the crack.

She could see the path heading up the cliffs, zig-zagging right up the side.

Captain Z started walking quickly up the path, excited to be so close now, but on the look out for more roots and more pirates.

16

Now we find Captain Z in the same spot in the story as where we started. Though now we know a great deal more about the where's and the whys of what she is doing.

Captain Spears and his men are rowing fast to reach the island and start the search for the thief pirate.

Captain Z is well on her way to finding out what secrets castle island really hold.

And now there is this mysterious note with its mysterious letters. It was belonging to Captain Spears. Now it is the pocket of Captain Zephyr. But as to what it says or who it's from, that we have no idea.

Will captain spears find our hero, captain z?

Will she find the treasure and escape somehow?

I don't know. All we can do is keep reading, and hope against hope that everything will turn out alright.

17

Captain Z was halfway up the monster of a hill by the time dawn started to break in the East. She was on the wrong side of the cliffs to see the water or the sun rising up from them, but a pink light started to glow around the cliffs.

Day light would make finding the treasure easier. It would make Captain Spears's job of finding her easier too. Captain Z pressed onward and upward.

The map showed the way to go at the fork in the path was left. Then it should curve back to the right before more zig-zagging up a steeper part near the top. Captain Z had already run into a few dead-ends and made some wrong turns. It is hard work to read a treasure map, especially in the dark. But she was determined not to quit now. She was close to that treasure, she knew it.

Captain Spears and his scoundrels were still nowhere to be seen. She figured they were close to the island now, perhaps even on shore. She hoped that there was not another way up the cliffs that wasn't shown on the map. It would be a terrible surprise to reach the X on the map and have Spears and his crew waiting there for her.

With the pink light over the hill above her, she picked up the pace and started to jog up the path. *Even if he is there waiting, she thought, I'll still be the one leaving this island with the treasure. Someway, somehow, I will be the one.*

The pirates tracked after her

19

At the top of the cliffs, Captain Z opened the map one last time. According to the map, there should be a hole up here. A hole that lead down into a little cave. And on the map, in that cave, the X was placed. The spot where the treasure was at. But this hole that lead to the cave was covered and hidden. Captain Z looked at the map to find out what landmark she should be looking for to uncover the hole.

The map showed a scrawny, spindly pine tree, next to a wide rock. Under that rock was the hole. She hoped that the tree was still alive and hadn't been knocked down by a storm. The winds could blow a gale out here in the ocean.

Captain Z scouted around along the top of the cliffs, being careful with her feet along the edge. Looking down, it was a long drop to the ocean below. One wrong step and... well she rather not ponder the result.

Finally, after almost an hour atop the cliffs looking for the tree and the rock, she found them. The tree was down at the bottom of a little hill, right at the edge of the cliffs. It looked just a scrawny and spindly as it was drawn on the map.

The wide rock next to it was covered with dirt, a bit of grass, and pine needles. She ran down to it and knelt to brush it off. Finding the edge of the rock, she bent down, put her fingers under it, and pulled with all her might.

Nothing happened. The rock didn't budge.

Undeterred, Captain Z carefully swept off every bit of dirt and debris on top of the rock. She used the stub of a stick to trace around the edge of the entire stone. Then she bent down, and pulled again.

Nothing happened. The rock still didn't budge.

Now frustrated, Captain Z found another rock. One that was heavy, but she could still lift. She dragged this rock over, got down on her knees, and smashed it down on the flat stone that wouldn't budge.

The stone covering the hole shattered, breaking into a dozen pieces. There was the hole underneath, dark, but big enough for a pirate to squeeze through. Captain Z pried out the smaller pieces of the rock, until the opening was cleared. Then, holding her breath, she jumped in.

20

The hole lead to a narrow passageway that ran along the edge of the cliffs. The rock had been carved away to make this tunnel that was just big enough to walk through with your back bent low. Dirt and sand covered the floor. Captain Z could see a light coming from the doorway at its far end.

At the same time, she thought she heard a voice above her. Someone shouting. Captain Spears was close. Somehow he and his crew had found the path up the cliffs. But the voice was faint, its owner still a ways away. Captain Z kept going. Crouching, she walked to the end of the passage, and the little cave it opened in to.

The cave was bright. A hole along the side of its far wall acted like a window. The window opened up to the cliff side, and the sun and sounds of the waves below and the gulls above were coming in to this little cave underground.

Captain Z looked around.

There in the corner of the cave nearest the door was a pile of rocks. Captain Z stepped over to it and quickly but carefully started pulling the rocks off the pile.

Six or seven rocks down, she saw it. A little leather bag.

