

Captain Z and the Treasure of Castle Island

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To my wife, daughter, and son.
You are my sun, my star, and my world.

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 glow of the stars and moon up above helped a bit, but it's always darkest, as they say, just before the dawn.

The lamp shined its light on a little dirt path that ran between the rocks. The path wound its way up through the steep cliffs of a forlorn and bare little isle. The cliffs,

the rocks, the path, and some palm trees were the only things to be seen on this island. But it also had something unexpected hiding on it. Treasure!

It was because of this treasure that our pirate friend was on this little island in the dark. Though “friend” might not be the word to use for such a character 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 cheek, ending at 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. A treasure rare as anyone had 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 simply *Captain Z*.

But 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.

2

Captain Z stopped for a bit to rest on one of the large rocks along the steep path. She checked the map again, making sure she was still on the right path, then continued to trudge up the mountain.

The map in her hand was a treasure map of the very island she was on. Pirates and fisher folk alike called this place *Castle Island*.

The path she was taking ended at an X on the map, and as you may know, an X always marks the spot. And at this particular spot was the treasure that Captain Z was hoping to find, and escape with, before she was discovered.

You see, Captain Z was not the only pirate creeping

about on this island in the dark night.

The Dread Captain Spears and his crew of scoundrel pirates were searching and scouting the island as well. Except, they didn't have a treasure map, as Captain Z had stolen it from them. So they were not searching for the treasure. Instead, they were searching for her!

3

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

The Dread Captain Spears was on his ship, the Sea Breaker, with the treasure map all locked up, safe and sound. At least, he thought it was safe.

But he probably would have thought differently 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's 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 rowboat slowly and quietly stole its way toward their mighty pirate ship.

Captain Z was in that little rowboat, along with a hook and rope, her lamp, and her feathered hat.

As the sky darkened into night, Captain Z pushed right up to the side of the big pirate ship. Swinging her hook around, she threw it up and snagged the railing of the ship. Quick as a wink, and quiet as a mouse, Captain Z climbed up and was on the top deck.

She tiptoed across the deck, toward the door leading below. Carefully, she skipped over squeaky planks and big heaps of tangled of rope.

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

4

What a commotion those pirates made while they were sleeping!

The snoring was so loud that it sounded like a thunderstorm down there.

Captain Z crept past the loud bedrooms and shuffled into the cluttered map room. Maps were everywhere.

They hung on every inch of the walls. They covered the tables and were scattered on the floor. Rolled up maps stuck out of vases and pots and pans. But none of these maps was the one that Captain Z was looking for.

Over in the corner of the room lay a small wooden chest, no bigger than a crab trap. In that chest, Sophia knew, was the map she wanted. The map that showed the way to the treasure of Castle Island.

The chest was locked. Such an important map would be well watched. Captain Z knew that the only key to the chest was strung around Captain Spears's neck. But there's more than one way to steal a map, and luckily for Captain Z, some pirates never think about these other ways.

But she did.

Instead of trying to unlock the chest to get the map, Captain Z simply grabbed the chest in her arms, with the map still inside, and carried it out of the room.

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 to get it off the ship. *Yes, Captain Z thought, in a few seconds I'll be off to the island to find the treasure, while this 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 and the chest came crashing down, with her behind it.

All of a sudden the snoring stopped. Out of the bedrooms came shouts.

“Avast! Who goes there?”

The frightened captain grabbed her stolen chest and flew out of the door and on to the main deck, slamming the door behind her.

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 nearly made her loose her balance as she looked for a place to hide. She had to get out of sight before the pirates found her with their 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 had woken them.

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

They were wearing footie pajamas, like children! The feet on their pj's made them slip and slide around on the deck. The pajamas were blue, or green, or pink. And on each of their heads was a little sleeping cap with a long tail.

They looked more like baby dolls than terrible pirates!

The biggest 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 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. When they 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. Sometimes pirates aren’t the smartest when it comes to that sort of thing.

Of course this is to say nothing of Captain Spears’s evil red eye.

Some people said it was a magic eye, and could kill a man with only a glance. Others said that Spears was cursed by a witch, and the eye was markings of that spell. Others said that he couldn’t see a wink out of it at all, a blindness caused by a run in with a poisonous jellyfish when he was just a child.

No one knew who was right or wrong about Captain Spears and his eye. But it did seem to glow in the night, like the flame from a candle. And at times it changed color, from red to yellow, or even blue.

The eye only added to the fearfulness other pirates felt when they spoke of Captain Spears.

For every terrible Captain Spears story, there’s a just as

terrible a story about Hissy, the cat that sailed about with Spears, like one of his own pirate crew.

It was said that when Hissy caught mice, it made them walk the plank and then pushed them overboard one by one to watch them fall into the water.

Hissy also liked to grab seagulls out of the air as they circled the ship. It would rip out all the feathers from the heads of these poor birds, and let them go. As such, the only seagulls that still flew around the Sea Breaker were completely bald.

The only person that could pet the mean old cat was Captain Spears himself. Anyone else who tried would get a scratch and a hiss.

There wasn't a more terrible pirate on the seven seas than the Dread Captain Spears. And there wasn't a more frightful cat aboard any ship on earth than Hissy.

And both of these villains, as well as a whole crew of scoundrels, were now looking for Captain Sophia Zephyr.

7

Captain Spears's good eye darted back and forth and all around the boat looking for something out of place. He had just woken up out of a wonderful dream, and

his head was still muddled and confused. He hadn't yet 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? She had to try to get to her little row boat before Spears found her.

Suddenly, a great commotion broke out. One of the sleepy pirates had slipped and gotten all tangled up in some of the loose ropes on the deck. While it was just rope wrapped around his legs and arms, in the dark this pirate thought it was the tentacle of a giant octopus that had come 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 flailed his free arm about. His pirate companions were slow to help, fearing such a beast could grab them and pull them under as well.

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

"Pray, grab my hand and I'll save you from the mon-

ster!" 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 rowboat that carried her here still where she had tied it.

As she turned back around to check that no one was watching her, she met 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. The cat 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 allowed her to escape by tangling up the sleepy pirate, had now narrowly saved her life.

As she fell off the side of the ship, some of the rope wrapped around her left foot. Now Captain Z was dangling upside-down by her leg twenty feet below where she started on the deck, but hanging right above her own little rowboat.

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 rowboat, which landed with a bang. She reached up and unloosed the rope coil around her ankle. Then, she dropped down and hit the rowboat with a thud herself.

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

A few of the pirate crew poked their heads over the railing 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 Cap-

tain 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 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, and disappeared 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 rowboats if they wanted to chase.

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 I have just the key to open this one.*

9

Back on the deck of the Sea Breaker, Captain Spears and his men were racing to their rowboats, which were docked on the tail end 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 toward the boats 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... uh, intruden?” 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 ask.

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 wanting to spy 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. But she found that we ain’t got any gold, and left.”

“Mayhap she came to steal your cuddly toys.”

That last remark came from Barnacle Bill. He got an elbow in his ribs and a shush in his ear from Sally Snake Eye. Talk of Captain Spears’s stuffed animals never ended well. 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. Luckily for Bill though, it was 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.

Zephyr was there to steal something, alright, he thought. But it wasn't food, nor gold, nor his cuddly monkey. But 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.

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 the chest where the map was stored was still wrapped 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!" He shouted.

"But Captain. Its still locked," Golden George said. He was most likely right, but no one would steal a

chest without an idea of how to 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 matters is the treasure,” Captain Spears replied. “She has the map which means no treasure for us unless we get it back, savvy?”

Captain Spears was also thinking of the other piece of paper in that stolen chest. The message. He was certainly a fool to keep that letter. A fool to even open it up and read it. But read it he had.

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

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

11

The rowboat 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 dragged it 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 have 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.

But the name Muddle came from the crows penchant for bad luck. It just as often messed things up as made them better. Captain Z loved her just the same.

And at this moment, Muddle was the key Sophia needed. She was the one who could open the chest.

Captain Z left the chest on the sandy beach. 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 and then the other, she looked up and down and all over the chest. Then she gave another caw.

Off Muddle went into the night. Flapping slow and low to the ground, flying around the trees near the beach. Here and there she stopped and picked up something off the ground. When she returned, her beak was

full of sticks that she dropped in front of the chest.

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. 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 and threw her the meat. Muddle flew up to perch on a palm tree to enjoy her treat.

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

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 kept 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 of her lamp 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 Cap-

tain 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 the 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 alive 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 the mysterious island and its wondrous hidden treasure.

