

SKIES of EQUESTRIA

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CHAPTER 6

Following the takeover of Nasr, Vyse and his companions were taken prisoner by Ramirez. Upon returning to the Grand Fortress, the Air Pirates were divided between two distant cells, split by gender, while Fina was taken into the direct care of Ramirez himself. The destruction and failure that lingered in our heroes' hearts were only strengthened by the gloom of Valua's black clouds.

"Well done, Galcian," Empress Teodora praised in her throne room. "Nasr was our only enemy with a navy. Now we rule the skies unopposed. Soon, all of Equestria will bow before the might of Valua... And they will see me as their ruler."

"Yes, Your Highness," Galcian dully agreed as he bowed his head.

"It is my understanding that the Alicorn and those Air Pirates had the Elements of Harmony in their possession when they were captured. Bring the Alicorn and the Elements to me. As for those Air Pirates..." A wicked smile spread across her face. "I want them executed in Lower City. I want the ponies to witness their deaths..."

"I will personally see to it that everything goes as you..."

"Wait!" came a voice from behind Galcian. It was the Prince of Valua, Enrique. He was a young, thin, gray unicorn with a short blonde mane, and blue eyes. He wore a purple feathered cap, and his cutie mark was that of a fencing foil. "Mother! I just heard that our fleet destroyed Nasrad while it was defenseless. How could you...? Why did you have to murder so many innocent ponies?! I know that we are acquiring more lands, but if we use these brutal tactics, the ponies will rise up and rebel against us. Please, we've made our point... Pull our troops out of Nasr."

"Silence, Enrique!" Teodora shrieked, causing her son to flinch. "It is Valua's destiny to span across Equestria and bask in the glory of the six Moons! How do you expect us to conquer the world without a little bloodshed?"

"But, Mother..."

"How can you expect to inherit the throne of the empire I worked so hard to build? You're

too much of a coward! Remove yourself from my sight."

Enrique was just about to burst from his anger, but quickly calmed himself down, remembering his place. "... Very well..." He bowed, and with a heavy, vengeful heart, turned to take his leave.

"I hate Valua," Vyse groaned as he stared out the window of his prison cell in the Grand Fortress. "It's always so dark and gloomy here."

"Yeah," Gilder coolly agreed, "especially when you're locked up in a jail cell. Valuans have no sense of hospitality... Hey guards, can we get some food in here?! How about a drink or something?"

Several floors above them, Aika was alone in her own cell, also staring out the window. *"*sigh** I can't believe we're back in Valua. I wonder where Vyse and Fina are being held..."

To her surprise, a guard and a very large earth pony had just opened the door to her cell. "Is this where the Air Pirate filly is being held?" the large stallion asked.

"Yes, Admiral Vigoro," the guard answered. "But, sir... Why does that concern you?"

"Hey, don't worry about it. Now run along and go make yourself useful somewhere else." The guard took his leave as ordered, leaving Vigoro alone with Aika. Vigoro was a large, blue earth stallion with a pointy brown mane and a red lipstick mark on his flank. He was also unclothed, unlike other Admirals, who normally wore some sort of uniform when on duty.

"Well, what do we have here?" Vigoro examined Aika's figure as he rubbed his chin with his hoof. "Nice legs, and curves in all the right places. Well, I suppose I've seen better, but she's not too bad."

Aika blushed, but not in a shy way. She was embarrassed to have somepony eying her like this, and almost felt insulted to hear she didn't live up to his "standards". "Who are you?! And are you always this crude?"

"I am Vigoro, the toughest stallion in the Armada. I'm surprised you haven't heard of me. The mares I've been with love to brag."

"I've never heard of you before in my life!! Where are Vyse and Fina being held?!" Vigoro said nothing as he quickly approached her and placed a hoof on the wall next to her. Aika flinched and reflexively tried to fend him off by wrapping her forelegs around herself. She had a feeling she knew what was on Vigoro's mind, and she wasn't about to let THAT happen. "Get away from me, you creep! You're all sweaty and you've got a serious fetlock problem! And what's that smell?!"

"Aww, c'mon Red... You know I'm the stallion of your dreams... We were meant to be together. I'm sure you'll grow to like me. Just give me a chance."

"Yuck, you're disgusting!"

Meanwhile, Vyse was still moping around his cell, complaining. It wasn't something he normally did, but then again, he'd never been imprisoned before, either. "This is shaping up to be a great day..." Vyse sarcastically moaned. "Let's see, so far we got captured, separated from Aika and Fina AGAIN... And we lost all of the Elements. What's next? Maybe they'll torture us... A perfect end to a perfect day."

"Vyse, you're only making things worse," Gilder calmly said. "Take it easy."

"How can you stay so cool at a time like--"

Vyse was interrupted by the sound of tiny flapping wings. Gilder's pet owl Willy had just flown in through the window, "who-ing" repeatedly. Gilder held out his front hoof so Willy could land on it. "Oh, Willy. How're you doing?"

"Who! Who!" Willy cried as he landed.

"Very bad, you say? Haha, is that so? Well, you had to fly all the way over here. I'm not surprised."

"Gilder..." Vyse began. "There's a note tied to Willy's leg with a piece of wire..."

Gilder undid the wire bindings and unrolled the note. "Let's see... 'We will begin bombarding the fortress at midnight, and will await your arrival just outside... The Claudia.' Heh... This isn't the first time my crew has had to break me out of a prison... They know the routine. Well, the Claudia may not be able to destroy the Grand Fortress by herself, but she'll cause quite a bit of commotion."

"That's when we make our escape!" Vyse exclaimed with newfound confidence.

"Exactly."

"But, there's still one problem... We need to get out of this cell."

"Leave that to me," Gilder said as he picked up the wire. "There was a wire around Willy's leg for a reason. I'll have this door open in no time."

"... Of course! Heh... is there anything you can't do?" Vyse then noticed something odd about the note. "... What's this?"

"What's wrong?" Gilder asked as he played with the cell door's lock.

"There's some writing on the back of this letter."

"Oh... Well, what does it say?"

"*ahem* 'To my darling Gilder, I will fight for your freedom as well! For you, my love!'" Gilder flinched in a very obvious manner. "'Your soul mate... Clara.' And there're lipstick marks at the bottom."

"Clara?! She's here, too?!"

"Well, according to this letter... yeah..."

Gilder stood up and rubbed his hoof to his chin. "Hey, Vyse... We don't really need to break out of here, do we?"

"What are you talking about?! We'll be hanged."

"Hm... being hanged... and being stuck with Clara... tough choice. Ah... oh well..."

Afterwards, Gilder lightly pushed the cell door open, having already unlocked it several moments earlier.

"Wow! I'm impressed..."

"Willy," Gilder called to his owl, "tell the crew to wait for me with a barrel of berry punch! I think I'm gonna need it."

"Who! Who!" cried Willy as he flew out the window.

"Well then... I'll grab our weapons," Gilder said as he grabbed Vyse's cutlass and his own pistol. "Let's go!"

"Heh... Let's not forget about Aika and Fina," Vyse reminded. "I'm not leaving without them."

Vyse and Gilder moved to the main hall of the prison cells. Strangely, there were very few actual prisoners. Vyse wondered if everypony else had already been executed... But his thoughts were interrupted by a loud shriek, voiced unmistakably by Aika.

Following the echo of the screams, Vyse and Gilder took an elevator up to the floor above them, where Aika was held. When they arrived, Aika had her legs clutched around the iron bars of the window, suspended off the floor like a monkey. Vigoro had one of her hind legs in his grasp, and was kissing it.

"Hey, Aika," Vyse nonchalantly began. "Do you want us to come back later?"

"Vyse!!" she screamed. "Get this creep off of me!"

Vigoro lifted his head from his kissing. "Hey, beat it squirt!"

Vyse bared his sword. "Sorry to spoil your fun, but you heard the lady."

"Who said we were having fun?!" Aika yelled as she climbed down from the window.

Vigoro stood up tall and inflated his chest, towering over the Air Pirates in an attempt to intimidate them. "I am Vigoro. No filly in Valua can resist me. I believe that the worth of a stallion can be measured by his popularity with the mares."

"Hmm... I kind of like that," Gilder agreed. "I should remember that for later."

"Where's Fina?!" Vyse interrogated. "Give us back the Elements and bring Fina here!"

"Fina?" Vigoro asked. "Oh, the Alicorn... Ramirez escorted her to the Imperial Palace."

"Is that so?" said Aika. "Well, after we beat the snot out of you, we'll be rescuing her."

Vigoro grinned. "I love it when mares talk tough. Lemme give your friends a lesson in brute force."