Now treasure is is often kept in a chest. Sometimes, gold is found in big sacks. Sometimes, necklaces and rings can be found in a jewelry box. Captain Z had never heard of treasure found in a little leather bag.

Still, she reached for it just the same. *Perhaps its a message telling where the real treasure is hidden*, she thought. She tried to ignore the idea that someone before her had already grabbed the treasure, and this was what they left behind to brag.

The bag felt empty. And when she opened it at first she didn't see anything. Her heart sank. But then she stuck her hand in, rummaged around, and pulled out four feathers and a scrap of paper with a few words written on it.

She looked over the feathers. They were bright white, but otherwise quite ordinary. Then she read the words on the paper. It looked to be a poem.

Only one of true measure Can make use of this treasure

But on a person or stead worn These feathers make a hero born

Not from a bird or bat of course But from the only winged horse

The gods were right to bless The feathers of the Pegasus

Feathers?

Feathers were really the treasure of Castle Island?

Captain Z's heart sank. Certainly this was some trick. Some terribly unfunny joke. *A joke that cost me dearly*, she thought as she heard laughing and talking in the tunnel outside the cave.

Captain Spears and his crew had found her.

21

Not thinking, Captain Z shoved the feathers into one of the many pockets on her vest, out of habit.

It turns out that this thoughtless action was in fact a very good thought indeed, as we shall find out.

The pirates came into the cave. Smiling with mean smiles and waving their cutlasses about. With the leather bag in her hands, Captain Z backed up further and further till she was right in front of the little opening in the cave wall that looked out to the sea.

If she stayed in the cave, the treasure would be lost, and maybe worse. She decided to try her luck out of the cave. Perhaps there was a way down.

She turned to the little window and before any of the other pirates could grab her she was out on a ledge outside the cave. The wind was blowing a gale, and there was just a few spots in the rocks to hold on to.

Captain Z looked down to see the ocean crashing into the rocks below. Those rocks looked big and sharp, even from up there. One slip, and she was a goner. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea, she thought to herself.

She tried to shimmy away from the window to the cave, but didn't get far. The ledge stopped short a little ways past the hole. There didn't seem like there was anything other place to put her feet. She was stuck.

Captain Spears and Hissy ducked into the cave last after his crew. He saw Captain Zephyr's legs as she went through the hole.

His eyes went from cool confidence to wild panic, all in one second.

"She's escaping you fools! Grab her!" He shouted. The pirates closest to the hole looked out, but didn't move. They weren't eager about following Captain Z out the window. Instead, they just stood where they were looking back and forth between the fearful Captain Spears and the fearful cliff wall.

Captain Spears pushed past them. "Ya good-for-nothings," he muttered.

He himself pushed his head and shoulders through the hole to look out on to the other side.

22

There was Sophia Zephyr, stuck on the edge of the ledge, just out of reach. She was trying to find a way down the cliff side, but without any luck.

Captain Spears considered going out on the ledge himself to get the treasure bag. Then he looked down at the rocks below and thought better of the idea. Maybe he could talk her back inside.

"Tis over, lassie," he said with a smirk. "Give me the bag, and we'll get you back to solid ground."

"Walking the plank doesn't seem so solid to me," Captain Z shot back. Her arms were aching. She wouldn't be able to hold on much longer.

"On my mother's own watery grave," said Spears, trying hard to look honest, "not a hair on your pretty head need be harmed if you give up the booty now." Then he looked down with a grin. "Unlikely, I'd say, to get such a promise from those rocks down there though."

Captain Z didn't trust Spears one bit, but what other choice did she have? The game was up.

Slowly, Captain Z shuffled back toward the window to the cave.

Captain Spears stepped back and watched as she got closer, so as not to scare her. They could deal with her once the treasure was out of her hands and into his.

Outside the window, Captain Z tossed in the treasure bag that had caused all the trouble. The pirates were on the bag in a flash, pushing and pulling, each one wanting to be the first to see the treasure first. Not one of those scoundrels suspected the treasure to be elsewhere.

But Hissy knew something was amiss. As Captain Zephyr reached for the window to pull herself in, that meanest of cats ran up to her with a growl. It bit at Captain Z's vest pocket, pulling out one of the feathers she had hidden there.

Captain Z grabbed for the feather and snatched it out of Hissy's mouth. Her other hand slipped from the rock.

She didn't even have time to scream before fell backwards, down to the rocks and the sea below.

23

The captain's eyes were shut tight while she braced for the crash. She expected the end to be terrible.

But the end never came.

After what seemed like a long while, Captain Z bravely opened one eye, just a peak. Then she opened it a bit wider. Then both eyes. Then both eyes wide.