The storyteller had been another pirate, the friendly Sammy Two Toes. Sammy had told such a tale that Captain Z knew she would have to find the treasure someday.

At that time, Captain Z was no captain at all, as she had

no boat of her own. She was just one of the crew of the Wind Drinker, charged with swabbing the deck and polishing brass. But that didn't stop Sophia Zephyr from dreaming and plotting. All things change with the times and the tides, as they say.

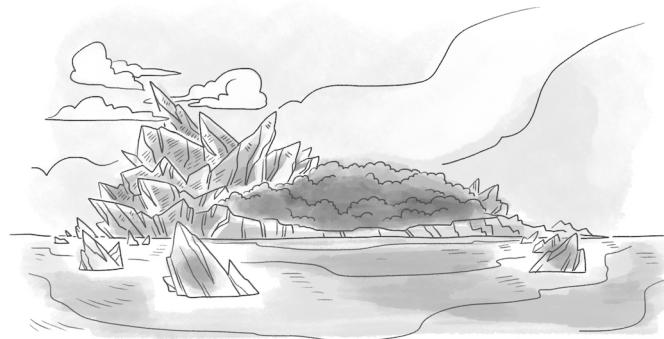
By and by, Sophia Zephyr became Captain Z and took control of Wind Drinker. But this is a tale for another time. By then, she had heard the story of Castle Island a hundred times or more. And each time, it ended with a different surprise. A different guess at the treasure to be found.

Some, like Sammy Two Toes, said it was a huge diamond. As large as your fist, and as heavy as your head. Sammy had said it shone brighter than 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 to eat it.

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

15



Now Sophia had finally found the island, and was close to finding the treasure. But she had to move fast, else all might be lost.

Captain Z was at the base of the cliffs, looking back and forth in the dark 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, she could see nothing that resembled the start of a path.

Well, it wouldn't have been lost for so long if it could be found so easily, she thought.

She ducked behind one of the many big rocks about, and lit her lamp 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. She hoped the trees and bushes here kept her lamp hidden from watching eyes along the shore.

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

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.

Walking alongside one of these boulders, 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 still sore from the rowing and scratched from the bushes and trees. She had the feeling of wanting to just give up and row away. Maybe the treasure wasn't even here anymore. Maybe the whole story was made up.

Sitting on the ground with these thoughts in her head, she finally looked up to see what was around her. The moon shone down to light the cliff walls. Something there 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. Here was the spot on the map that she had been looking for!

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

At first, it didn't look like any path started here. The cliffs were just as high as anywhere else. But when she squeezed her head behind the claw closest to the cliffs she saw a crack in the rocks. You wouldn't see it if you didn't know where to look, but there it was, a path up the cliffs.

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 up through the rocks.

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

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 and the why of what she is doing.

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

Captain Z is well on her way to finding out what secrets Castle Island really hold.

And now there is also this mysterious note with its jumble of letters. It belonged to Captain Spears. Now it is in the pocket of Captain Zephyr. But as to what it says, or who it is from, we have no idea.

Will Captain Spears find our hero, Captain Z?

Will Captain Z find the treasure and escape?

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 giant of a hill when dawn started to break in the Eastern sky. 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.

Daylight would make finding the treasure easier. It would make Captain Spears's job of finding her easier as well. Captain Z pressed onward and upward.

At a fork in the path, the map showed that left was the direction to take, then the trail should curve back to the right, before more zig-zagging up a steeper part near the top. Captain Z had already run into more than a few dead-ends and wrong turns. It's hard work to read a treasure map, especially in the dark. But she was determined not to quit. She was too close to the treasure now.

Captain Spears and his scoundrels were still nowhere to be seen. She figured they should be on the island by now. 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.*

18

Captain Spears peered out into the night as his men rowed them toward the shore. *At least this eye is good for something*, he thought, looking out into the dark. Though it was night time, to Spears, everything was

brightened through his glowing eye. The world looked as if the sun was still up, but hidden behind a cloud.

The eye also allowed him to see things that were far away as if they were closer, like a spy glass. Captain Spears scanned the island off in the distance, looking for signs of Captain Z. There on the beach, he could see her empty rowboat on the sand. That meant she had already made it on the island and was looking for the treasure.

His eye followed the beach up toward the cliffs at the North end of the island. He looked for her there among the rocks and trees, but saw nothing.

Then, high above the cliffs, Spears's red eye caught sight of a big black bird floating lazily on the updrafts. *That could only be Zephyr's crow*, he thought. *That thing always gives her away.*

"We'll land up there," he said to his men while pointing. The spot was up the beach, close to the cliffs.

They made it to shore and pulled their rowboats up on the sand. Then they set off creeping along the coast, heading for the cliffs.

Captain Spears was leading the group. That red eye of his guiding him through the dark. The eye brought the ground closer, as if he were down there on his hands and knees with his nose to the sand like a bloodhound.

Spears could see the little scuffs in the sand made by the footsteps of Captain Zephyr as she walked the beach not more than an hour ago. A normal eye would miss those marks. But the red eye saw this, as it saw a great many other things. Captain Spears tracked Sophia up the beach and around the cliffs. His men followed.

They reached the three jagged rocks, and Spears knew they were close. He had looked at the map for a bit while he had it back on his ship. He remembered the drawings of the rocks and where the path was supposed to be.

The scoundrel pirates followed their captain down to the claw's furthest finger. They were amazed when he showed them the secret path behind it.

"This way, ya mutts," he growled as he smiled. "She'll be leading us to the treasure, by and by."

19

At the top of the cliffs, Captain Z opened the map again. It showed a hole among the rocks. A hole that led down into a little cave. And in that cave, the X was marked, the spot where the treasure lay. But this hole leading to the cave was covered and hidden.

The map showed a scrawny, spindly pine tree, next to

a wide rock. Under that rock was supposed to be 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 think about what would happen.

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 as 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 to it and knelt down to brush it off. Finding the edge of the rock, she 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 a short 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 a bit frustrated, Captain Z found another rock.

One that was heavy, but that she could lift. She dragged this rock over, got down on her knees, raised it up and smashed it down on the flat stone.

It shattered, breaking into a dozen pieces. There was the hole underneath, dark and narrow, 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 led to a narrow passageway that ran along the edge of the cliffs. The rock had been carved away to make a tunnel 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 the far end.

As she walked through the tunnel, 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 far away. Captain Z kept going. Crouching, she walked to the end of the passage, and into a little cave.

The cave was bright. Another hole along the side of the far wall acted like a window. The window opened

up to the cliff side, and the sun and the sounds of the waves below and the gulls above were coming in.

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.

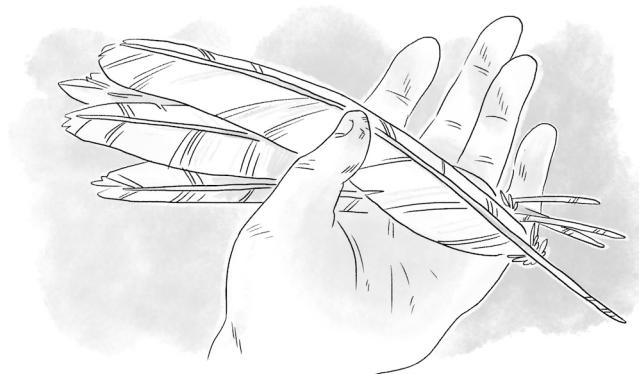
Six or seven rocks down, she saw it. A little leather bag.

Now treasure is 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 a 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 could have already grabbed the treasure, and this was just what they had left behind.

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.

She looked over the feathers. They were bright white, but otherwise quite ordinary. About the size of crow feathers, perhaps just a bit bigger. She didn't recognize the bird they had come from, but they didn't seem particularly interesting.



She looked at the paper. There were words on it that looked to be a poem.

*Only one of true measure,
can make use of this treasure.*

*But on a person or steed worn,
these feathers make a hero born.*

*Not from a bird or bat of course,
but from the only winged horse.*

*The gods were surely right to bless,
the feathers of the Pegasus.*

Feathers?

Feathers were the treasure of Castle Island? Certainly this was some trick. Some terribly unfunny joke.

The sounds of laughing and talking in the tunnel outside the cave made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

A joke that isn't very funny, she thought as she looked for a place to hide.

She didn't have more time to curse the feathers or even think about them anymore.

Captain Spears and his crew had found her.

21

Haphazardly and out of habit, Captain Z shoved the feathers into one of the many pockets on her vest.