Without even bothering to get a good look at his target, Vigoro turned toward Vyse and raised his forehoof. Vyse shot into the air just in time to avoid Vigoro's punch, which struck the iron bars of the jail cell and heavily dented them. The strength of earth ponies was never anything to sneeze at, but Vigoro was a particularly large one.

Gilder attempted to fire at Vigoro, but alas, the bullets were taken out when the pistol was confiscated from him earlier. After a few futile pulls of the trigger, Gilder noticed Vigoro heading in his direction. Gilder reflexively ducked, causing Vigoro to topple over Gilder's

crouching body. Vigoro's tumbling halted with him in the middle of a hoofstand, but before he could get his hind legs back on the floor, Aika rushed up to him and bucked him the rest of the way over. Aika was an earth pony too, and was strong enough to kick his grand weight clear into the wall. The collision with the concrete, as well as his head smashing into the stone floor after falling from it was enough blunt trauma to weaken him to the point where he could no longer move.

"Heh..." Aika chuckled as she stood over Vigoro, who was struggling to stay conscious. "Looks like you were all talk."

"Grr..." Vigoro struggled to get up, wanting a better look at the mare who'd defeated him. "Well... you got lucky... And... and... I didn't have my cannon or... my... armor."

"On Pirate Isle where I was raised, we have a saying... 'A true pony never makes excuses for his shortcomings.' And, going by that saying, you've got quite a ways to go."

"Heh... You've got an attitude... I like that. You'll be seeing me again. You can count on it." And then Vigoro slipped into unconsciousness. Aika grabbed her boomerang, and they took their leave of the prison cells, but they weren't out of Valua yet.

They reached the hall where the elevators were and tried to call the one they'd used before. The doors did not open, revealing that somepony else was using it, possibly coming to their location. They quickly found a present elevator and slid in before the other could open.

The elevator they avoided waiting for was indeed occupied, and had arrived at their previous position. Prince Enrique had come to the Grand Fortress to see Vyse, escorted by his personal guard.

"So, this is where the Air Pirates are being held..." Enrique deduced, taking in the lifeless scenery.

"Yes, Prince Enrique," said the guard.

"I wish to speak with them. Take me to them."

"Sir... perhaps it would be best for you to wait out here. The cell is... not fitting... for one of your stature. I'll get the other guard ponies. We will bind the prisoners and bring them to you." The guard rushed off, leaving Enrique unattended in the prison halls.

Well, I'll finally get to meet the Legendary Air Pirate, Vyse, Enrique thought to himself. If the rumors that I've heard are true, he'll look like a demon and spit fire... But, my instincts are telling me that he's fighting for all the right reasons.

"Prince Enrique! It's an emergency!" shouted the guard as he came galloping back. "I found Admiral Vigoro unconscious in one of the cells. The rest of the cells are empty. It appears that Vyse and the others have escaped!"

"What?!" Enrique asked, pretending to look surprised. He had actually expected this turn of events somewhat. *I see... They're trying to escape from the Grand Fortress again.* He turned to face his escort. "Listen carefully. Do not tell anypony about this. Keep the doors to this area closed. Don't let anypony in or out. If you are questioned about it later, tell them that it was a

direct order from me. Understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty! But..."

"Very well, then. Good job. Stay here. There's an urgent matter that I must attend to."

When their elevator came to its stop, the Air Pirates found themselves inside the control room for one of the Grand Fortress's giant cannons, with a shell twice their height sitting right next to them.

"What the..." Vyse gaped as he beheld the size of the weapon. "This cannon's new... and it's HUGE!!!"

"This thing is big enough to wipe out an island!" Aika added.

"We can run through the barrel of the cannon to the other side of the Fortress. Oh... Hey. What happened to Gilder?"

Vyse and Aika looked around. Gilder had hidden from them. After a second or two, he emerged from behind the giant shell. "Sorry about that," he said. "Let's get moving!"

"Hey, what were you doing?"

"I just had to take care of something. Heh, don't worry about it. We should get out of this dump. My crew is about to attack."

The Air Pirates ran through the barrel to the outside wall of the Fortress. It was currently in offensive mode, so the catwalks normally used for maintenance were on the outside, and directly beneath each cannon. Vyse and company used these to reach an elevator, also used for maintenance, on the far end of the fortress wall. This elevator would take them to the very top of the fortress, where the Admirals gathered. According to what Vigoro had told them, Fina was in the care of Ramirez, so if he hadn't left for the palace yet, they would both still be there.

The peaceful trip up the elevator was interrupted by the quakes of rapid cannon fire raining upon the fortress walls. The Claudia and the Primrose had come to create a distraction for Gilder. But since they were so far away, they couldn't have seen that Gilder was ON the side of the fortress they were blasting away at.

"My crew is right on time," Gilder noted. "Heh... but we're running a little late."

"Whoa!" Vyse said in awe of the Claudia's might. "Look at that firepower! Hey, what about Clara?"

"I'm sure she can hold her own... I think."

Meanwhile, the Valuan soldiers were preparing the Fortress's cannons to fight back against the Claudia. They were loading the cannon that Vyse and the others had run through before, but as soon as the shell tried to slide through the barrel, an immense amount of sparks generated from the friction, causing it to explode in an enormous blast of fire that heavily damaged a small portion of the wall.

"That cannon we went through..." Aika pointed out. "It just exploded!"

"Heh..." Gilder snickered, looking proud of himself. "I, umm, left them a little present... Are you two ready? Here's where the real fun begins."

Fina was watching the commotion from the window of the Admirals' meeting room. She had been left there temporarily, only until the situation was under control. She heard the door open behind her. Standing in the doorway was Ramirez, a blank expression stained with regret upon his stern face.

"Ramirez..." Fina said to him as he approached. He remained silent. The words would not come to him. "Ramirez... why? Why are you fighting for the Valuans? What about our orders? What about the Elders?"

Ramirez continued to stare at Fina. He had yet to come up with an explanation that would make sense to her. Neigh, an explanation that would make sense to anypony but himself. If Fina couldn't understand, then no pony else would, either.

"Lord Ramirez, it's an emergency!!" shouted a guard who'd just come into the room. "One of our cannons exploded and the entire deck is on fire. But no enemy shells hit that area."

"Find out the source of the fire and report back to me," Ramirez quickly, yet calmly ordered as a master tactician would. "In the meantime, stop firing and set the fortress to defensive mode. There are only two or three ships attacking. Their effect on the wall will be minimal."

"Yes, sir!" and the guard ran off to do as ordered.

Ramirez turned again to Fina. "I fight for Lord Galcian now. That is all you need to know." He turned from her, and exited the room, closing the door behind him.

"Ramirez..."

Vyse and company had just arrived at the top floor of the fortress. After re-entering, they were about to open the doors to a large hallway, but stopped when they heard a voice coming from the other side.

Ramirez was marching down two rows of guard ponies, preparing them for the mission that lied ahead and barking orders. "Everypony, remain calm. The Grand Fortress isn't about to crumble under the firepower of a few ships." He turned to face his soldiers and glared at all of them. "Anypony who deserts his post will have to deal with me personally."

"Yes, Admiral Ramirez!" they saluted.

"I will go investigate the cause of the explosion. Two of you stay here and guard the Alicorn. The rest of you, follow me."

Once Vyse was certain Ramirez had left, he and the others prepared to burst into the hall,

knowing that there'd be two guards waiting for them. On the count of three, Vyse and Gilder bust the door open, surprising the two soldiers. Being caught off-guard, they couldn't have prepared for Aika's boomerang, which knocked one clean on the head, and bounced off the other's before flying back to Aika's skilled hooves. Both guards were knocked unconscious before they could even get a good look at their attackers.

The Air Pirates kicked the door to the meeting room down and were, at last, reunited with Fina. "Fina!" Vyse called to her. "We came to get you out of here!"

"Vyse!" Fina cried as she ran towards him, embracing Vyse after having been so worried about him and Aika.

"We got here as soon as we found out where you were. Are you okay?"

"Yes... I am... Thank you..." Fina slowly let go of Vyse's shoulders. "It's strange... The first time you rescued me from the train, I was really surprised to see you. But this time, I knew that you would come for me. I knew you would find me."

"Hahaha... Oh Fina, after all we've been through together... I swear on my oath as a Blue Rogue that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

"... I know..." said a smiling Fina.

Gilder chuckled. "Heh... Good one, Vyse. I didn't know you were so smooth with the fillies. Getting jealous, Aika? I bet you wish that Vyse would say stuff like that to you."

"I don't need to hear him say those things," Aika happily responded. "I know he would do the same for me. Whenever I'm in trouble, I have faith that Vyse will always be there to save me. He already saved me once today."

"Heh... Good point. But can we save the mushy stuff for later? We just broke out of prison, and we're still in Valua."

"Alright," Vyse agreed. "But, how exactly are we going to get out of here?"