She wasn't falling down. She was floating down!

She drifted down the cliff side, the way a dandelion seed might dance on the breeze.

By the time she made it to the crashing waves and the rocks, her legs were beneath her. She touched down gently as you please, her feet resting on the top of a mossy rock.

Looking all around for an explanation, she saw none. She looked up high at the hole from which she fell. It looked tiny from down here. She looked down at the ocean and the waves rolling and crashing around her. Then she looked at the feather in her hand.

The feather?

She stared at it, unbelieving. She put it in her pocket. Immediately when she took her hand out, all her weight came back. Her body felt heavy and her legs felt weak. She stumbled onto another rock for better balance.

She looked up again to see if anyone was watching from the cliff hole. No pirate heads were sticking out to see her fall. Above the cliffs the gulls continued their calls and cries. Out of that mess of birds swooped Muddle. She coasted on the breezes above Captain Z's head. They were glad to see each other.

Captain Z picked her way among the rocks, making her way as fast as she could back toward the beach where her boat was hopefully still docked.

Those pirates up in the cave will no doubt be angry when they find the leather bag empty. If they thought her gone, then all the better for her. They wouldn't be chasing her now to reclaim the treasure. They would be looking for it between the rocks where she fell, which is to say the wrong place.

24

the pirates note the treasure is missing. and missy is to blame for captain z's death

25

Captain Z had been rowing for the last hour and was getting close to a tiny cove behind a jagged little mountain, on the south end of the island. The place she had hidden her boat, Wind Drinker.

Captain Spears and his crew hadn't seen the spot, as they came down from the North and stayed anchored in plain sight. They weren't looking for a place to hide, as they didn't expect to find anyone here.

Captain Z knew different. When she had sailed for Castle Island, she had come around wide during the night. The little cove was a lucky find, and the perfect spot for her boat. That giant of a vessel, The Sea Breaker, probably wouldn't have fit anyways.

Wind Drinker was different. Captain Z was actually the entire captain and crew of the whole ship. It was tricky, but with her riggings, and because of its size, the boat could be managed by a one person crew if need be. And that is how Captain Z had made it all the way to Castle Island by herself. Besides, most of the extra space was taken up by this row boat.

Captain Z rowed around the bend at the Southern tail of the island and was in the cove. The shade from the mountain felt good after all that rowing in the sun. Muddle cawed from above and landed on the ship's front mast.

There was a rope ladder and a hook waiting for her at the back of Wind Drinker. She fixed the hook on the front of the row boat, then used the ladder to get on deck.

On board, she started turning a crank that hoisted the row boat up out of the water and on to the back of the larger boat. It was a tight spot, but she knew it would all fit as it had in the past.

Next she prepared to launch.

Cranks clanked and spinners spun as all the sails of Wind Drinker were raised by one cunning pirate. The anchor was pulled and then before you could say "Jolly Rodger", the ship had set sail.

Captain Z was still confused and a bit sour about the treasure. Feathers weren't on the top of her list of valuable booty. She wanted gold, she wanted jewels. She wanted a diamond the size of your fist!

Still, floating down that cliff and making it to the bottom without a scratch must be worth something. She pulled out the poem and read it again, trying to figure out what it meant.

She had heard the name Pegasus, but didn't quite remember from where. How or why these feathers made anyone a hero was a mystery.

Also in her hands was the jumbled letter from Captain Spears's chest. This thing was valuable to Spears, perhaps it was worth something to her.

She wanted a second set of eyes to read these words, to see if more information could be squeezed out of them. And she knew just the person that was the best at squeezing out information.

Captain Z set course for the Port of Goodnews, the biggest town in the West Waters, and the home of her good friend, Dr. Nora Star.

26

Wind Drinker was docked in Port Goodnews that night. The harbor master was paid extra to keep his mouth shut about who was docked there that night, but Captain Z knew it hardly mattered. If someone wanted to find out she was there, it would happen. Getting out of town fast was a good idea anyways. Goodnews wasn't the kind of town she liked to stay in long.

She walked through the crowded streets, winding around familiar restaurants and stores until she made it to the quiet little alley known as Bug Street. Two blocks down and there was Dr. Star's little shop. The sign above it read "Star Light, Star Bright: Schools and Support".

It was well past closing time, but Captain Z knocked just the same. After a few minutes, she could hear someone walking up to the door.

"We're closed," Nora said behind the door, trying to sound sterner than she was.

"Well then open back up," Captain Z responded.