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 cruel 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 through it and out on a ledge outside the cave. The wind was blowing hard and there were 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 high up where she was. 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 to be any other place to put her feet. She was stuck.

Captain Spears and Hissy ducked into the cave last after his crew finished coming through. 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. They just stood where they were, looking back and forth between the frightful Captain Spears and the terrifying 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 holding on to a little leather bag and trying to find a way down the cliff side, without much 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, Zephyr,” he said with a smirk. “Give me the bag, and we’ll get you back on 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 treasure now.” Then he looked down with a grin. “Unlikely, I’d say, you’d

get such a promise from those rocks down there.”

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. He would deal with her once the treasure was out of her hands and into his.

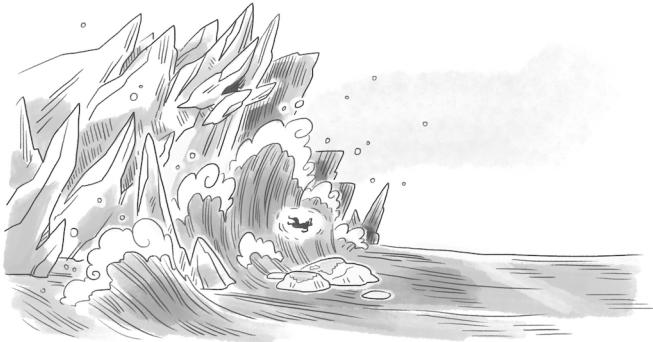
From outside the window, Captain Z tossed the treasure bag that had caused all the trouble back in to the cave. The pirates immediately all jumped on it, pushing and pulling, each one wanting to be the first to see the treasure. Not one of those scoundrels suspected the treasure, useless as it looked, happened not to be in the bag.

But Hissy knew something wasn’t right. As Captain Zephyr reached for the window to pull herself in, that meanest of cats ran up to her with a growl. It bit into Captain Z’s vest pocket, pulling out one of the feathers she had hidden there.

Captain Z grabbed for the feather, snatching it out of Hissy’s mouth. But as she did, her other hand slipped from the rock.

She didn’t even have time to scream as she 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 forever, 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, her feet resting on the top of a mossy rock.

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

A 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 and reached out to balance herself.

She looked up again to see if anyone was watching from the hole in the cliff. No pirate heads were sticking out to see her fall. Above the cliffs the gulls continued their calls. 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, moving as fast as she could back toward the beach where her boat was hopefully still waiting.

Those pirates up in the cave will no doubt be angry when they find that leather bag empty, she thought. If they thought her gone, then all the better. That way, they wouldn't be chasing her now to take the real treasure.

24

Up in the little cave on the side of the cliff, the pirates were still fighting over who would open the satchel.

In fact, it was such a fight that no one but Hissy and Barnacle Bill had noticed Captain Z's fall.

Bill had stayed out of the fight over the bag, as he didn't want to get hurt in the scuffle. He was on the other side of the cave, near the doorway when he saw Hissy try for the feather and watched in horror as Captain Z had slipped and disappeared from view.

In fact, it was such a terrible sight that he hadn't been able to utter a word since it happened. He just stood there with his mouth open wide, and his eyes opened wider, as the others continued to fight.

Golden George had grabbed the bag away from Smelly Ned, who had pushed poor old Jon Thumb down to get it. But now they were all wrestling on the floor again.

"Enough ya sea rats," their captain bellowed. "Hand me the booty."

That was the end of the fight. Golden George reluctantly held out the bag for Captain Spears to take.

"Well it ain't foods," said old Jon Thumb, with a hint

of sadness. He and Cinnamon the cook had spun tales of the meals they would eat here on the island.

“Is it gold?” Asked Golden George.

“Nay,” said Spears with a frown. “Not heavy enough a sack,” he said, raising the bag up and down.

“Looks small,” said Sally Snake Eye.

It does, thought Captain Spears. The thought that they had been bamboozled crept into the back of his mind. Quickly, he opened the bag and looked in with his good eye.

He stood there peering into the bag for a full minute. He didn’t believe what he saw.

“Well, captain,” Sally Snake Eye finally spoke up. “What’s in the bag?”

Captain Spears turned the bag upside down. Only a bit of dust fell out and floated to the ground.

All eyes turned to the little hole that Captain Z had gone through. Now it dawned on them that she hadn’t come back through it.

Spears ran to the hole and stuck his head through. He looked back and forth along the cliffs and saw nothing but stone.

He pulled his head back in and looked around at his

crew.

“Where did she get off to?” he said in a low voice. Not really a question to the crew, but this was the cue for Barnacle Bill to finally speak up.

“H-H-Hissy!” He stammered.

“Hissy what?” Spears said, glancing at the cat. She was near the window cleaning her paws, as if nothing at all had happened.

“Hissy pushed her out!” Bill responded. His wide eyes locked onto the cat as he pointed. “Down down down,” he said sadly and trailed off.

Captain Spears pushed his head through the hole again and looked down to the crashing waves below. He peered with his red eye hoping to see some sign of Zephyr in the ocean froth. Much as he hoped, he saw nothing.

He pulled back and swatted at the mean cat with his hat. She ran a few feet, hissing, then stopped again to clean another paw. Spears turned back to his crew with his eyes down to the ground.

“Escaped?” Asked Smelly Ned. Perhaps she had caught hold of another part of the cliff and made her way down.

Captain Spears shook his head no.

“I fear she took the long fall,” he said.

Even though she had stolen the map and the treasure from them, the whole crew was more sad than mad as they walked slowly down the trail.

It’s a sad thing to loose a pirate.

They had looked through the rest of the rock pile and all through the cave for where the treasure might be hiding. Nothing but more dust was found.

They would search the rocks below the cliffs for the treasure for the rest of the day. But, of course, they would find nothing.

Meanwhile Captain Z was on her way to getting off the empty bit of land known as Castle Island.

25

Captain Z had been rowing for an hour and was getting close to a tiny cove behind a jagged little mountain, on the south end of the island. This was 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 had stayed anchored in plain sight. They weren’t looking for a place to hide, as they didn’t expect to find anyone here.

But Captain Z had done things differently. 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 monster of a boat, Captain Spears's Sea Breaker, probably wouldn't have fit anyway.



Wind Drinker was different. Captain Z was the entire captain and crew of the whole ship. It was tricky, but with her custom riggings, cranks, and cables, the boat could be managed by a crew of one. Captain Z had made it all the way to Castle Island by herself.

Captain Z rowed around the bend at the southern tail of the island and slipped into the little cove. Wind Drinker was there waiting for her. Muddle cawed from above and landed on the ship's mast.

There was a ladder and a hook attached to a rope on the back end of the ship. Captain Z fixed the hook on the front of the rowboat, then used the ladder to get on deck.

She turned a crank that pulled in the rope and hoisted the rowboat up out of the water and on to the back of the ship. It was a tight spot, but she knew it would all fit as it had before.

Cranks clanked and spinners spun as Captain Z prepared to launch. All the sails of Wind Drinker were raised by the cunning pirate. The anchor was pulled and then, before you could say "Jolly Roger", 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 her 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, but only getting more confused.

She had heard the name Pegasus, but didn't remember from where. And she didn't understand how these feathers might help make heroes.

Also, in her hand was the jumbled letter from Captain Spears's chest. This thing was valuable to Spears, else he wouldn't have locked it up. Perhaps it was worth something to her as well.

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 who was best at squeezing out information.

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

26

The fast sails of Wind Drinker brought Captain Z to the Port of Goodnews as night fell on the city.

The harbor master was paid extra to keep his mouth shut about the ship, but Captain Z knew it hardly mattered. If someone wanted to find out she was there, it would happen. She needed to be gone soon anyways. Since she had turned to pirating, 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 Incident Avenue. Two blocks down and there was Dr. Star's home and workplace. The sign above it read *Star Light, Star Bright: Schooling and Support for Children in Need*.

It was well past visiting hours, but Captain Z knocked just the same. After a few minutes, she could hear someone behind the door.

“We’re closed,” a voice shouted. Captain Z could tell it was Nora, trying to sound sterner than she was.

“Well, then you better open back up,” Captain Z shouted back.

“Sofia, is that you?” Nora opened the door a crack to look through. Then she opened it all the way and ran out to give her friend a hug. It had been nearly a year since they had last seen each other.

“I have some questions for you,” Sofia Zephyr said, looking a bit sorry that she hadn’t come just to visit.

“I figured as much. Let’s get inside,” said Dr. Star.

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

27

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, it was still all very familiar. As a child, Sophia had grown up inside this school.