"Well, since we're in the Grand Fortress, there should be Valuan ships docked all over the place. We can borrow one of those. We should be able to reach the docks from the bottom floors of the fortress."

"So, we'll take the elevator back down and look for a ship. Alright! Let's go!"

As the Air Pirates descended, the Fortress began doing exactly what Ramirez had commanded of it. It was rotating, shifting into defensive mode.

"Now's our chance," Gilder announced. "We should find a ship and get out of here."

Once the elevator reached the bottom, the Air Pirates re-entered the fortress. As soon as they did, however, the doors surrounding them suddenly locked as the alarms began blaring.

"Oh, no! The alarm!!" Aika shouted.

"This isn't good..." said Gilder. "In a few seconds, this place is going to be crawling with guards."

"Quick!" came a gallant voice from above a nearby elevator shaft. "Get on the lift!"

"Somepony is telling us to get on that thing!" Aika said as she looked up the shaft. "I can't see who it is! Vyse, what should we do?"

"If we just stand around here, we're gonna get caught anyway," Vyse said. "We should take our chances."

"That's true," Gilder agreed. "It looks like that's our only option."

The Air Pirates all stood atop the lift, and it raised them up and through the shaft. The loud blaring of the sirens below faded, until the sounds were completely silenced. At the top of the lift... stood a very proper-looking unicorn with a rapier sheathed at his side.

"So, you're Vyse?" the unicorn asked. "I am Enrique."

"Enrique?!" Gilder shouted, instantly recognizing the famous name. "You're... the Prince of Valua!!!"

"You're the Prince?!" Aika asked.

Enrique simply laughed, as he was used to ponies being surprised by his status. "Yes... I am. After you escaped from your cells, I figured you'd head for the docks to try and steal a ship. Please, follow me."

"Alright, what's going on? Why is the Prince helping us?"

"I have no idea," Vyse admitted. "But, we should probably follow him."

The Air Pirates all followed Enrique down a long, metal tunnel. It became quite dark, but not so much that they couldn't continue to follow him. Eventually, they came to a stop, and Enrique flipped on a nearby switch, causing the lights in the room to activate.

"What the?!" Vyse asked as the lights turned on.

They were in a long, elliptical room made almost entirely of steel. The front walls were windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, and the back wall had what looked like a captain's seat. The center of the room had a meeting table, surrounded by control panels with a steering wheel facing the windows. The Valuan flag hung above the captain's seat.

"You've probably already figured out that we're on the bridge of a ship," Enrique guessed. "Say hello to the Delphinus, the newest member of the Armada. This is my personal flagship."

The Delphinus was a long, sleek, gray ship with purple markings. The front of the hull was bladed for the purpose of ramming, and the engine powered a large number of propellers for speed. The bowsprit was extremely long and thick, and housed all of the high-tech cannons equipped to the Delphinus. Vyse had seen many of Valua's steel ships before, but never anything like this.

"It is heavily armored," Enrique continued, "and can still match the top speed of our Cruisers. And it is equipped with the weaponry of a Heavy Battleship."

"It's amazing!" Vyse shouted in awe.

"This ship is the prototype. Soon, we will begin building a whole fleet of Delphinus Class Ships. Valua plans to use these ships to take over the world."

Gilder looked around the bridge, compelled to rub his hoof along the corners of the control panels. "With a whole fleet of ships like this, Valua would easily take over the world. Especially since Nasrad has fallen. SO, your Royalness... There's still one thing that I can't figure out. Why would you help us escape, then take us to the bridge of your flagship? You've gone through a lot of trouble just to show off..."

"Yeah," Aika agreed as she crossed her front legs. "Gilder has a good point."

All eyes were on Enrique. His actions were largely suspicious, and he WAS a Valuan after all. What was he planning? Was this some crazy scheme to lure them into a trap? Enrique lowered his head, and a brief silence followed.

"I..." Enrique began. "I want you to take this ship... And I want you to take me with it!"

"WHAT?!" Vyse shouted as he almost tripped backwards.

"Are you serious?" Aika added.

Enrique raised his head and lifted his hoof. "Valua has been taking over other countries by force, destroying their lands, and murdering innocent ponies. As a Prince of the Valuan Empire, all of the innocent blood spilled by the Armada is on my hooves. I've done all I can to convince the Empress, and Galcian, that what Valua is doing is wrong, but I cannot convince them to change their ways.

"Everything I have tried has failed. I am powerless to stop them. My only chance for redemption is to aid you. Please! Take me with you! I will even go with you as a hostage."

Enrique bowed to the Air Pirates, ready to do whatever it took to end his mother's evil plans. Vyse saw the determination in his eyes, and heard the honesty in his voice. How could he turn away such a noble endeavor?

Vyse placed a hoof on Enrique's shoulder. "Of course you can come with us. But, there is one problem... the Blue Rogues don't take hostages. If you want to sail with us, you must do so as a Blue Rogue."

Everypony on the bridge smiled, even Enrique. "... Thank you!" said Enrique as he lifted himself up. "I will do my part as a member of your crew!!"

"You know, I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Vyse of the Blue Rogues."

"It is an honor to be a member of your crew Vyse," Enrique said as he shook Vyse's hoof.

Aika rubbed her head. "I never would've thought that I'd be riding in the same ship as a Valuan, let alone the PRINCE of Valua. But... The Elements are still in the hands of the Valuans..."

"Yes..." Fina agreed, the fact dawning upon her as well. "You're right..."

"Well..." Enrique interrupted. "Technically, you are right."

"What?" Aika asked, curious as to what Enrique's little smirk was all about.

"I have the Elements. I stole them before I came to the docks to find you. I tried to destroy them... But perhaps it would be best if I returned them to you. Please, take them." Enrique levitated two jewels out of his bag: one shaped like an orange apple, the other a pink butterfly.

"Wow! Enrique, you've done so much for us already... Thank you!"

"Heh," Gilder laughed, "you act an awful lot like an Air Pirate, for a Prince."

"Alright!" Vyse yelled as he took the helm. "Start the engines!! Let's take the Delphinus and get out of here!!!"

"Yeah!!!" everypony cheered.

The Delphinus hummed to life, as the support structures locking it in place gently lifted from it. With the grace of a pegasus first taking flight, it slowly hovered out of the docks, and into the giant tunnel that led to the Grand Fortress gates. But alas, they were too late.

"They sealed off the entrance!" Vyse shouted, noticing the gates were now closed.

"I wouldn't worry too much about the fortress," Gilder said. "They haven't had time to repair the spot where I blew up the cannon, so it should be extremely weak right now. And if this ship's got the firepower that the Prince said, we should be able to blast our way out."

"Vyse, just to let you know..." Enrique began. "The Delphinus is equipped with Valua's newest and most POWERFUL weapon. It's called the Gemstone Cannon. Until recently, it was only an experimental weapon under development by Lord De Loco. He used data collected from the Orange and Pink Gigas to develop it. He says that this cannon's power rivals that of the Gigas themselves... But the manufacturing cost of this cannon is so immense that this ship is the ONLY one in the entire Armada equipped with it."

"Wow!!!" Aika beamed. "That means this ship is as powerful as a Gigas then! I can't believe it!!!"

"Well then..." Gilder began. "Vyse, let's give her a test run, shall we?"

The Delphinus approached the smoking hole where the blown up cannon was. With a press of a few simple buttons, the part of the hull directly beneath the ship's bowsprit opened up a flower coming into bloom. A long, thin cannon stretched out of it, and began to glow with a powerful-looking aura that completely encompassed it. The aura passed through the barrel and around it again, in a never-ending cycle of ever-growing power.

"Gemstone Cannon..." Vyse said as he slammed a large red button before him. "FIRE!!!"

A beam, the size of which would never have been predicted based on the cannon's diameter, shot forth at a speed faster than the eye could watch. For what seemed like several minutes, a near endless supply of pink energy blasted through the walls before it. The beam caused tornadoes, lightning bolts, and various explosions all around it, each one adding to the limitless destruction the Gemstone Cannon was capable of.

Within the first second of the blast, a hole big enough for even the Delphinus to fit through was formed. The Grand Fortress was severely scarred. Had it been a living creature, it would have died right then and there. The Delphinus, as well as everypony on board, had escaped from the "impenetrable" walls of Valua.

"We did it!" Vyse shouted as he flew through the air.

"I can't believe it!" Aika yelled. "We just broke through the Grand Fortress!"

Gilder laughed. "You sure know how to break in a new ship!"

"Now," Fina began as she slowly formed a smile, "we can finally continue on our search for the other Elements of Harmony!!"

Enrique looked out the window at the sight of Valua becoming more and more distant. "Well Valua, it looks like this is goodbye for now..."