"Sofia, is that you?" Nora opened the door a crack to look through. Then she opened it all the way to give her friend a hug. The way time flies, it had been nearly a year since they had seen each other.

"I have some questions for you," Sofia Zephyr said, sorry she hadn't come just to say hello.

"I figured as much. Let's get inside," said Dr. Star.

The two walked into the boarding school and closed the door behind them.

Sophia Zephyr still knew her way around all the odd twists and turns to get to the main room. Although it had been a year since she last visited, Sophia had grown up inside this school. Memories from her childhood flooded back as she went along.

Orion and Nova were both reading by lamp light. When they saw Sophia in the doorway they sprang up to both give her hugs at the same time.

Little Lucy had fallen asleep on the floor. With all the commotion she woke up, but stayed on the rug rubbing her eyes. She was five now, but was only four the last time Sophia had come back to the school, so didn't really remember her much.

All the children had to hear stories of Captain Z's latest adventures. She told them of her run ins with Captain Spears and the hunt on Castle Island. She skipped talking about the feathers and the floating for now. She wanted to talk to Dr. Star about it first.

MORE TALKING

Captain Z re-read the feather poem to Dr. Star.

Only one of true measure Can make use of this treasure

But on a person or stead worn These feathers make a hero born

Not from a bird or bat of course But from the only winged horse

The gods were right to bless The feathers of the Pegasus

“So what does it mean?” She asked the doctor after she had finished. “What is a *Pegasus*?”

“Well, the Pegasus is a myth. A legend,” Dr. Star explained. The story goes that there once was a terrible monster, Medusa. She had snakes instead of hair and was so frightening to look at that anyone who did was turned to stone.”

“Sounds like a nice lady, wish I could have met her,” Captain Z joked.

Dr. Star continued. “Eventually, a hero comes and kills her. Cuts her head clean off. But out of Medusa’s body springs the Pegasus. This Pegasus is the fastest horse in the world. With the added benefit of having wings to fly. The Pegasus is in all sorts of stories where it helps heroes battle monsters, or fly to the gods, or other such fun.”

“Do any of these stories have pirates in them?” Captain Z asked.

Dr. Star laughed. “Not that I know or remember,” she said.

“Well how can it be that I have the feathers of a made up flying horse?”

“I don’t know,” Dr. Star responded.

“And why would they work for me?” Captain Z continued. “If the poem is to be trusted, only a hero would fly with these things.”

“What do you mean they worked for you?” Dr. Star was confused.

Sophia filled in the parts of the story of Castle Island that she had left out the first time she told it. How that mean cat Hissy caused her to fall. How instead of smashing onto the rocks, she held on to the feather as she floated down.

Dr. Star looked frowned a bit. “That’s unbelievable,” was her response.

“That’s ok,” Captain Z smiled. “I wouldn’t believe it myself. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

“Well then maybe you aren’t really a bad pirate after all,” Dr. Star smiled as well. “Perhaps there is a bit of hero in you.”

Captain Z now frowned. She had never heard of a hero pirate. Those words didn’t make much sense together in her ears.

“Well, one last question about this then,” Captain Z said. “Does steed just mean horse? If I had a pick-me-up pony, it would be floating too?”

Dr. Star thought for a bit. “That’s what the word steed usually means,” she said finally. “But maybe in the poem its saying just anything that you ride on. I don’t really know.”

“Who does?” Captain Z asked without expecting an answer. *If that were true*, she thought, *my steed would be Wind Drinker*. Now that was exciting. A flying ship would be a whole lot more useful then a flying horse, to a pirate.

29

It was now very late in the evening. Both women were very tired, it had been a long day.

“Let’s get some shuteye,” Dr. Star sighed. “We can tour the town tomorrow. See all the friendly faces.”

“Probably not many of them left,” Captain Z grumbled. Then she pulled out an envelope from her vest.

“Just one more thing,” she said. It was that paper with the jumbled letters on it she had found with the map.

“What do you make of this?” She asked the doctor.

Nova looked it up and down for a long time, holding it close to the lamp to see better.

“This looks like a code to me,” she answered finally. “A hidden message of some sort. I’ve heard of a way to hide a message that would look like this. First you switch all the letters around. A becomes P, B becomes T, and so on. Then you write your message with this new alphabet arrangement. Everybody who needs to read the real words knows which way the letters were swapped, so its easy for them. To everyone else, the words don’t make sense.”

“Could you read it?” Asked Captain Z hopefully. If Dr. Star could crack the code, then maybe it would point to more treasure.

“I’ve never been any good with words and puzzles like this,” Dr. Star said shaking her head. “It would take me weeks, and I might not get anywhere.”