Orion and Nova were both reading by lamp light. When they saw Captain Z in the doorway they both sprang up to give her a hug.

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 and had joined the school a year ago after being rescued by Dr. Star.

Because she was so young when Captain Z had visited last, Lucy didn't recognize the pirate, and she didn't trust anyone she didn't know.

Nova and Orion wanted to hear stories of Captain Z's latest pirate adventures. So Sophia told them of her run-ins with Captain Spears and the hunt for treasure on Castle Island. She skipped over talking about the feathers and the falling from the cliffs for now. She wanted to talk to Dr. Star about that first.

Soon, Lucy was in Captain Z's lap listening with rapt attention. Just like that, Sophia and Lucy became fast

friends again. Like Sophia, Lucy had a bit of a wild streak and a love for excitement and danger.

As Sophia finished talking, Lucy was so tired that she was carried off to bed by Dr. Star. Captain Z got a few more hugs from the other two children. Then, Nova put her arm around her younger brother Orion and the two walked back to their room to collapse into their soft beds, under warm blankets.

But the night was still early for Dr. Star and Captain Z.

“I’ve got something I want to talk to you about,” Sophia said to her old mentor.

“I’m all ears,” Dr. Star responded.

28

Captain Z showed the feathers to Dr. Star and read her the poem.

*Only one of true measure,
can make use of this treasure.*

*But on a person or steed worn,
these feathers make a hero born.*

*Not from a bird or bat of course,
but from the only winged horse.*

*The gods were surely right to bless,
the feathers of the Pegasus.*

“So what does it mean?” Captain Z 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 that anyone who looked at her 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 winged horse Pegasus. This Pegasus is the fastest horse in the world, with the added benefit of being able 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 remember,” she said.

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

“I don’t know,” Dr. Star responded. “It sounds like just a joke to me.”

“But that’s the crazy part. They actually work,” Captain Z confessed.

“What do you mean by that?” Dr. Star asked.

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 had held on to the feather and floated down.

Dr. Star frowned. “That’s unbelievable.”

“You’re right,” Captain Z said as she smiled. “I don’t believe it myself. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

“But if the poem is right,” she continued, “then only a hero would be able to fly with these things.”

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

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

“One last question about this,” Captain Z said. “Does steed just mean horse? If I had a little pony to ride, it would be floating too?”

Dr. Star thought for a bit. “That’s what the word steed usually means,” she said finally. “But it could be that the poem is saying it that way just to rhyme. Perhaps anything ridden could count as a steed. I can’t say for sure.”

If that were true, Captain Z thought, *my steed would be Wind Drinker.* That was an exciting thought. A flying ship would be a whole lot more useful than a flying horse to a pirate.

29

Both women were very tired, it had been a long day. Dr. Star yawned and started to get out of her chair to go to bed.

“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.

Nora 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.”

Dr. Star paused a moment to yawn. Then she continued.

“Anyone who needs to read the real words knows which way the letters were swapped, so its easy for them. To everybody else, the letters don’t make sense.”

“Could *you* make sense of it?” Asked Captain Z hopefully. If Dr. Star could crack the code, then maybe it would lead 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.”

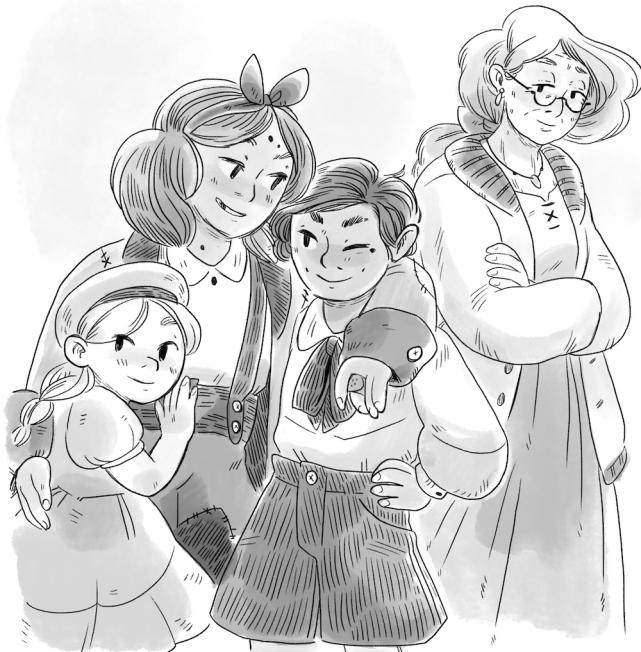
Captain Z took the paper back and looked at it a bit longer.

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 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 hidden treasures to be found.

30



The next morning, bright and early, Sophia was woken up by the banging of pots and pans in the kitchen.

When she staggered in to see what was making all the commotion, she found Lucy. Lucy had decided she wanted to make everyone breakfast, and was trying her best to figure out how.

Captain Z offered to help.

By the time the rest of the group was awake, they had coffee, eggs, pancakes, and fresh strawberries on the table. Everyone thanked Lucy and Sophia, for the delicious start to the day.

After they had cleaned up, it was time for Dr. Star to get to work. She had some patients to see and didn't want to keep them waiting.

"Why don't you all go into town together," she said as she was packing up her things. "You can go see Walter and get some food at the market for supper tonight."

While Captain Z wasn't too excited about taking three children around by herself, it would be nice to see her old classmate. She hadn't seen Walter since her last visit when he helped her with the special riggings and cranks on Wind Drinker.

It was a short walk down the hill and into the market. The streets were already crowded that morning. It seemed like everyone in town had come out to buy fish, fruit, or trinkets. Captain Z pushed her way through the crowds, making sure that the children stayed close

behind.

Eventually, they reached the quieter end of the market and ducked into a dark and smoky little building. Inside was Walter, the blacksmith. He was banging away on a piece of red hot metal, sweating and scowling at it as he shaped it into a point. It looked to be some new type of spear, most likely made for the town guard. They were his best customers.

Sophia had grown up with Walter in Dr. Star's school. They had both been part of the very first class when Dr. Star first opened the school. There were two boys and two girls in that class, and Walter and Sophia were one of each. They had been like brother and sister back then, always joking around, but also always watching out for one another. Even now that they were both grown up, they still acted a bit like siblings when they got together.

Walter didn't even have to look up to know who had come into his shop. He could tell it was Sophia just by her walk.

"Well, did you get another boat you need to rig with pulleys?" Walter asked. He looked up and smiled at Captain Z.

"I'm still enjoying the first one too much to be needing another," Captain Z responded.

Walter put down his fired metal and gave Sophia a big bear of a hug. He was stronger than he looked, all that blacksmithing builds muscle.

The children walked around the little shop to admire Walter's creations as the two grownups talked. Walter liked making little figures when he wasn't working on weapons. On his shelves stood a little metal knight, complete with sword and shield, and a wonderfully detailed little metal dragon. It looked as if it might come alive any second to fly about the room.

"It's good to see you, Little Z," Walter said. That was the name he had given Sophia while they were in school together. She had always been shorter and smaller then the others. Captain Z was now taller then Walter by a few inches, but the name stuck.

"It's good to see you too Walter," Captain Z said. "What's new in Goodnews?"

"Ah, everything stays the same 'cept what's been changing," Walter said with a wink. He never had a straight answer to a question.

Captain Z asked about the others they had gone to school with when they were young. Besides Sophia and Walter there were Irene and Carlos. Irene was still at the university, her head filled with enough facts and understandings for ten people.

Carlos was still missing. No one had heard from him in three years. Walter feared the worst.

“Can’t be nothing but trouble for Carlos, says I,” Walter remarked.

“I’m sure he will come back someday,” Captain Z said.

Walter grunted. He didn’t think she was right about that, but there was no reason to argue the point.

“One thing that has changed around here is the guards,” Walter said, peering out the door before continuing. “Lately every one of them seems to be getting up on the wrong side of the bed. The prison is overflowing with all the people they’ve locked up. It would seem just looking at them wrong is enough reason for them to drag you away these days.”

“Any ideas as to what’s keeping them in such mean spirits?” Captain Z asked.

“I’m not one for ideas,” Walter said. “Those I have I keep to myself, especially since they are still eager to buy my wares. Irene might be having an opinion on the matter. You should go ask her.”

Walter and Captain Z talked for a bit longer, retelling stories from their childhood. Then it was time for Walter to get back to his metalwork. They hugged again and said their goodbyes. Captain Z promised to come back for a longer chat in a few days. Then she and the

children went on their way.

31

They walked back out on to the street and down towards the market.