From the window of the Admirals' meeting room, Ramirez watched the Delphinus escape. It flew far into the distance until it disappeared on the horizon, along with the Air Pirates, his Prince... and his foalhood friend.

"We did it!" Vyse celebrated once they were safely out of Valuan airspace. "We escaped from the Grand Fortress twice!"

"Yes," Fina agreed, "and I'm happy that we're all together again!"

"Some of us are happier than others..." Gilder moaned. Clara had recently boarded the Delphinus to be with Gilder, and had been nuzzling the side of his neck nonstop ever since. Both of her forelegs were wrapped around him, and she was almost tearing up with joy.

"Oh, Gilder!" she cried. "I'm so happy! I'll never let you go!"

"Out of one prison, into the next."

Aika laughed. "What's wrong, Gilder? You two make a cute couple!"

"I am very happy for you, Clara," Fina added.

"Oh thank you, Fina!" said Clara, finally looking up from Gilder's neck. "This is too good to be true! This is the happiest day of my life!!!"

Gilder rolled his eyes. "I'm REALLY starting to miss that jail cell back in Valua..."

"Well," Enrique interrupted, "since we have a new ship, I believe it's time to decide on a captain. Even though this is my ship, I am not an experienced sailor. I would feel more comfortable with somepony else at the helm."

"I know who I'd cast my vote for," Aika said. "Vyse... You're the best pony for the job!" Vyse stumbled backward from Aika's unexpected forwardness, totally speechless.

"I agree with Aika," said Fina. "I would feel most comfortable with you as our captain."

"I know that I just met you," Clara began, "but there's something about you... I think you would make an excellent captain."

"You're a great sailor, Vyse," said Gilder, "and a good leader. I think you'd make a great captain."

"Well, it seems unanimous..." Enrique announced. "Vyse, will you accept the responsibility of being Captain of the Delphinus?"

Vyse had no idea what to say. Everything was happening so quickly. In the course of the past hour, he had literally been given the most powerful ship ever created, and then voted by

everypony he knew to be its captain. Becoming the captain of his own ship had always been his dream. Now that it had been dropped right in front of him, was he going to let the opportunity slip away so easily?

Of course not. He would never forgive himself if he did.

"I'll do it!" Vyse announced. "I won't let you down!"

"That's what I wanted to hear!" Aika cheered. "Oh yeah! The Delphinus is going to need a new flag!"

"You're right, Aika!" Gilder agreed. "Every crew should have a flag that symbolizes what they stand for. And in most cases, that would be the cutie mark of that ship's captain."

"Yeah..." said Vyse. "The flag of the Albatross was based on my Dad's cutie mark. I think I'd like to follow in his hoofsteps."

"I'll make a big flag with your cutie mark on it," Fina offered, "and we can hang it right here in the bridge."

"Hey, Vyse," Aika interrupted. "I want to take a look around the Delphinus."

"I think we all should," Vyse agreed.

"We should split up and check the ship," said Gilder. "If something's wrong with it, it's better to find out now, rather than in the heat of battle."

"Sounds good to me! Break time, everypony! Meet back at the bridge when you're done."

Everypony in the room split up to take a good look around the Delphinus. There was a ladder that led up to the crow's nest, which was large enough to hold a slumber party in. Attached to the ridges of the nest was a large searchlight that could be rotated. The bridge of the ship was nice and wide, and because the ship didn't require wind to sail, there were no masts in the way. This would not only make it easier to clean, but also easier to fight on.

In the bottom rear of the ship was the luxurious dining hall, complete with gold chandeliers, tables for everypony, and a large kitchen stocked with sealed supplies. Even ponies that couldn't cook would be spared the threat of starvation with the wide variety of foods on board.

Vyse had finished exploring, and had returned to the bridge. He was alone, except for Gilder, who had been waiting for him. "Vyse, do you hear something?" he asked. "I keep hearing this rattling noise nearby..."

Vyse looked around for the source of the rattling. Behind one of the control panels was a large, lidded compartment for storing supplies. Vyse opened it, and could never have been prepared for what he'd found inside it. A green foal, with a red mane and a band-aid on his cheek.

"Heh... Long time no see, Vyse!" greeted the colt.

"Marco!" Vyse shouted, remembering him from his previous visit to Valua. "What are you doing here?!"

"I heard that the prince's ship was finished and was being prepared for departure. So, I

snuck on board and was planning on escaping Valua in it. I'd heard that the prince was a really nice pony, so I figured he wouldn't kill me for trying to escape. Well, at least not right away.

"But I never would've thought that you, of all ponies, would get your hooves on this ship! At least now I don't have to go looking for you! I'm gonna travel along with you whether you like it or not. But don't worry... I'll stay outta your way, okay?"

"Heh... You're pretty pushy there," Vyse chuckled. "Ah, why not...? I'll make you my first crew member!"

Marco began bouncing back and forth, excited to have been as lucky as Vyse had been in having his dream come true so unexpectedly. He immediately put himself to work as his captain's first mate, swabbing the decks of the Delphinus with an uncanny enthusiasm.

Lots of dreams were coming true today. Could anything possibly go wrong?

"I'm leaving," said Gilder.

"What?!" shouted Vyse.

"I'm going to head back and meet up with the Claudia. I figure this is probably my best chance to escape from Clara. I don't think I'm ready to settle down just yet."

"Sure you are. You two make a really cute couple."

Gilder raised his eyebrow as he checked to make sure no one was listening. "Vyse! Don't even joke about that!"

"Hahaha... alright, alright. Sorry, I couldn't resist. But seriously, we're all going to miss you."

"Thanks. Before I go, I have three pieces of advice for you. First... You'll need to get a crew. With a ship this size, you'll need a lot of crew members to take care of the specific duties. Get a good watchpony, a cook, a gunner... I'm sure there are plenty of skilled ponies out there who will join the fight against Valua. If you run into anypony who can help you, bring them aboard.

"Second, you'll need a base. You'll need a place to repair your ship, and your crew will need warm beds and meals every once in a while. Your father has his own base, right? You said it was on Pirate Isle. Well, you'll need your own headquarters as well. What about that deserted island that I found you on? I believe it's called Crescent Isle... That island looks just about right. Why don't you head back there?"

"And most of all... No matter what happens, never give up. I don't know if you've realized it yet, but you've accomplished a lot so far... especially for somepony your age. You've escaped from the Valuan Coliseum, crossed South Ocean, found Discord's Treasure, defeated three of the Armada's Admirals, took two of the Gigas out of commission, and escaped from the Grand Fortress... twice.

"For some reason, everypony seems to follow you, myself included. Even though you're a little loco in the coco. Actually... it's because no matter what happens, you never give up. Anytime something stands in your way, you never let it stop you. Your crew knows that you will

always do everything in your power to protect them. I can tell by the way they all look at you.

"... And on this bridge, with this ship, you're going to sail around the world. You'll probably run into things ten times more dangerous than you've already faced, but no matter what happens, don't give up! If you follow my advice, you'll accomplish things that you've never even dreamed of..."

"Thank you..." Vyse said after Gilder's long-winded, yet meaningful speech.

"Oh, Gilder!" called the voice of Clara. "Where are you?"

"Oh no!" shouted Gilder as he ran for the door. "It's Clara! Sorry, Vyse... I can't stay and chat any longer. She'll catch me and it'll be all over!!! So long, Vyse. I hope to see you again someday... I usually just sail around in search of fun, but the time I spent sailing with you... was probably the most fun I've ever had. Keep it up!"

"Thanks for everything, Gilder," Vyse whispered as his friend bolted out the door. About a half-minute later, a dumbfounded Clara came into the room.

"Hey, Vyse..." she began, looking around the room. "Where did Gilder gallop off to?"

"Uh, um..." Vyse mumbled, not wanting to betray Gilder, but not wanting to lie to Clara, either. "He said that he was... um... going back to the Claudia."

"What?! Well, I've got to catch him right away! He's not getting away from me that easily!" And Clara left to continue her lifelong chase.

Vyse giggled to himself. "... Well, it looks like Gilder is going to need more luck than me..."

All was silent, save for the ever-present humming of the engine. Vyse was finally completely alone in the bridge. With an almost hesitant air about him, he slowly approached the helm of the ship, as if he were nearing a great treasure. When he came to it, he rubbed his hoof along the wheel, carefully easing it to the left, and to the right.

This was his. The ship, and everything on it, belonged to him. He didn't even need to steal it. It was rightfully his in every sense of the phrase. And the helm he held in his hooves was the proof of it. Standing in that very spot, Vyse was going to make all of his dreams come true...

Vyse took in a deep breath, as the clouds before him whisked past. "I can't believe it. I'm finally the captain of my own ship. And the Delphinus is quite a ship! Alright... let's go! Full speed to Crescent Isle!!!"

