

# SKIES of EQUESTRIA

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## CHAPTER 4

“Hey, look!” Aika pointed her hoof out the front window. “There are leaves blowing in the wind.”

“Which means... we’re close to land!” Vyse exclaimed as he steered the Little Jack. “We’ve finally made it across South Ocean!”

“I’m sure these leaves came from Ixa’taka,” Fina deduced. “Under the light of the Pink Moon, ever since ancient times, the lands of Ixa’taka have been covered in lush forests and many varieties of animals. The moon has blessed the lands with fertility...”

“Blessed lands, huh?” Aika pondered. “If that’s true, I’m sure there are all kinds of delicious things to eat there. I can see it now... piles and piles of fruits, vegetables, hay, oats... all of different shapes, sizes, colors, and tastes...”

Vyse grinned devilishly. “I bet there are just as many carnivorous monsters roaming around the woods, too... Preying upon unsuspecting foals who sit there, stuffing their muzzles with fruit...”

“Hey! You don’t have to crush my hopes like that!”

Fina couldn’t help but giggle. “If Aika was hungry enough, she’d probably eat the monsters, too!”

Aika scoffed jokingly. “Vyse! Look what you did! Now you’ve got Fina doing it!”

“Oh... I... I’m sorry...” Fina apologized, not realizing that Aika was kidding. “I didn’t mean any harm...” Aika laughed to let Fina know everything was fine.

“Alright everypony, get to your posts...” Cap’n Drachma ordered. “Get ready to drop anchor.”

“Aye aye, Captain!” Vyse responded. “As soon as we see Ixa’taka, we’ll look for a spot to land.”

Ixa’taka was an enormous continent, almost as big as Valua. It’s many large islands were, as expected, covered from shore to shore in thick trees that made up the nation’s many forests and jungles. Rivers, lakes, and waterfalls were plentiful, and several Ixa’takan ships flew around,

which appeared to have been built from sticks and leaves. Ixa'taka was nature itself.

Surrounding the western borders of Ixa'taka was a giant, white stone reef. Although the Little Jack could sail through smaller reefs, this one looked completely impenetrable, even to steel ships. The northern borders were blocked by mountains and a giant net that appeared to be made of iron. Who could have built that, and why? The southern borders were blocked by sky rifts, and to the east lied the treacherous South Ocean, where our Air Pirates had just come through. It was no wonder nopony had ever heard of this place.

On one of the higher islands, on its eastern cliff, Vyse spotted what appeared to be a treehouse village. Vyse pulled the Little Jack into its harbor and dropped anchor to keep the ship from floating away. The welcome sign was in a language Vyse did not understand, but Fina recognized it easily. She read the village's name as "Horteka". Excited to meet the natives, the Blue Rogues entered the village.

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As soon as Vyse and friends entered the town, they were immediately welcomed by some nearby villagers. Or so they thought; they didn't feel very welcome. The ponies that greeted them said nothing, staring at the Air Pirates with a mix of confusion and caution. They were of an unusual appearance as well, as not only were they all earth ponies, but they had matching coat and mane colors and, to their surprise, patterns.

"Umm..." Aika began, confused. "These ponies are all black and white... And they have stripes, too..."

"They're not ponies, Aika," Fina explained. "They're zebras, and they were born with those stripes."

A couple of the zebras whispered to each other and nodded. Finally, one turned to the ponies, and asked, "Are you Fluttershy?"

"Huh?" Vyse asked, also confused.

"The pony behind you with wing and horn. Both are features Fluttershy had worn."

"What?" Fina was more confused than anypony. "Are they talking about me?"

"Umm... We're Blue Rogues," Vyse tried to explain. "We came across South Ocean."

The zebra villagers looked disappointed. "You are not Fluttershy; you will only bring doom. You are the same as the others; it's best you leave soon." The zebras turned and trotted away from the Air Pirates, refusing to speak to them any further.

"What did I say?" Vyse asked, feeling the zebras' animosity toward them was somehow his fault. "Who is this 'Fluttershy', and what do they mean by 'the others'?"

Fina wore a blank expression. "I have no idea. I don't know what they're talking about."

"We should meet with the leader of the village," Drachma suggested. "He might be able to explain what's going on here. Also, the trip across South Ocean has depleted our fuel supply. We need to stock up on gemstones if we ever want to leave this place."

“Okay...” Vyse agreed. “Let’s find the leader of this village... Maybe we’ll be able to find some gemstones here as well.”

The village of Horteka was a confusing labyrinth of treehouses, ladders, and slides. For zebras, who apparently did not have horned or winged variations of their species, this was probably the most convenient method with which to build the village. They appeared to be a simple and peaceful tribe, so Vyse wondered all the more why they were so unwelcome. As they explored the shops and tried to make conversation, they were responded to with only glares and silence.

On the far end of the village lied a particularly decorative straw hut, one that seemed larger than the other buildings. Correctly assuming that it was the residence of the village’s leader, they stepped inside. Sitting on a short, wooden throne was an exceptionally old zebra with extremely long eyebrows. The Air Pirates approached the village elder.