“I’m hungry,” Nova complained.

“Let’s get some lunch at one of the market stalls,” Captain Z suggested. “Then I’ll take you into the University before we head home.”

Irene, the other girl in Dr. Star’s first class would most likely be among the books and papers there. Perhaps she could help crack the note Sophia had found on Captain Spears’s boat. Irene had helped design the pulleys and mechanisms that Walter had made to allow Captain Z to sail Wind Drinker solo. She seemed to know something about everything. Uncovering the hidden message might just be an easy task for her.

They walked through the market stalls looking at all the food and wares for sale. Exotic spices filled one stall, their scents spilling out into the street and into their noses. Fresh fish were in another, some bigger than a man hung from the rafters. A few sellers had huge wheels of cheese on their tables and sausages linked together in long chains. Some stalls had silks and scarves

and brightly colored cloth for sale.

The crowds were filled with all sort of folk who were out enjoying the sights, smells, and tastes of the market. Families were strolling through to buy groceries for dinner. Merchants were perusing the stalls hoping to find good deals on silks or spices that they could re-sell in the smaller towns on the nearby islands. Town guards were roaming about in packs of two or three. There seemed to be a lot of them, and most seemed to have a sour look on their faces, from what Captain Z could see.

A bit unusual for such a nice day as this, she thought. Most likely its all in my head, I'm seeing things because of Walter's words. But than Walter is always suspicious about something or somebody.

As they walked, the bright colors of fresh fruit caught Lucy's eye and she went over to a large stand to admire them. The stand had dates and plums on their tables, along with baskets of lemons and oranges. Limes were in great big barrels, alongside large juicy looking apples.

Lucy reached into one of the barrels and pulled out the biggest apple she had ever seen. She could barely hold it in her hand. She held it up and looked at it. Fruit like that rarely made it to the Port of Goodnews. Most of it was sent directly to the big cities of the Eastern Coast,

where prices were higher and tastes were fancier.

“Look!” She said to the others.

Captain Z saw Lucy holding the apple and smiled. But her smile faded when she saw two guards come up behind Lucy with anger in their eyes.

32

One of the guards grabbed Lucy’s wrist. The apple dropped down to the ground, rolling under the fruit seller’s market stand.

“Gotcha!” The guard shouted. “Thought you’d be running off with a nice red apple, did you? Well think again! You’re coming with us. Thieves like you get locked away in Goodnews.”

Captain Z ran up to the guards. Lucy twisted her wrist free and jumped behind Captain Z as she stopped in front of them.

“What are you doing?” She asked. “The girl’s done nothing wrong, she’s with me. Where are you trying to take her?”

The second guard snorted. “That street urchin was fixing to steal fruit from one of our honest sellers here,”

he said. “It’s a good thing we were here to stop her, isn’t that right?”

The guard was looking at the fruit seller for a reply. The old man had a big belly and a balding head. Behind his glasses, his eyes shifted back and forth between Lucy, Captain Z, and the guards.

“Listen now,” he stammered. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“This thief is the one in trouble here not you,” the first guard said with a mean looking smile. “She was trying to take that apple from you, right?”

The old man’s eyes flicked back and forth even faster. His breaths were short and close together. “Well, well, well... I wasn’t paying much attention,” he said finally. “But, if you say so. I’ll trust your word officers.”

Captain Z interrupted before the guards could respond.

“In any case, it’s not stealing if you get paid. Here’s the two coppers for that apple, and one more for your troubles.” She plunked three coins down on the table and turned around. She grabbed Lucy’s hand and started to walk back to the other children who were standing in the road looking worried.

“Say now!” Called out one of the guards. “Don’t you want your apple?”

Captain Z turned around. One of the guards was moving slowly around the stand towards her and the children. She had a hunch that they weren't going to let them get away easily. The other picked up a mushy looking apple off the ground, not the one Lucy had picked, one that had been rotting there for some time.

"That money bag of yours looks full of silvers. Maybe even a bit of gold," he said. "One little apple must not mean much to you."

He tossed the apple to Captain Z who caught it with one hand.

"Ya, pirate," he finished.

33

Hearing that word made all other people around them in the market stop and stare at the captain. As Captain Z knew, pirates were forbidden to enter Port Goodnews. Any pirate caught in town could be locked up for a very long time.

Even if you weren't really a pirate, just being called one could get you into a lot of trouble. Captain Z had learned these lessons the hard way.

He would have branded me a pirate no matter what I did,

Captain Z realized. *But unlucky for them, it happens to be true.*



The guards inched closer.

Captain Z felt the apple in her hand. She threw it hard underhanded straight from her hip. It caught the nearest guard square in the forehead, hitting him hard with a thump. He nearly fell over from the blow and stood there holding his head, apple mush all over his face.

Captain Z took off.

Grabbing Lucy's hand again, she started running away

from the fruit stand.

“Let’s go!” She ordered the other two children. Nova and Orion followed, running as fast as they could.

People in the crowd watching the ordeal jumped back as the guards pulled out their swords and started following. The first guard was still wiping the mush off as he ran.

The apple had slowed the guards a bit, but not by much. Captain Z tried to loose them in the crowds by running zig-zag through the stalls and people. Still the guards followed. They were getting closer.

Captain Z led the children out of the market and into a little alleyway between the nearby stores. They ducked under low hanging wires crowded with drying clothes. They sped left, then right, down through a maze of side streets, trying to loose the guards.

She hoped to find a way back out to the main street where they could try to get lost in the crowds. Instead, Captain Z found a dead end.

The shop buildings all crowded around the little road. There was no way to squeeze through. She tried a few back doors to find them locked. The guards were coming. She could here their grunts and calls getting closer and closer. Captain Z would be caught if they tried to go back down the alley. They would be caught anyways

in a few seconds if they stayed where they were.

Sophia looked up for a way out. There, halfway up the last building at the end of the alley was a little metal ladder that led to the rooftop.

Maybe we will be able to loose them up there, she thought.
At least there was a chance.

She hurried over to the ladder with the children following close behind. Captain Z lifted Lucy to the first rung and watched her start to climb. Then she helped Nova and Orion up.

She heard shouts from the alley. The guards had seen them. Quickly, she jumped up and grabbed the ladder. She pulled herself up and followed the children on to the roof.

34

The wind was strong up on the top of the building. It whipped around the children's hair as they waited for their captain to reach them. The first guard was already on the ladder by the time Captain Z made it all the way up to the roof.

The group jogged down the length of the building, looking for a way down or a place to hide. The rooftop

of the next building over was close enough to reach. Orion and Nova stepped across the gap between the two buildings. They grabbed Lucy's hands to help her across.

Captain Z jumped the gap and kept running.

They made it to the end of the roof and looked around. The next building was fifteen feet away, too far for any of them to jump and make it. They looked down to the alley below. The fall would hurt or worse.

Captain Z peered down along the sides of the building, hoping to find another ladder they could use to climb down. There weren't any on this building, from what she could see.

There was nothing to hide behind, only a few stubby chimneys sticking up. It was another dead end.

The captain was about to lead them back to the other side of the building, when they heard a harsh, nasty laugh.

The first guard was standing at the edge between the two roofs, watching them. After a few seconds, his partner caught up.

"End of the line," the guard sneered.

He twirled a length of rope as he crossed over to the roof Captain Z and the children were now trapped on,

laughing more as he got closer.

Frantically, Captain Z patted her pockets to find something she could use to defend herself with.

All she pulled out were the four feathers.

Well, here is my chance to see if they really work, she thought.

The guard slowly stepped towards them, making sure there was no room to run around him.

Hurriedly, Captain Z shoved a feather into each of the children's hands, keeping one for herself.

"If I make it over, then follow me. It's our only chance," she whispered.

The children looked on in confusion as Captain Z paced a few steps back. Then, taking a deep breath, she ran full steam toward the side of the roof, jumping right as she reached the edge.

35

"No!" Lucy cried as Captain Z leapt.

The guards were frozen as they watched. Everyone expected her to disappear over the side of the building.

But that is not what happened.

They all watched stunned as the captain floated through the air like a cloud in the breeze.

She landed gently on the next rooftop, jogging to a stop.

Looking back, she was just as surprised as the rest of them, but motioned for the children to follow her. Lucy looked down past the edge of the building but didn't budge.

It was one thing to watch an impossible jump like that and quite another to try the jump yourself.

Orion shot forward and leapt, keeping his eyes closed through the entire jump. He floated over just like Captain Z. The captain caught his arm to stop him from overshooting and missing the roof entirely.