In truth, the Delphinus had not yet been completed. The hull hadn't been fully reinforced yet, so it was impossible to fly through stone reefs, as the Little Jack could with the Harpoon's aid. And the engine's output settings hadn't been properly adjusted yet either, so it wasn't able to power through sky rifts. They would have to wait until a professional made the necessary upgrades to it.

Because Nasrad and its army had fallen, the South Dannel Strait was no longer guarded, allowing the Delphinus to pass through unhindered. The sight of the burnt city tempted Vyse to flood his own heart with anger, but now was not the time for that. There was nothing he could do for the surviving ponies of Nasrad at that moment.

Despite having been totally lost when he was on the island before, Vyse managed to locate Crescent Isle's exact location this time around. The Delphinus dropped anchor, and the crew emerged to take a good look at what would become their new home. It was largely unchanged from when Vyse was last on it.

"Hey, Enrique..." Aika said. "How does it feel to be outside the Imperial Palace?"

"Huh? Oh..." Enrique was looking rather ill. Bags had formed under his eyes, and he struggled to put on a smile. "Everything is so... ungh... so... beautiful. The sky is... blue... and the clouds... are white. I've never seen anything like it... before..."

"Heh. Looks like somepony is a little airsick. Perhaps all of this traveling is a little rough for our sheltered Prince."

"Yes... Aika... you are correct... I... I never realized that sailing could be so... so... rough. But this was my... decision... I can't let a little airsickness... slow me down... Ungh...!!!" Enrique leaned over the side of the island to hurl, gasping to catch his breath afterward.

Fina laid a hoof on his back to comfort him. "Enrique... are you going to be alright?"

Vyse grinned. "Well, it looks like this is going to be a long trip for Enrique."

"Yeah, don't worry Enrique," Aika consoled. "Once you get used to sailing, you won't get sick as easy. I'm sure you'll be okay."

"Hey!" came a gangly voice from behind them. "It took you long enough to get here!"

Standing behind the Blue Rogues were two very old-looking stallions. One was so skinny, he looked as though standing alone was strenuous enough to snap him in half. He had a blue coat, a long blonde beard, and a wrench for a cutie mark. The other was extremely short for his age, even shorter than De Loco. He was green with a short white beard and an image of a hammer on his flank. Both of them were earth ponies.

"Hey! Hey!" yelled the short one. "It's good to meet you! You're Vyse, right?!"

"Gilder told us you needed a crew," said the skinny one. "We're here to report for duty. I'm Brabham! If anything's broke, I can fix it! I'm the greatest engineer that ever lived! That's a nice lookin' ship! If you want, I can get it running smoother than ever! Crank it up a few notches... give it more power..."

"Ba-ba-bam!" shouted the short one as he spun around and struck a pose. "I'm Izmael. You want something built? I build it. You don't want something built? I build it anyway. I'll build some buildings for you! You're going to need a base, right?"

"Uhh... sure..." Vyse replied, unsure how to react. He'd never met ponies this eccentric before. "Thank you."

"Leave it up to us!!!" Brabham laughed. "... But, before we get started, we'll need some

funds to cover expenses and labor. First, I'll fortify the hull of your ship so you will be able to pass through the stone reefs. Then, I will upgrade your engine, so... you'll be powering through sky rifts in no time. But it will cost you... 100,000 bits."

"I plan to build you a port and some living quarters first," Izmael explained. "Let's see... Cha-ching! I'll need about 300,000 bits. What a bargain!"

"What?!" Aika shouted with a shocked look on her face. "So all together, we'll need to give you 400,000 bits?!"

"Well," Enrique began, having slightly recovered from his sickness, "the Delphinus does need some modifications. And we are going to need more than a couple of caves to call this a base..."

"Enrique is right," said Vyse. "Let's put off our search for the other Elements of Harmony until we can get this all sorted out. But, how are we supposed to come up with 400,000 bits?"

"Gilder already offered a solution, actually" Brabham explained. "He told us that you found the lost treasure of Discord, right?"

"Well, yeah, but it's only one coin."

"That coin is still a priceless artifact. We are more than willing to accept that in place of a standard payment."

"Wow, really? This piece of junk?" Vyse held the Discord coin in his hoof, the emblem on it seeming to mock him with its cheesy grin. He did not hesitate to give it over to the two old ponies, who seemed very ecstatic about the transaction not because they were being paid, but because they could finally get to doing what they loved most: working.

"Oh, it's getting late..." Vyse blurted. "I'm starting to get hungry, too..."

"Way ahead of you!" said Brabham as he pointed to a nearby campfire. The two of them had already prepared dinner for their new employers.

"Great timing!" Aika said.

Vyse began trotting down to the campsite. "Well, it looks like we're spending the night at our new headquarters... Crescent Isle."

By the time the Blue Rogues had finished their dinner, night time had already rolled in. The four sat in a circle around the campfire, laughing at small jokes they each made about every tiny little thing. Brabham and Izmael did not join them; they were too busy working their plots off. Marco was already fast asleep.

"Well, the improvements to our ship are almost finished," Aika announced. "And pretty soon, we'll have an actual base on this island."

"Yeah," said Vyse. "Starting tomorrow, we should start searching for the remaining Elements of Harmony."

"Yes..." moaned Enrique. "But I hope this time, I won't get airsick..."

"Hahaha... You'll need to get over that!"

"Oh, Fina," Aika began, having suddenly been reminded of something that was bothering

her. "There's something that I wanted to ask you. That Admiral... umm... what was his name? Ramirez? How do you know him?"

"What?" Fina asked, surprised by the question. She was subconsciously hoping it would never be asked.

"When we met him in Nasrad, you seemed to know an awful lot about him." Fina remained silent. Speaking about Ramirez was difficult for her, especially after learning what he was doing these days. "If you don't feel like telling me, it's okay... Don't worry about it."

"... No, I'm sorry," Fina apologized. "I should have told all of you about him sooner. I will tell you everything I know about... Ramirez. You know that I am an Alicorn... a descendant of the Magenta Civilization... Ramirez is an Alicorn as well."

"What?!" Vyse asked. "But, he only has a horn!"

"He has wings as well. He is merely hiding them beneath his clothes."

"That makes sense," Enrique pondered. "If the Armada knew he was an Alicorn, they'd be trying to capture him instead of Fina. He probably feigns ignorance of the Elements in order to keep up his disguise."

"Ramirez was our best warrior. He can channel the power of the Magenta Moon through his blade, making it sharp enough to cut through light. We grew up together... A long time ago, he was one of my best friends. He didn't used to be so... so heartless and cruel. He used to care for me like a little sister.

"When we heard that the Valuans were trying to reawaken the Gigas, Ramirez volunteered to come down here and stop them. He went on a journey to search for the Elements... alone. Shortly after he started his quest, we lost track of him. We never even dreamed that he would join forces with the Valuan Empire. Those were the ponies that he was sent here to stop.

"I don't know why he changed. I hope the Ramirez I knew isn't gone forever..."

"Admiral Ramirez," Enrique mused. "Not only is he one of Valua's greatest swordspories, but he is also a master strategist. He used to be Galcian's Vice Captain. But, I don't even think he knows Ramirez's past."

"Cheer up, Fina!" Vyse suddenly broke the somber mood. "We're here with you now! Two Air Pirates, an Alicorn, two crazy old stallions, a snot-nosed brat, and an airsick Prince! Valua doesn't stand a chance against us. There's no other ship that can boast a more motley crew!"

Fina couldn't help but giggle.

"Fina, what Vyse is trying to say..." Aika began, "is that you aren't alone..."

Enrique turned to Fina as well. "I'm not sure if I appreciate his comment about the airsickness, but we're all together now."

"Vyse... Aika... Enrique..." Fina wiped away the water that was forming in her eyes. "When I came here, I was all alone... Now I have so many wonderful friends... Thank you so much. Thank you all. I... I will do my best."

"Alright!" Vyse cheered. "So tomorrow, we continue our search for the rest of the Elements of Harmony! We'll start early."

"Oh, Enrique..." Aika sung. "Are you sure you can get up on time without a servant to wake you?"

"Hey!" Enrique snapped back. "I always get up on my own! I don't need any servants..."

Everypony laughed at how easily Enrique got angry at Aika's little joke. Afterwhich, they all turned in for the night. Another big adventure awaited them.

By the time morning came, Brabham had already finished making the adjustments to the Delphinus. The stronger hull would allow it to push through stone reefs. The stronger engine would allow it to power through normal sky rifts. Brabham even painted over the purple markings, making them blue instead, to represent the Blue Rogues.

"Well, it's time," said Vyse as the Blue Rogues stood around the bridge's meeting table, maps and the like covering it like a tablecloth. "Fina, where should we head next?"