“So you are the ponies from the east who’ve just arrived today,” said the elder. “Your kind bring disaster. I demand that you sail away.”

“Wait a minute!” Vyse insisted. “Why does everyone keep talking about this ‘Fluttershy’ and these ‘other ponies’? I don’t even know who ‘Fluttershy’ is!”

“Fluttershy is our goddess, since generations before. She aided us after the Rains left our nation sore. Prophecies state that when the zebras of Ixa’taka are in danger, Fluttershy’s messengers will come from the east to eliminate these strangers.”

“I understand... And since we came from the East, that’s why everyone thinks ‘Fluttershy’ sent us.”

“But...” Aika interrupted. “If Fluttershy’s messengers are supposed to save you, why did you say that ponies from the East bring disaster?”

“Even now,” the elder began, “the ponies from the East destroy our flora and fauna. They claim they come from a faraway land, a dark place they call ‘Valua’.”

“Valua?! Then Belleza wasn’t lying! They ARE here!”

“When the Valuans came, everyzebra thought they were sent by Fluttershy. They said they were looking for gemstones, and we never wondered why. We took them to Gemstone Mountain, where they could all be seen. But they turned on us and attacked with a fire-breathing machine. They took over the mountain, where much zebra blood is spilled... For if they refuse to work, then they are quickly killed...”

“That’s terrible! They’ve enslaved the zebras to mine for gemstones so they can make weapons!”

“So that’s why everyone is so against these ‘ponies from the East’,” Vyse realized. Knowing he had to convince the village elder to trust them, Vyse bowed before him and looked him straight in the eyes. “Please... You need to trust us. We are different from the Valuans... the ‘Ponies from the East’. We fight against Valua so they can’t hurt others... And that is why we’ve come all this way... We need a very precious stone, called an Element of Harmony.”

The village elder stared blankly into Vyse's eyes. He had heard all of these things before from the lying mouths of the Valuans. And yet...

"You can't expect him to trust us..." Drachma sneered. "You're wasting your time!"

"... Please," Vyse begged. "I am telling the truth. Please..."

The village elder couldn't explain it, but the pony's modesty was something the Valuans did not show. He had a feeling, just a feeling, that this time, these same claims had a different purpose. "... If you fly North of this village, you will see... A hut in the forest, where our king will be. The zebras have passed down the Sacred Pink Stone for many ages. From the strongest of warriors, to the wisest of sages. Your eyes, they are pure; I believe your words are true. Please... save the zebras; I place my faith in you."

"Thank you..." said Vyse as he stood up. "I will not betray you. Let's go! We've got a country to save!"

The village elder began spreading the word throughout the village that the Blue Rogues could be trusted. Although many zebras disliked the elder's choice in allies, they nonetheless abided by his decisions and treated the Air Pirates more fairly. When asked where some gemstone fuel could be obtained, the zebras pointed the Air Pirates toward a cliff on the opposite side of town.

At the cliff, a large, rusty, iron ship had crash landed and was covered in vines and moss. Aboard and surrounding the ship was a sight Vyse never expected to see: ponies. A mare stood by the ship, foals played with a zebra child from the village, and a colt was hard at work on the deck of the ship. Vyse wondered if they weren't Valuans. Predicting the hard-working pony to be the leader of the group, the Air Pirates approached him.

"Hello," the colt greeted with a smile. "You certainly don't seem to be from this town. Who are you?"

"We're not," Vyse informed. "Actually, we had to cross South Ocean to get here. My name's Vyse."

"Wow! You were able to cross South Ocean? That's impressive. My name is Hans. It's good to meet you. We're Blue Rogues under the command of Captain Centime. We had to crash land here after we tried to cross South Ocean ourselves, and a hurricane blew us off-course."

"Centime..." Drachma pondered. "He's the Blue Rogue that takes in orphans and trains them. I also heard that's he a brilliant engineer."

"Yeah, he was... I mean, is. The Valuans kidnapped him and are forcing him to build weapons for them. We're staying here and working on the ship until he returns."

"Oh..." Fina whispered, sorry to hear the bad news. "I hope he returns soon..."

"Hey!" Aika shouted, mostly to lighten the mood. "Hans, I was wondering if you could help out some fellow Blue Rogues... We burned our fuel supply crossing South Ocean. Do you think you could spare a few gemstones?"

"Of course," Hans agreed as he dumped a particularly large gemstone out of his

saddlebag. “We’ve got plenty to spare!”

“Thanks!” said Vyse. “We owe you one. You’ve really helped us out a lot.”

“You’re welcome. Well, I need to get back to work. Good luck!”

Vyse was thankful that he was lucky enough to come across a fellow Blue Rogue willing to aid them, even if their being there was a misfortune. Vyse wondered if he couldn’t do something about Hans’s captain, Centime. Either way, now that they had enough fuel to last them a long time, the Little Jack was ready to head North. Hopefully, the hut the village elder told them about wouldn’t be too hard to find.

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It was a mere half a day’s flight northward that the crew of the Little Jack noticed something peculiar. A particularly strong smell that wasn’t coming from the ship, and thus must be something of great significance.