Nova and Lucy still didn't move. Then they heard the guards running towards them.

Lucy turned back around to see both guards right behind her. Arms outstretched, their shocked faces had been replaced with angry ones. Lucy screamed, grabbed Nova's empty hand, and they both jumped away together.

Up into the air the two girls went, but instead of falling back down, they hung there weightless. It felt as if they

were in the ocean, coasting along on a strong current.

Lucy had butterflies in her stomach as they slowly drifted towards Orion and Captain Z who were waiting for them. She had time to look back to see the two guards teetering on the edge of the building they had just jumped from. The guards were still reaching out over the edge towards the two girls even though they were now too far away to catch. The guards were more confused than angry, completely astonished by what they were watching.

The girls reached the other rooftop, but were still high in the air. Captain Z grabbed Nova's leg to pull them both down to the ground. All three children looked at the captain, their eyes full of questions.

"This was the treasure from Castle Island," Captain Z tried to explain. "These feathers I found, they are magical somehow."

The guards started shouting to one another. They were too afraid to attempt the jump, but they hadn't given up the chase. They were running back to the ladder to follow Captain Z and her crew through the alley.

"Come on," Captain Z said to the children. "They'll never catch us if we keep jumping."

Captain Z didn't make it to the University, but they did make it home. Three more rooftop leaps and they

were out of downtown. A few more cautious steps and they were back safe in the school.

The two guards never saw the captain or the children again.

36



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

In the dream, Captain Spears had pushed her off the cliff on Castle Island 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 else in the school was asleep.

Captain Z rubbed her eyes and sat up. She lit a lamp and pulled on her vest for warmth.

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

No time like the present, she thought. The bad dream made her want to stay awake. Besides, she was usually 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 led 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 TA A AT

It was a start, but it didn't help much. *Well, on to the three letter words*, she thought. One of the three letter words had an "A" filled in for the starting letter. Another had a "T".

The only three letter A words Sophia could think of was "and", and "ant". *Let's try the first one*, she thought, and filled in the rest of the word. The word "the" fits nicely into a three letter word starting with "T". She filled that in too.

PAU JLS OUIMTQ

THE A E N

ZSMELC LP ELJT

DA AT DA N

L OLE ELC ZRS

A AD DA

XRSP IRRETUJQ

T D E

L IRRE ELC ZRS

A D DA

VLXPLMTQ LTE XMSLPUQ

A TA N AND ATE

It was starting to look a bit like actual words, but just barely. Many of the coded words ended in the same letter. *Perhaps that letter is “S”, she thought.* Lots of words ended in “S”. Perhaps more than most. She added it in.

She stared at the words, frustrated she hadn’t cracked the code yet. The last word looked very familiar. Finally she saw it: “PIRATES”. This made the last line “CAPTAINS AND PIRATES”. She was excited to be making progress.

She filled in the letters from these words and slowly worked out the rest of the message. The words “PORT GOODNEWS” came next. With a bit of guesswork and a bit of luck she filled in the rest of the gaps. What she saw when the code was all cracked gave her butter-

flies in her stomach.

PAU JLS OUIMTQ
THE WAR BEGINS

ZSMELC LP ELJT
FRIDAY AT DAWN

L OLE ELC ZRS
A BAD DAY FOR

XRSP IRRETUJQ
PORT GOODNEWS

L IRRE ELC ZRS
A GOOD DAY FOR

VLXPLMTQ LTE XMSLPUQ
CAPTAINS AND PIRATES

37

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

A war? A battle, with pirates? That couldn't be right. She must have 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 cities of the Eastern Coast, but still had more guards and galleys than 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.

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 nothing. Everything outside was quiet and peaceful, to be expected at this early hour.

Just to make sure, the captain decided to take a quick look around outside. She wanted to get a good look at the harbor from above.

Captain Z 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.

In the dim light, Captain Z could see what looked to be an entire fleet of ships filling the harbor. Many of them looked to be flying the black flag of the Jolly Roger. Pirates had invaded the port.

Most were floating out in the harbor, 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 moving between the other boats on the piers.

Amazingly, the town guard and its fleet were nowhere to be seen. *Something bad must have happened*, she thought. *The guards would not simply sleep through such an invasion.*

She thought back to the market chase and Walter's warning about the guards. *Perhaps the guards aren't guarding these people anymore*, she considered.

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

She couldn't see Muddle, but guessed she was still on

the ship.

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 loved a good fight, but was in no mood for a battle that she couldn't win. A pirate army against a sleeping town didn't sound like a fun time to her.

38

She made it back down to the school and slammed through the door. Captain Z ran through the hallway, pounding on the children's door to get them moving, before knocking on the door to Dr. Star's room.

Dr. Star had heard Captain Z, as she came banging through the hall, and was sitting up in her bed when Sophia burst in.

"I've decoded the message," Captain Z said. She was out of breath from the long run. "Pirates are going to attack Port Goodnews this morning. It's a war."

Dr. Star checked her watch. "Attack Goodnews? Are you sure the message is right?" She asked.

"There is a whole fleet of pirate ships in the bay, right

now. Some are coming into the town. The town guard is missing, or worse, joined with the pirates.”

Dr. Star’s face became more serious with each word.

“You have to get yourself and the children out of town,” Captain Z said firmly. “Who knows what these pirates plans are. If you leave now, you can make it.”

“I wouldn’t be able to make it out of here before they attacked, even if I left now,” Dr. Star respond, shaking her head. “Plus, if a battle is coming, I need to be here to help the hurt and wounded.”

It was true that there were few healers in the Port of Goodnews, and none were as skilled as Dr. Star. *But that doesn’t mean she should stay and risk her life*, thought Captain Z.

“If you take them now,” Dr. Star suggested, “you could make it out fast enough to escape.”

Captain Z was definitely planning on leaving now, or as close to now as possible. But she had no mind to be taking children along for the ride.

She was about to argue the idea, when she remembered the poem that came with the Pegasus feathers. She remembered the part about a hero being born. Perhaps she could be a pirate and a hero at the same time.

Before she could respond, there was a knock at the bed-

room door. Nova, Orion, and Lucy shuffled in.

“What’s going on?” Asked Nova.

Captain Z didn’t have time to explain. “You’ve got two minutes to change your clothes and pack your bag,” she answered. “You are leaving the city now, one way or another.”

The children knew better then to ask questions of a pirate. They all ran out back out of the hallway to their room.

Lucy might need a bit of help from Nova, Captain Z thought. But they’ll be ready to go.

“They would just slow me down,” Captain Z continued finally. But Dr. Star could tell she was ready to take them. “With those brats, I might not get very far.”

“They are quick on their feet, and quicker to learn,” Dr. Star said. “Besides, I think luck will be on your side.”

Captain Z glared at the doctor for a few seconds before storming off into her room to get ready. She knew she couldn’t refuse such a request from Dr. Star, but that didn’t make it any easier.

39

Less than five minutes later, Captain Z and the three children were out of the house and down the block.

They went slow, peeking around corners and crouching as they passed the homes and shops on the way down the long hill toward the port. The piers were situated near the center of town. There would be plenty of places to hide as they went, as long as they were careful.

Closer to the water, they started catching glimpses of groups of pirates heading this way and that. They all looked to be on a mission and not one of them was looking about to see Captain Z or her soon-to-be shipmates.

Once they made it to the center of town, they crept down toward the far end of the pier where Wind Drinker was docked. They kept behind buildings and dry docked ships, so the pirates wouldn't see them coming.

As they moved through the buildings, they saw glimpses of the boats docked along the pier. Pirates were surrounding some of the larger ships. Captain Z couldn't tell what those pirates were up to, but she knew it couldn't be something good.

Finally, they made it to the far end of the harbor. They

were hidden behind a boat house in front of the docks. The sky was getting lighter. The captain was surprised that the pirates hadn't started their attack yet. *They must be waiting for some sort of signal*, she thought.

From the pier, she began to hear a familiar sound that put her on edge. Muddle was cawing wildly.

The crew ran to the other side of the boat house to get closer to the ship.

Peaking around the corner of the building, they looked down the pier toward Wind Drinker. Two pirates had untied the boat and were pulling it away from the dock. It looked as if they meant to drag it out to the bay so no one could board it. They would have finished their job by now if it weren't for Muddle.

The crow was cawing and diving down at the pirates. With each swoop, she tried to peck at their hands or heads. The two pirates were ducking down and waving their arms, trying to scare off their attacker. Captain Z jumped out from behind the boathouse, charging down the dock toward her boat.