"In the East," Fina began, "there is a land that basks in the light of the Blue Moon. That land is known as Yafutoma. Their culture is very different from yours."

"Yafutoma... Yafutoma..." Enrique whispered to himself as he rubbed his hoof against his head.

"You've heard of it, Enrique?" Vyse asked.

"Yes. According to Valuan historians, Yafutoma is a country far east of Nasr. It is scattered across several small islands. I remember the stories... the creatures living there are hybrids of birds and beasts, and they eat by manipulating multiple appendages at the ends of their forelegs."

"They're hybrids??" Aika asked, looking more dumbfounded than ever. "And they eat with, what, tentacles or something? What are they supposed to look like? And how do they eat with tentacles? Are they monsters?!"

"Hmm..." Vyse thought. "Somehow, I don't think it's what you're imagining, Aika..."

"I was hoping that we'd get to eat all kinds of exotic food on our trip... This has me a little worried..."

"To get to Yafutoma," Enrique explained, "we should sail around the southern tip of Nasr. Some time ago, during the Valuan-Nasr War, a cape was discovered by invading Valuan forces. The cape was named Cape Victory. There is a city there called Esparanza. If anypony knows how to get to Yafutoma, it would be the ponies there."

"Okay," Vyse said, "so we're heading south of Nasr. Alright, everypony to their stations! Let's go!"

At this point, the Delphinus only had a five-pony crew. It was more than what the Little

Jack had, but then again, the Delphinus was a much, MUCH larger ship, and would eventually require much greater care. Vyse was positioned at the helm, steering the ship. Enrique did his best to be the lookout, despite his airsickness. Aika was stationed at the cannons as usual; that was a job she knew how to do well. Fina spent this time learning where everything was in the kitchen, as she was the only member of the crew who actually knew a bit about cooking. Marco continued his work as the pseudo-janitor, and never regretted a second of it. Brabham and Izmael stayed behind to build the headquarters, promising to be done by the time they returned.

The trip to Esparanza took about three days. They had to travel south past Nasrad, and then west into the desert where the Temple of Pyrynn stood. Further southwest still, they came to a sky rift, which made them quite proud of themselves that they could actually pass through it. On the southern tip of the Nasrean continent, just as predicted, was the steel city of Esparanza.

The Blue Rogues disembarked at the pier, except for Marco, who remained on-board. The notion of sailing excited him so much that although it was even newer to him than it was for Enrique, Marco didn't get airsick. He wanted to spend as much time on the ship as possible.

Far to the east of where they stood, on the edge of the horizon, the Blue Rogues could see a sky rift. It was similar in appearance to the two darker sky rifts they'd seen before, and were still incapable of passing through. But this one... this one was pitch-black. It looked rounder, thicker, like an ever-present storm the size of a whole country.

In at least two visible directions, walls of dark sky rifts poured from it, one of them to the north. This giant rift had been the source of the ones Vyse encountered before. The storm itself may have been concentrated to this one area, but its effects were spread worldwide. Vyse wondered what pegasi, in their right minds, would create such a devastating storm.

"That sky rift looks worse than any of the others..." Vyse noticed.

"If we tried to power our way through it," said Aika, "I think the Delphinus would get ripped to pieces."

"But, if we don't go through there, we won't be able to reach Yafutoma. Isn't there something we can do?"

"Ungh..." moaned Enrique, airsick as usual.

"Are you feeling any better this time?" Aika asked.

"No... To be completely honest, I feel awful. Why don't you take a look around the city? I don't think it would be wise for me to move in my condition."

Enrique leaned over the side of the pier to hurl again, prompting Fina to rub his back. "I'll stay here and look after Enrique."

"Alright," said Vyse. "Aika, let's go check out the city. Somepony here has to know how to get to Yafutoma."

The city was a lot drearier up front. The buildings were rusted, debris lied all over, and stray dogs ran amok. It was nearly identical to Lower City Valua, only hot instead of cold and twilit instead of dark. They weren't many ponies roaming the streets, and the few that were seen wore very tattered clothing. The citizens of Esperanza included Valuans and Nasreans alike, and they seemed to be living together in peace. But then, why did everypony look so depressed?

As any good adventurer knows, the best place to scour for information is the local pub or tavern. It didn't take long to find; it was located right in the center of town. There were three ponies inside: a male unicorn getting intoxicated off salt at the bar, a female earth pony who was the bartender, and a pegasus with a long mustache and a broken wing slouched in the corner with a bottle of berry punch in his lap.

"You're not from around here, are you?" asked the mustached pegasus.

"Actually," Vyse began, "we just came into town and we were wondering if somepony here could help us."

"So you came to me... Well, that's just great... By the way, the name's Don. Now ask me your question and be on your way."

"You know that sky rift to the east...? How do you get through it?"

Don remained silent. After a few seconds, a large grin grew on his face, and he slammed his bottle onto the table. "SO, yer lookin' for a way to cross the Everfree Rift, eh?!"

The other two ponies at the bar turned to look at Vyse and Aika. For a few awkward seconds of silence, the two of them were stared at as if they'd said something horrible. They felt very uncomfortable.

"MWAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!" Don maniacally laughed. "So, the world is still full of foals..."

"What?" Aika asked.

"Are you two really serious?" the tavernkeep asked. "You're trying to cross the Everfree Rift?"

"They don't stand a chance," said the unicorn. "Somepony better tell their parents where they are."

"Kid," Don began. "That's no ordinary sky rift... The lands inside of it just ain't natural. Plants grow and spread... animals fend for themselves... and storms generate... ALL without the aid of ponies."

"What?!" Aika asked. "Those things just happen in there? All by themselves?!"

"During the war, this cape was discovered... And this city was built. This place is the edge of Equestria. If you try and go any further east, you'll be killed. Hundreds of ponies... good ponies... have died tryin'. But, there's always a few foals that don't heed the warnin's. The Everfree Rift usually claims `em..."

"Some of the best sailors from all over the world tried to cross the Everfree Rift. They came from everywhere... One by one, they tried to pass through. All of them failed. The ships that enter the Everfree Rift are either pushed away by the winds... or they get sucked in, never to

return.

"My crew and I lost our ship. We were lucky to survive. After a while, sailors stopped comin'. All we do now is sit around here, and wait to die..."

"Some things are just impossible," the unicorn added. "Why don't you just go back to wherever you came from and have your mommy tell you bedtime stories?"

"What's wrong with you ponies?!" Aika shouted, furious at the nonsensical misery that surrounded her. "Vyse, let's go! We're just wasting our time here."

Vyse remained silent. He was just as angry as Aika, but he kept it contained. He stepped closer to Don and glared at him. "Thanks for telling me about the Everfree Rift..." said Vyse. "Before I go, I just want to say that I've never met a more pitiful bunch in my life. If you lose sight of one dream, you replace it with another. Think about how much you could have accomplished in the time that you've spent here."

"Just because you couldn't cross the Everfree Rift, are you going to sit here for the rest of your life? Because you tried something once and failed, are you going to throw the rest of your life away? There's a whole world out there to see! Don't you have any desire to sail again?"

Don remained silent. Vyse couldn't tell if he was hurt by those words, or just ignoring them. Don didn't get the chance to respond, because Fina came busting in, a look of worry on her face.

"Fina, what is it?" Vyse asked.

"Vyse! Aika!" Fina cried. "Come to the port! Quickly! The Armada is coming!!!"

"What?!" Aika shrieked. "What are they doing here?!"

"Aika, let's move!" said Vyse. "We should hurry back to the port."

Back at the port, Enrique had fully recovered from his airsickness, and was looking out at the horizon. "Ah, Vyse... you're back. I think you need to see this..."

Vyse used his glass eyepatch to look in the direction Enrique faced. Surrounding the city were two maroon-colored ships, led by a third very large one with a spiked shield attached to the front: the Auriga.

"That huge armored ship belongs to Admiral Gregorio," Enrique explained. "Gregorio is the best defensive tactician the Valuan Armada has ever seen. They even nicknamed him 'Ironwall'."

"Interesting..." said Vyse. "He's forming a blockade around the town."

"Prince Enrique!" called a voice from down the pier. One of Gregorio's personal guard ponies had come ashore. He saluted the Prince when entering his presence, for even though Enrique had turned traitor, his subjects still had great respect for him. "I've come on behalf of Admiral Gregorio. He has an urgent message for you."

"I see. Well done," Enrique thanked. He levitated the message in front of himself, and read it out loud. "I hope my Prince finds himself in good health. I heard that you had a change of heart, or were perhaps brainwashed by the Air Pirates. Empress Teodora has sent me to escort

my Prince back to Valua, so that he may recover. If my Prince refuses to comply, my ships will regrettably begin firing upon the city tomorrow at noon. Your Humble Servant, Gregorio.' ...
Hmm... Uncle Gregorio is asking me to surrender."