Captain Z took the paper back and looked at it a bit longer.

She was pretty good with words, when she wanted to be. Maybe she had enough smarts to crack the code. But it would have to wait for a time when she wasn’t so dang tired.

The night ended with a hug. Captain Z found a cozy couch and a warm blanket and was soon deep asleep. Snoring, and dreaming of treasure.

30

CHARACTER BUILDING WITH KIDS AND TOWN FOLK. PERHAPS MORE FLOATING.

31

Captain Z woke up in a sweat, breathing heavy from a terrible nightmare.

In it, Captain Spears had pushed her off the cliffs himself. His bright red eye followed her down over the edge. She fell backwards, on and on through the darkness.

It was still dark outside. Everyone in the school was still asleep.

Captain Z rubbed her eyes and lit a lamp to clear her head.

Fiddling with her pockets, she happened to bring out the envelope with the secret message in it. She opened it up and looked at the jumbled letters again.

No time like the present, she thought. That bad dream made her not want to try to sleep again right away. Besides, she was typically an early riser. She found some paper and a quill and ink to help her with the code. First she wrote out the code on her own paper, leaving plenty of room below each line.

PAU JLS OUIMTQ

ZSMELC LP ELJT

L OLE ELC ZRS

XRSP IRRETUJQ

L IRRE ELC ZRS

VLXPLMTQ LTE XMSLPUQ

Those one-letter words are probably either the word "A" or the word "I", she thought. Needing to make some sort of guess to get things started, she guessed "A". She filled in the guess under the letters

PAU JLS OUIMTQ

A

ZSMELC LP ELJT

A A A

L OLE ELC ZRS

A A A

XRSP IRRETUJQ

L IRRE ELC ZRS

A A

VLXPLMTQ LTE XMSLPUQ
A A A

That's a lot of a's in this message, she thought. Still it was good to have a start, even if it turned out wrong. And this start lead to another guess. What's a two-letter word that starts with "A"? Captain Z pondered. Well, how about "AT"? It seemed logical, so she wrote in all the T's

PAU JLS OUIMTQ
T A

ZSMELC LP ELJT
 A AT A

L OLE ELC ZRS
A A A

XRSP IRRETUJQ
 T
L IRRE ELC ZRS
A A

VLXPLMTQ LTE XMSLPUQ
A T A AT

It was a start, but it didn't help much.

CONTINUE CODE CRACKING

32

Captain Z starred at the decoded message, trying to grasp its full meaning.

A war? A battle, with pirates? That couldn't be right. She must of made a mistake.

The Port of Goodnews was one of the most guarded cities in all the Western Waters. It was small, compared to some of the Eastern cities, but had more guards and galleys even then many of them. Certainly no pirate would be dumb enough to attack the city outright.

Still, the message filled Captain Z with dread. It was now Friday morning. In an hour or so, the sun would begin to rise on a new day.

She listened for any strange sounds outside. If pirates were planning an attack, they would have been spotted by now. Guards would be running to their stations. Alarms would be going off. Captain Z listened, but heard none of that kind of commotion. Everything outside was quiet and peaceful, as you would expect from such an early hour.

To appease her own worry, the captain decided just to make sure there was nothing strange going on. She needed to get a good look at the harbor from above.

She crept out of the school and up the alley. She turned the corner and started up the bumpy hill to Lookout Point. Street after street, she looked down as she jogged past and saw nothing but dark homes. A few times she turned around to try to see the harbor, but trees and smaller hills blocked the view.

The sky was starting to light up just a bit when she found the path to the viewing spot. She ran down the path and onto the lookout's little platform. There she could see all the harbor at once.

What she saw took her breath away.

There wasn't just one ship out in the water, so early in the morning. There was an entire fleet of ships, and they were all flying the black flag of the Jolly Rodger. Pirates had come into the port.

Most were floating out in the open waters, in a loose formation. A few were docking near the center of town. From where she stood, high up on the hill, Captain Z could barely make out pirate crews coming off these docked ships. They were coming into the city, and looked to be carrying swords, knives, and guns with them.

Worse still, the towns guard and its fleet where no where to be seen. Something bad must have happened. A force like that would not simply sleep through such an invasion.

Captain Z could just make out Wind Drinker in the dark. It sat where she had docked, on the far end of of the harbor. From what she could see, none of the other pirates had tied up over there. At least not yet.

She couldn't tell if Muddle was still on the ship or not.

Captain Z started running as fast as she could back down the hill. She had to warn Dr. Star. And after that, she had to escape from Port Goodnews before the pirates started attacking. She was in no mood for a battle, especially one so unevenly stacked against her.