The first pirate stood up as the captain met him. Before he could react, she had smashed into him with her shoulder. He flew backwards and off the dock, splashing into the water.

The other pirate stood up and started shouting, "Zephyr's

here! Zephyr's here!" Pirates from the other parts of the pier heard him calling and started running toward them.

As he shouted, Muddle swooped again and beaked him hard on the top of his head. The pirate raised both hands to cover his head and shouted out in pain.

Captain Z took advantage of the situation. She ran into the pirate as he held his head. A hard shove made him stumble back over the edge of the pier and into the cold water with a splash.

The children ran down the pier to join Captain Z as she got into her ship. More pirates reached the pier. Their boots pounded on the wooden planks as they ran.

The captain pushed the dock hard and pushed the Wind Drinker out into the water. She loosed the main sail as the pirates reached them.

40

They were lucky to have a small boat. And lucky Captain Z had the riggings on cranks and pulleys.

They were luckier still to have a steady wind blowing away from the town out toward the bay.

With the main sail out, and the wind up, the ship

quickly shifted away from the dock.

It was ten feet away when the pirates made it to the end of the pier. One of the first tried to jump aboard, but came up short. It was further away than he expected, and he splashed into the water. He bobbed up and down in the water, spitting and coughing.

Other pirates ran to the edge but could only watch as the ship drifted further out. They shouted a few choice words but could do nothing from the land.

The pirate ships in the bay were a different story though. Captain Z would need even more luck to get around them to escape the port.

All of Wind Drinker's sails were out now. They picked up speed and cut through the calm waters, making an arc out toward the bay's entrance. The land formed a crescent around the water, with a narrow opening out to the ocean. On either side of the opening stood a guard tower, one for each peninsula.

If the guards were turn coats, the captain thought, we could get blown out of the water from the cannons in those towers.

Even if the towers were empty, the waterway between the two strips of land could be easily blocked by a ship or two. If the pirates moved to trap them in, Wind Drinker would be stuck in a very small bit of water

with all these angry pirates.

But at first, none of the other ships moved to stop them. The pirates didn't want to break formation, they seemed afraid to get off track.

Perhaps they are afraid any noise might wake the town and spoil their surprise, Captain Z thought.

Commotion or no, the town would be awake soon anyways. The sky was brighter now. The day was coming.

Wind Drinker steered around two small pirate ships that were floating close to the pier. The captain and the children stared into the faces of the pirates aboard the nearest one. They were all glaring at the runaway ship, but weren't moving to stop it. Every few seconds they would look back toward the entrance to the port, as if expecting a signal of some sort.

Wind Drinker was half way to freedom when that signal came.

A shot rang out from a large ship near the East peninsula. Then the bright light of a flare slowly arced its way over the waters.

The pirates sprang into action. Captains on all the ships started barking orders to their men. A few seconds later, the first booms of cannons could be heard. They were firing into the town!

The sleeping townspeople didn't know it, but the war had begun.

41

As Captain Zephyr had been sneaking towards her boat, Captain Spears was already on his. Waiting for the signal like all the other pirates in the bay who had made a pact with the leader behind this sinister plan.

He had put his boat, the Sea Breaker, far out in the waters, near the port's entrance. He hoped to avoid most of the action.

Spears had agreed to join the battle against the Port of Goodnews, not because he wanted to capture the city, but because he feared what would happen to him if he refused. The whole ordeal left a sour taste in his mouth. *Waiting in the water like eels in the dark, he thought, it doesn't seem right.*

As they say, a fight is no fun if your match doesn't know they are fighting.

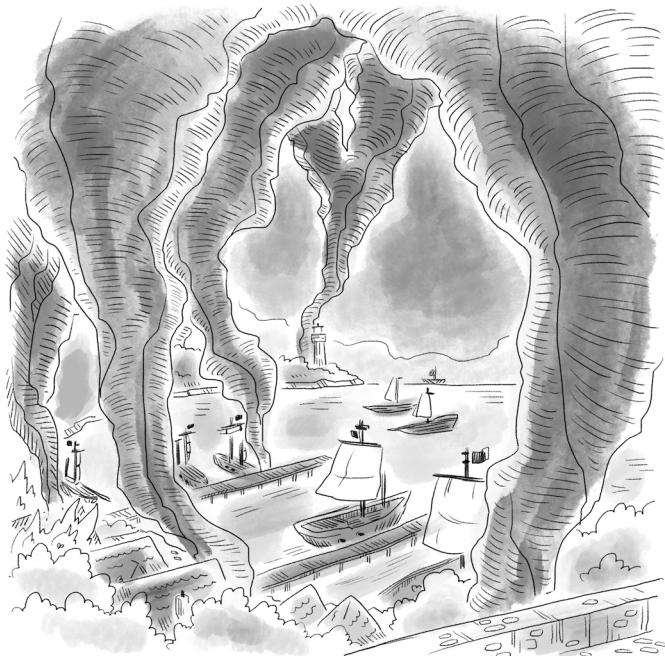
Still, he was there waiting in the dark, just the same.

As he was thinking about this, he heard strange noises coming from far off on the shore. He turned to gaze out with his red eye to see what was going on. The eye

focused on a big black bird, a crow. The same crow he had seen on Castle Island! It was screeching and diving at pirates on the pier near a familiar looking boat.

His eye lit up at the sight of the bird. *What is that thing doing in Goodnews?* Spears wondered. *It should still be mourning the loss of its poor little captain out on Castle Island.*

Then, he saw Captain Zephyr herself running down the pier toward her ship. Captain Spears nearly fell overboard from the sight. She was alive!



“Well I’ll be a talkin’ gator,” he said to himself.

She was far off, but his red eye made sure it was her. The eye was glowing hot now, like an iron just out of the fire.

She should be dead, but wasn’t. Which meant that perhaps the lost treasure of Castle Island wasn’t really lost either.

Then the flare shot up from the leaders boat. The signal to start the invasion.

Captain Spears watched it as it lit the sky red over the water. He saw the other captains dutifully follow their orders to start the attack. But Captain Spears now had another reason not to join in the battle. If he could block Wind Drinker from leaving the bay, perhaps he could get his hands on the treasure Captain Zephyr had stolen.

He spoke in a hushed voice to his crew to explain the plan. Then he gave the order and the Sea Breaker started slowly making its way toward the entrance to the bay.

If Captain Zephyr wanted out, she would have to get through Spears and his Sea Breaker.

42

With all the commotion, most of the attackers didn't even notice Wind Drinker sprinting out of the port. But one of the many ships Captain Z passed started to give chase. They pulled their sails around to turn and follow Captain Z as she steered away from the pier.

It was Captain Pete Moss on the ship following Wind Drinker. Captain Z recognized him as they pulled in behind.

Captain Moss had a slow ship and a slower crew. They were weighted down with a slew of cannons he was itching to use. And he would have used them on Wind Drinker if the port hadn't been so crowded with other pirate ships. One missed shot and he could sink one of the other pirate ships.

So, Captain Moss trailed behind Captain Z's ship as it weaved to and fro between the other ships in the harbor. Captain Z took her ship wide around the pirate swarm to stay clear of the cannon fire directed into the city.

Even from a distance, the cannon blasts were loud and scary. Lucy hid at the back of the boat and covered her ears. Orion and Nova kept their heads up, but ducked down with every nearby blast.

Captain Moss was not a skilled sailor, nor was his crew accustom to taking orders. They all had spent the last year living the land lovers life in Bodega. Now out in the water again, the crew had lost their sea legs.

So when Zephyr cut sharply through the water around a big galley, Pete Moss didn't follow, though he tried. Shouting to the crew to tack in the sails and turning the wheel as hard as he could, his barge started into the turn. But the ropes on the sails were tangled and twisted up and his big boat couldn't turn sharp enough.

The front side of his ship smashed into the back half of the galley with a deafening screech. Moss's ship took all the damage. It lurched to a stop, sending the Captain and his crew flying to the deck floor. Planks and other bits of wood were thrown across the water. Moss got up to look at the front of his boat to find a huge gash where sea water was flooding in.

Moss started shouting to abandon ship, and within seconds he and his crew were lowering their rowboats into the water. The pirates started rowing as fast as they could while their ship tipped sideways into the water.

The ship sank completely into the water a few minutes later. Captain Moss and his crew watched it go down, then sadly rowed for shore.

The crew on the galley that had been hit watched them from their deck, making sure to note all the pirates in-

volved in the disaster. The leader would hear about this.

Zephyr sailed on.