"Uncle?" Vyse asked.

"Oh, Gregorio was an Admiral in the Armada even before my father passed away... He helped raise me when I was growing up... I even earned my cutie mark thanks to his training... He's always been like an uncle to me. I know that he doesn't want to fight, and he really does want me to surrender... But I can't go back. Not after everything they've done. Even if... even if it means I have to fight him."

"Enrique?"

"Let's rest up for tomorrow. Gregorio is the most honorable pony that I've ever met. He won't break his word."

"I understand. We should rest up on land tonight and keep you off the ship until tomorrow. The last thing you need is for your 'Uncle' to see you throwing up over the railing in the heat of battle."

"... Great... now you're starting to sound just like Aika."

"Haha, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Come on, let's stay at the inn tonight. We're gonna need our rest."

The next morning, the Blue Rogues all gathered at the pier, rested and ready for their next encounter with the Armada. "It's time to go fight Admiral Gregorio," Vyse announced. "It's going to be a tough battle. Give it everything you've got!"

"Aye aye!" Everypony else cheered.

"Hey..." came a familiar voice from behind them. It was Don. "You aren't actually goin' to fight against the Armada, are ya? You're planning to fight Admiral Gregorio by yourselves?"

"Yup," Vyse coyly responded. "That's the plan."

Don smirked and shook his head. "I don't doubt your abilities, but I used to be a Valuan Soldier. I know what the Armada can do. Going up against one of their Admirals is crazy."

"Our ship is the best there is. We're faster than Gregorio's ship, and I think we can match their firepower."

"But... even if you win... You'll never get through the Everfree Rift!"

"Like I said," Vyse began, "our ship is the best there is. Our engines are more powerful than you think. And it might just be powerful enough to get us through the Everfree Rift."

"Besides... Ever since I was a foal, I've always wanted to see what was beyond the edge of the world. That very edge is right in front of me. I have a chance to do what nopony else has ever done before. I have a chance to make history today."

"If I said that I'm not scared, I'd be lying. But, I won't let this opportunity pass me by. The chance to fulfill my foalhood dream lies right in front of me. You don't expect me to just give up, do you?"

Don was about to respond, his mouth holding the air with which he wanted to speak. But he couldn't come up with anything to add to his debate. He sighed, and laughed a little. "Heh heh... I suppose, then, no matter what I say, you're not goin' to listen... Alright, then at least listen to this:

"The Everfree Rift is a giant vortex. If you can get through one side, you'll reach the eye in the middle. It is rumored that the eye is calm. There are other calm pockets along the edges of the Everfree Rift. If you find one of the pockets, you might have half of a chance."

"I see... Thank you!" said Vyse, as he and his crew boarded the Delphinus.

"Heh... You're just like me when I was your age..."

"Admiral," Gregorio's Vice Captain reported. "The Delphinus is approaching. It is moving into attack position."

Gregorio was a very old earth stallion with a salmon-colored coat, a very short white mane, and facial hair. He wore a large, iron breastplate around his torso, and his cutie mark was a shield. "My orders were to bring him back alive, or kill him if he refuses. We must do everything in our power to take him alive. All ships, prepare to attack! The Delphinus is the Armada's most powerful ship. Our adversaries may be young, but we can't underestimate them."

"Vyse," Aika began, "the Armada is getting ready to attack us!"

"This is it!" Vyse declared. "Everypony, to your battle stations! We've got to get past Admiral Gregorio's defenses! We will defeat him! Then we'll get through the Everfree Rift and reach Yafutoma!"

"Aye aye!" they all saluted.

And so the battle began. The cruiser was the first ship to approach the Delphinus. "Air Pirate scum!" its captain shouted. "Give the prince over! You'll pay for foalnapping and brainwashing him!"

"Alright, Aika," said Vyse. "Time to see what the Delphinus is really capable of. Fire!"

Aika activated the cannons on the portside of the ship as they turned to face the cruiser. The cannons on the Little Jack weren't able to adjust their direction, so this was an incredible convenience for them. The Delphinus's massive cannons shot straight at the enemy ship, with a speed no cannonball had ever seen before. The shots ripped right through the cruiser, easily crippling it in one fell swoop. One down, two to go.

Meanwhile, the battle had attracted the attention of Esparanza's ponies. They had all come out to watch the battle, and as soon as they saw how powerful the Delphinus really was, they began cheering for it, a newfound happiness brought to their previously dull lives.

"Yeah! Go!" they shouted. "Turn!!! No, not that way!!!"

"You idiots! What are you doing? You're supposed to fire all your cannons right there!!!"

"Yeah, get them!!! Hey, they're not that bad!!!"

Don was watching the fight with a bit more serious attitude than everypony else. "They still need to get past two more ships... They have a long way to go!"

After the near instantaneous defeat of the cruiser, the battleship took the field. "You'll never defeat the 2nd fleet of the Imperial Armada!" shouted its captain.

Vyse thought that a few cannon blasts would be enough to finish it off. But the enemy battleship was heavily armored, as a ship in Gregorio's fleet would be expected to be. The entirety of the enemy ship's hull was heavily reinforced. Cannonfire wouldn't be enough, but Vyse didn't want to waste any energy firing the Gemstone Cannon.

There was only one vulnerable spot on the battleship: the deck, which was located on top and wasn't easy to target. Unlike the Little Jack, however, the Delphinus was equipped with torpedoes, missiles that could fly high into the sky and then land on top of opponents. Vyse gave the order for one to be fired.

Firing a torpedo in this manner is extremely tricky business. It takes time for the torpedo to come back down, and when it does, the target needs to still be underneath it, which is nearly impossible when the target is moving. This is why knowing how long a torpedo takes to land, and predicting the enemy's movements are essential to their usage.

Because torpedoes were so difficult to use, most ponies didn't use them despite their power. But this was the Delphinus we're talking about. Its highly advanced torpedoes were capable of homing in on its targets, to the point where they could move while falling to ensure they struck their target. Vyse couldn't believe his eyes when the very first torpedo they fired shifted to a sudden angle to hit the battleship and blow it to smithereens.

"Alright!" Aika cheered as she galloped about in small circles. "We're doing great!"

"Gregorio's ship, dead ahead!" Fina reported, having been practicing standard sailor dialect. "He'll be in range shortly!"

"Uncle Gregorio..." Enrique said to himself. "I can't let you take me back!"

"Alright..." said Vyse. "Full speed ahead!!! It's now or never!"

"Prince Enrique..." said Gregorio as he brought his ship to a halt in front of the enemy. "Please forgive me for taking up hooves against you, but you leave me no choice. I will not allow you to escape! You will not get past the Auriga!"

As soon as the battle began, Vyse tried to move the Delphinus into a normal cycling formation, as was the standard practice for ship combat. But before he even realized what was happening, the entire ship began to violently tilt to the side. Gregorio's ship had actually rammed them with the spiked shield attached to its front! The Delphinus spun to the side as the Auriga passed by.

"Did he... Did he just RAM us?!" Vyse shouted as he got up off the floor. "That pony is

freaking nuts!!"

"As I stated before," Enrique said as he too got up, "Gregorio has been nicknamed 'Ironwall' by his peers. He is the Armada's best defense tactician... By using the most indestructible parts of his ship as a weapon, he ensures that the more vulnerable parts are never exposed."

"Ugh, he's already moved back into position... He's getting ready to ram us again. I wonder if we can pierce his defense with the Gemstone Cannon."

"It's worth a shot. But Vyse... please, try to aim for just the shield."

"... I understand. I'll do my best to avoid destroying the ship."

Vyse took the helm of the ship and began steering it out of the Auriga's path. The Delphinus curved up and over the Auriga as it tried to ram them again, sending both ships flying in opposite directions.

"Okay, everypony," said Vyse. "Here's the plan. I want all of the ship's power to be redirected to the engines. We're gonna try to make a hard turn the next time he tries to ram us. And as soon as we do, I want the Gemstone Cannon ready to fire! Target: the shield at the front of his ship!"

"Aye aye!" they responded.

Both ships, now a ways apart, turned to face the other. Both headed in a straight line, like two magnets coming together. As soon as the Auriga powered up its engines in preparation for the ram, Vyse gave the order for the same to be done with the Delphinus. The Delphinus's sudden boost of speed let it slip to the side of the Auriga as it continued to turn around. The Auriga turned in its direction in an attempt to continue its assault, not realizing that it was putting its broad side in the range of the Delphinus.

"Gemstone Cannon... FIRE!"

The Gemstone Cannon fired straight at the front of Gregorio's ship, hitting it only from the side. Only the frontmost tip was struck, disintegrating the spiked shield while leaving everything else intact.

