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

The low glow of a lamp, running out of oil, is the only light about. The stars and moon covered by the angry clouds of a dark and stormy sky.

This lamp shines its light on a little dirt path between the rocks. The path goes up through the cliffs of a forlorn and bare little rock of an island. The cliffs, the rocks, the path, and a few palm trees are about the only things on this island - apart from the treasure, that is.

And it is because of this treasure that our pirate friend is here on this little island tonight as well. Though friend might not be the word to use for such a terrible figure as this one.

The little lamp she holds gives us a glimpse at her face. A jagged scar runs across it - starting at the left ear and painting a crooked Z through the nose, before ending at the other side of her chin.

Her mouth is turned down in a deep frown. Her eyes, look like two pieces of coal - black and smoldering - as they stare out into the darkness.

And of course, her grand feathered captains hat covers her matted brown hair - dirty and braided into knots and hooks.

This is our hero, as it were: Captain Sophia Zephyr.

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

But, there is a chance she might not stay that way.

Let's look, listen, and find out.



Castle Island

Captain Z rests for a bit on one of the large rocks along the steep path she's been following and checks the map in her hand. She makes sure she is still on the right path, and then continues trudging up the mountain.

The map is a treasure map, showing the route up these rocky cliffs of Castle Island.

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

You see, Captain Z is not the only pirate walking about on this island in the middle of a dark and stormy night. The Dread Captain Spears and his crew of scoundrels are searching and scouting on on that island too. Except they don't have the treasure map, you see, as Captain Z has stolen it from them, so they can't be searching for treasure. Instead, they are searching for her!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What a commotion those pirates make when they are sleeping!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They looked more like baby dolls than terrible pirates!

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

Hissy, his cat, trotted along beside him.



Captain Spears

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

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

Or the time he captured ten dolphins and tied their tails together. Then he spent a whole day skiing behind them as they pulled him through the water, shouting “Look at me! King o’ the

fishes! King o' the sea!" Though I have to hope he knows dolphins aren't fish at all, some times pirates aren't the smartest when it comes to that sort of thing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And both of these villains were looking for Captain Zephyr.

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

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

She had to escape, but how?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What luck!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Captain Z focused on her rowing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Up she flapped to perch on the top of the little chest, holding the stick in her beak. Then, she

stuck the stick into the keyhole along with the tip of one of her claws.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She opened the envelope and unfolded the paper.

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

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

Such questions, that didn’t concern the treasure on Castle Island were best held for another time. Captain Z folded the paper and put it back in the envelope. Then she put that envelope

in a small pocket on the inside of her vest. That should keep it safe till there's more time, she thought.

Right now, I need to find that path.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She walked along the rocky steep side of the cliffs. It was slow going, the bushes and trees blocked her way, making her go around. Large rocks and boulders were everywhere. More than a few times, the way was blocked by one of these big rocks and she had to backtrack to find another way around.

She was tired and scratched up when she finally something that made her heart skip a beat.