With all the other pirates focused on the town, or the crash, it looked like the way was clear for them to escape.

Captain Z pulled Wind Drinker around to point directly at the entrance to the bay. It was still open, and free of ships. Despite the cannon fire and the commotion all around, Captain Z smiled at her luck. *We made it*, she thought.

That's when she saw the Sea Breaker slowly maneuvering through the waters towards the entrance. Captain Z's heart was gripped with fear. Spears had seen her, and was going to cut them off before they made it out!

43

Captain Z panicked. The Sea Breaker was big enough to block most of the entrance. Wind Drinker could probably dodge around it, but then they would be in open water. Out there, with no other ships around, Captain Spears would be free to blast away with his cannons. Captain Z knew her ship couldn't stand up to that kind of fire power. They would be helpless if

Spears attacked. The game would be up.

If Spears and his crew boarded the ship, Captain Z would most likely be held captive. The children would be prisoners in the Port of Goodnews, with no one to protect them. And the feathers would be stolen.

The feathers!

Captain Z had forgotten her treasure, but now she wondered if they might be her one chance to get out.

What if Wind Drinker is my steed? She wondered. There was only one way to find out.

She roped the wheel steady so that it stayed on course. They were still headed straight out to open water. The Sea Breaker was reaching the entrance already. It slowed near the western edge and straightened out.

Captain Z pulled the feathers out of her pocket and looked them over. Then she slowly touched them to the ship's wheel.

Nothing happened.

She didn't loose hope. Moving to the front deck, she tried the floor, the railing, and even the main mast. She touched the feathers to each spot hoping for some magic to happen. But the feathers did nothing, and the ship remained in the water.

Lucy, Orion, and Nova watched Captain Z frantically

move about the ship, jamming the feathers here and there. They could feel the fear rising in their bellies. Even Muddle above started to caw with fear.

Captain Spears had positioned his ship along the edge of the entrance to the port. The crew started loading grape shot and mast breakers into their cannons. As Wind Drinker passed by, they would fire the shots and blast down the sails. Captain Z's ship would have no way to move and the treasure would be as good as gotten.

Captain Z, now desperate, ran around the whole ship from front to back with two of the feathers in each hand, trying to get her steed up in the air. Finally, she stopped and cried out in frustration.

Lucy looked up. She had an idea. In her loudest voice, she shouted to Captain Z over the commotion in the bay.

“Try it on the wings!”

Captain Z was confused until she saw that Lucy was pointing up. Captain Z looked up as well to see the sails of her ship blowing in the wind. *The sails*, she thought, *of course!*

Filled out and full of air, the sails did look a bit like wings. Just like the Pegasus of legend, perhaps the feathers would work as part of the wings of the steed.

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It was their last chance. Wind Drinker was almost alongside the Sea Breaker as it sped toward the entrance to the port. As soon as they were in range, Captain Spears would open fire.

Captain Z ran to the mast and started climbing up the rope ladder to the sail. As she held on with one hand, she took two of the feathers in the other hand and jammed them into the sail cloth. The quill of one of the feathers stuck.

Instantly, the boat jolted. The hull creaked loudly and lifted up partway out of the water.

It worked! They were starting to float, but it wasn't enough. They were only a few feet out of the water.

The jolt threw Captain Z back and she swung away holding on to the ladder. She swung herself back toward the sail and jabbed in the second feather.

The ship creaked again as it lifted up completely out of the water. Now they were skimming across the surface of the sea, and they were moving at a breakneck speed.

In two seconds, they would skim right in front of the Sea Breaker.

Desperately, Captain Z grabbed the last two feathers

in her free hand and jumped up into the sail. Both feathers stuck to the sail as Captain Z fell down to the ground.

Wind Drinker lurched into the air like a wind powered rocket.

Captain Spears and his crew stood slack-jawed and silent. Their necks craned up as Captain Z's ship sailed over their heads and out towards the sea. No one could speak. Spears's eye changed to a brilliant yellow as he watched the flying vessel, not believing what he was seeing.



Wind Drinker flew steadily up and up until finally leveling off high in the sky. Muddle flew along next to Captain Z and weaved back and forth among the masts as they went. The children began to cheer when they realized they had somehow escaped.

Captain Z lashed the feathers to the sail with a bit of string and jumped down to join in the celebration.

With no water to slow it down, the ship flew as fast as the wind. The Sea Breaker was soon just a small dot on the horizon. *But how do I steer?* Captain Z wondered. Without water to push around, a rudder should be of no use. She decided to try the wheel anyways, just to be sure. She untied the ropes that were keeping it steady and slowly started to turn it.

Magically, the ship started to turn as well! The movement was faster than what you would expect in the water, but that was no problem for Captain Z. She would learn to fly the ship just as well as she could sail it.

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The cheering stopped as the children turned to look back to see a glimpse of the destruction of the Port of Goodnews. It was far off in the distance now, but they could still make out smoke and fire coming from

the buildings near the bay. The pirates were no doubt taking the city for themselves.

“The people need our help,” Nova said.

“They need help, Aye,” Captain Z said. “But one ship won’t do a lick of good, even one that can fly.” She turned to look at Nova and the other two children that she had sworn to protect. “We can’t save Goodnews, least not by ourselves.”

Nova looked sad. “Then where do we go to get help?” She asked.

Captain Z looked out over the water at the breathtaking sunrise. The sky glowed orange and red, and the clouds were fringed in purple. She turned the wheel and pointed the ship directly toward the great ball of light.

“East,” the captain replied.

No one in the Western Waters was strong enough to fight back a pirate crew that could take Port Goodnews. If what the note said was true, that this was a war and not just one fight, then this morning’s attack was only the beginning of something much bigger.

The Eastern Coast would be their only hope for finding help. The armies there could march down and put a quick end to any pirate uprising. *If they believe us, Captain Z thought, and if they agree to help.*

Getting there was a long trip by sea, but to fly would be a different story. *As long as the wind blows strong, we might get there in time*, Captain Z thought. It would still be a tough trek, one Captain Z had never tried before, though she knew the way. They would have to make it over the Porter mountains and then through the Casperian desert.

Orion, Nova, and Lucy walked over next to their captain to squint into the sunrise and look out. They would need to learn quickly how to help aboard Wind Drinker and work together if the plan was to be a success.

Lucy was thinking about something and frowned as she looked up at Captain Z.

“So, are we pirates now?” She asked. She knew Captain Z called herself a pirate, and that was fine, but otherwise, she wasn’t very fond of any pirates that she knew of. She didn’t want to have to be a pirate, if she didn’t have to.

“Not pirates,” Captain Z said. “That name’s a bad fit.”

But then what are we? The captain thought.

“Adventurers!” Nova shouted, as if reading her mind.

Captain Z thought the name over, then nodded her head in agreement. *Adventurer suits me well*, she thought. She was tired of playing by pirate rules anyways. They

would make up new rules as they went along.

“Captain Z and the Adventurers,” Nova said again, and smiled.

As Captain Z returned to the ship’s wheel, her mind turned to all those pirates in the Port of Goodnews, and who could be the leader of such a crew. *Who’s cruel enough and powerful enough to make that many pirates fight together?* She wondered. Certainly not Captain Spears. He was greedy, to be certain, but he would never want a whole town to call his own. And he certainly didn’t have enough smarts to make a plan like that work.

No. Someone far more cruel was behind this war. Controlling the pirates like pieces on a chessboard. It made Sophia’s skin crawl just to think about someone that terrible.

Whoever it is, we’ll make him pay, she decided.

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So our hero, no longer a pirate, but part of a crew of adventurers, sailed through the blue skies of the Western Waters, heading east as fast as they could fly.

Over the mountains and through the desert, they would

find an army to fight for the people of Goodnews and others in the Western Waters. At least that was the plan.

The Port of Goodnews would be captured no doubt by the pirates, probably even before the sun set on the day. And then whoever was leading those scoundrels would most likely turn their eyes to other nearby towns. Captain Z hoped that there would be few people hurt in the attacks. She hoped someone in the cities of the Eastern Coast would listen to their story and come to stop the invasion. The quicker they could find help and come back to fight, the better.

Muddle swooped down to land on her perch near the captain's wheel. She kept her wings outstretched, letting the wind blow through them as she held on to the stand with her feet.

Nova, Orion, and Lucy continued to stare out into the wide ocean they were travelling above. Soon enough they would need to get to work, learning the ins and outs of the ship and how to manage it. They would also need to chart the course they would take out to the Eastern Coast. But for now, Captain Z let them enjoy the view.

This would be the beginning of their adventures.