Gregorio was no fool. That spiked shield may not have been his only offense, but it was the most indestructible part of his ship. If the Delphinus could so easily destroy it, there'd be no chance he would survive a direct hit. The power of the Delphinus had no equal.

Gregorio surrendered. He immediately gave the order for his crew to wave the white flag.

The Auriga pulled up next to the Delphinus. The crews of both ships emerged to their respective decks, so that they might converse. Enrique and Gregorio took the leads, each staring at the other for a few silent moments.

"I always thought," Enrique began, "that if we were ever in battle together, that we'd be on the same side."

"Prince Enrique," said Gregorio. "Is there anything I can do to make you reconsider?"

"... No... I've made up my mind. I am not going back to Valua. I know that you've noticed

a change in the Empire as well... They are headed down a dark path... Trying to rule Equestria with an iron hoof... It will be Valua's downfall... This world... this sky... is not Valua's to rule. It belongs to the ponies.

"And to right the wrongs that Valua has committed, I have decided to travel with Vyse and his companions. Tell that to my mother. And also, that I pray every day for her good health. This is goodbye. I must go. Be well."

"Farewell, Young Prince."

The ponies of Esparanza danced and cheered and celebrated as they watched the Delphinus speed off toward the Everfree Rift.

"Those ponies are great!" they shouted. "They just took out the Armada with one ship!"

"HaHaHa! They make me feel like sailing again!"

Don took a sip of punch, and grinned at the vanishing ship. "Vyse... You put on quite a show... If you make it back from the Everfree Rift... I hope you come back here and tell me about it... I can't believe I'm saying this... You hear me, Vyse?! You better make it back!"

The center of the Everfree Rift was far to the southeast of Esparanza. The Delphinus flew alongside its walls, looking for one of the air pockets Don had told them about. At the westernmost edge of the Rift, they finally found a small opening that led inside.

"It looks like we can get inside the Everfree Rift through here," Vyse deduced. "Enrique, are you ready?"

"... Yes, I'm ready," Enrique answered. "I don't suppose I have much choice at this point. We must get through the Everfree Rift no matter what. Don't mind me... I will be fine. This is neither to time nor the place to be complaining about airsickness."

Vyse ordered that all of the doors leading outside be locked, and that each member of the crew remain inside at all times. The Delphinus slowly slid into the vortex. Just as Don had said, the area beyond the vortex was calm. The Rift appeared to be somewhat layered, with certain spaces between the layers being calm. But the inside was still almost completely pitch-black, the sun only dimly lighting the inside through the thick cloud ceiling. It almost felt as though they were flying through a massive cave with walls that would destroy them if touched.

The Delphinus sailed through various air pockets as they presented themselves. The rift was filled with floating islands upon which lied countless shipwrecks. The dreams and lives of so many ponies ended in this terrible place. Vyse prayed that he would not end up joining them.

The Blue Rogues were trying to head east, so normally, they'd be keeping an eye on the compass to ensure they wouldn't get lost. However, the compass was spinning out of control. There was no way to tell which direction they were headed now, especially since the various

pathways found in the rift seem to change location on a whim. Vyse was unpleasantly reminded of Discord's Island.

After some time of wandering around, Vyse found what was quite obviously the center of the vortex. The ceiling raised the highest here, and the layers of the Everfree Rift circled completely around it. Within this room were scattered several large rocks floating in the air. But they weren't simple islands. Upon closer inspection, they discovered that they were actually gemstones.

And every one of them was white in color.

"What the?" Vyse asked. "Those gemstones. They're white..."

"White gemstones?" Enrique asked. "But that doesn't make any sense. Gemstones come from the moons, and none of the moons are white."

"And look how many there are..." said Aika. "I don't think I've ever seen more gemstones in such a closed space before."

"Actually... I think you have," Fina added. "I believe you see large clusters of gemstones every time you look up at the sky."

"Wait. You mean the moons?"

"Fina has a point," said Enrique. "If there are white gemstones here, then there must have, at one point, been a white moon."

"What do you suppose happened to it?"

"I'm not sure. But I suspect its destruction has something to do with this Rift's existence."

"... That's incredible..." said Vyse. "That means Equestria actually had seven moons at one point?"

"I suppose it did."

"This is so exciting!" Vyse couldn't contain his happiness. His ears perked and his rear hooves kicked at the floor a little. He was learning things that nopony else had ever known before.

"So these gemstones..." Aika continued. "They're the remains of the white moon, huh? Doesn't that mean there must have been a White Civilization as well? Or a White Element?"

"Oh. Um..." Fina thought to herself. "I was only ever told about the Six Moons, and the Six Elements of Harmony. I'm afraid I don't know anything about a White Moon."

"If the theoretical White Civilization was wiped out by its Moon's destruction," Enrique began, "then any Element or Gigas it may have had may have been destroyed as well."

"Or, you know," Aika interrupted, "maybe there never were any of those things. Maybe this rift has always been here, devoid of ponydom. We don't have proof of any of our own claims."

"As much as I'd love to continue theorizing about a seventh continent," Vyse began, "because you know I really, really would... I think we should save it for after we escape from this place."

"Agreed," the others complied in unison.

The Delphinus wandered the Everfree Rift for what felt like hours. They had no indication of which direction they were headed, and far too often did they accidentally end up turning around, going in circles, or even finding their way back to the entrance. It was a natural labyrinth, the solution to which seemed impossible to find.

Vyse decided it was time to rest. He dropped anchor at a sturdy-looking island, and suggested that everypony take a break. Aika carefully opened the door to the bridge, hoping it was as calm in the air pockets as it seemed. To her relief, it was. Only a slight breeze was present, blowing from the nearby cloud wall. She trotted about the deck, taking in the surroundings, until a tall shadow formed over her.

The other Air Pirates heard Aika's shriek and immediately ran out to the bridge. "Vyse!! Help!!!" she cried. The ponies all bared their weapons at the creature that lived on the island, who had emerged from one of its rivers to attack Aika.

"Now just hold your horseshoes, you silly ponies, you!" said the creature as he flailed his claws around. "I absolutely did not mean to startle you. I just came to greet the first visitors I've had in centuries! It can get SO boring here by myself. Honestly, sometimes I feel as though I'm the ONLY creature in this entire Rift with any, shall we say, *CLASS*."

"Uh..." said Vyse, not sure what was going on. "Okay, then... No harm done, I guess."

Aika tilted her head as she looked at the strange, flamboyant creature. "Why is half of your mustache a different color from the rest of your hair?"

"Oh, well now THAT is a fantabulous story to tell! You see, I began dying it that way about a thousand years ago, after my encounter with..."

"Woah, woah..." Vyse interrupted. "You say you've lived here for a thousand years?"

"Indeed I have! And let me tell you, it has not gotten ANY less tacky in that time... Honestly, no other place in the world is in greater need of a few decorations."

"Yeah, that's great. Um, does that mean you know your way around?"

"Why, of course! This Rift shifts and turns and switches around more than a mare changes her mind!" Aika gave the creature a little sneer. "But I've had a millennium to learn how the whole thing works."

"Great!" said Vyse. "Could you tell us how to reach the eastern exit?"

"East? Well, what color was the entrance you took?"

"Huh? Color?"

"Yes, silly! Was it a Tangelo Orange? Or a Brandeis Blue?"

"Well, we came from the Orange civilization, so..."

"Then if you want to reach the other side, all you have to do is follow the blue-tinted tunnels! Here's a hint: they tend to be more pleasant to look at! Ohohohoho!"

"I see! Thank you very much!"

"Not a problem! Don't be a stranger now, cutie!" And the strange creature returned to the depths of the river it emerged from.

"... Did that guy just call me 'cutie'?"

Aika giggled. "I think you have another admirer, Vyse!"

Vyse did exactly as the odd creature suggested, following only the blue-tinted air pockets. He should've realized before that the tunnels were colored, but he was too busy trying to avoid the cloud walls. Following the blue tunnels made perfect sense too, as it meant they were reflecting the light of the Blue Moon.

After less than an hour, the blue tint of the cloud walls started to become more and more vibrant. The air pockets got bigger, and they could feel the Delphinus actually being pushed out of the rift in the blue light's direction. With a final, forceful push, the ship was shoved out of the Everfree Rift, and into the land of the Blue Moon.

"We did it!" Aika cheered. "We actually made it through the Everfree Rift!!"

"Well!" Enrique laughed. "I can't believe that we are actually going to be able to see what lies east of the Everfree Rift! We're making history as we speak!"

Vyse paid no attention to his crewmates. He was too excited. He continued to sail the Delphinus toward the light of Blue Moon, anxious to see what new and exciting things awaited him. He had discovered a new continent. He was beyond the edge of the world.

End of Chapter 6