Aika sniffed around, trying to determine the scent. “What IS that smell?”

“It smells like something is burning,” Fina deduced.

Drachma stepped to the front and pointed forward, out the window. “Look on the horizon.”

Vyse was the first to notice what Drachma was pointing out, due to his keen eyes. “The forest!!!”

The forest was being burned to the ground. What was once a beautiful floor of trees now slowly faded into fire and ash. The entity responsible was the very machine the village elder had warned them about. A large, green, iron ship with an adjustable flamethrower attached to the front of the hull was sweeping the forest, burning every bit of flora until it was the last green thing in sight.

The one piloting this twisted machination was none other than the 5th Admiral of the Imperial Armada: De Loco. He grinned from ear to ear as he flailed his hooves around in uncontrollable excitement. “Burn! Burn! Buuuuuuuuuuurrnnnnnnnn!!! Witness the awesome power of my Flame Cannon! The thicker the forest, the more it burns! HAHAAHAHA!!! After I burn down the whole forest, I’ll be able to find the Lost City of Rixis, and the Element of Harmony will be mine!!!”

“Lord De Loco!” his Vice Captain calmly reported, apparently used to his leader’s hyperactivity. “There’s a ship approaching from the aft. It matches the description of those Air Pirates!”

De Loco stopped flailing his hooves, but continued smiling. “Vyse is here?! He’s the colt that escaped from the Grand Fortress and defeated Belleza! Perfect!!! PERFECT!!! He’s just in time to feel the heat from my Flame Cannon! Hehehehe... I wonder how Vyse likes his food... Medium? Or perhaps... Well-done!!! I hope he doesn’t die too fast! HAHAAHAHAHA!!!”

“Medium? Well-done? Sir, aren’t ponies normally vegetarians?”

“It was a JOKE, you moron!!!”

The Little Jack moved closer to De Loco’s ship, moving into battle formation. “This is horrible!” Aika cried. “What kind of twisted psycho would do this?”

“Whoever it is,” Vyse growled, “he’ll have to deal with me!”

“Heeheehee!” De Loco shrieked. “Fear the power of the invincible Chameleon!” De Loco may have been a few straws short of a haystack, but he was an Admiral for good reason. His ship was larger, so instead of rushing into the battle to make himself a bigger target for the Air Pirates, he kept his distance, staying out of their harpoon’s range and waiting for them to get close. What slipped De Loco’s mind however, was that the Air Pirates had cannons other than the harpoon, all of which he was soon struck by.

De Loco couldn’t believe he’d made such a novice mistake so early in the fight. “Damn you, Vyse!!! You dare even SCRATCH my precious Chameleon?! You will PAY for your insolence!!!”

“Lord De Loco...” the Vice Captain tried to reason with him. “We must repair the damage to the ship as soon as--”

“SILENCE! It may be damaged, but a perfect machine will never break down! Heehee... Just you watch! I’ll make sure to give Vyse a branding he’ll never forget!!!”

Out of pure, unnecessarily intense frustration, De Loco shifted the Chameleon into full pursuit mode, intent on getting his revenge even at the cost of further damage to his own ship. Despite the Little Jack’s speed, De Loco’s erratic strategy caught them by surprise, and their ship was immediately engulfed in the Chameleon’s strong flames.

“Haahahahaha!” De Loco laughed maniacally. “How do like THAT, Vyse?! That’s what you get for scratching my ship!”

Acting quickly, Vyse steered the Little Jack to safety while Fina used her unicorn magic to dump some barrels of water on the fire before it did any serious damage. Their ship was charred, but still perfectly functional. Though if they got hit by the flamethrower again, it would be the end of them.

“What the hay?!” Vyse shouted. “I didn’t think that flying piece of junk could do that much damage!”

“Listen, colt,” Drachma advised. “The next time he comes at us with that flamethrower, turn straight towards him and fire the harpoon!”

“What?! We’ll be killed!”

“De Loco is unpredictably erratic. We might not be able to defeat him normally, but he just revealed something interestin’ to us. Ya follow?”

“... I think so. It might be our only open shot at him. And if we survive, De Loco’s ship will be crippled! Alright, Aika! Fina! Fire all of the cannons at De Loco’s ship!”

Aika and Fina did as ordered, and De Loco, who was still gloating over having successfully burned the Little Jack, didn’t even notice their attack preparations. He was once again hit by several cannon blasts. With a blank stare followed by an incredible scream, De Loco

shifted his ship into full gear and speeded at the Air Pirates, flamethrower at the ready.

“Alright!” Vyse shouted. “Now, turn towards him quick! Fire the Harpoon Cannon! Target: the Chameleon’s Flame Cannon!”

The ship turned, and backed away from the Chameleon while doing so. Being close to it while this occurred would be a terrible idea. The Harpoon spun and fired directly at the Flame Cannon, striking it right in the barrel and clogging it before it could fire. The energy and pressure given off by the cannon caused it to overheat immediately, and then... it exploded in a gaseous cloud of fire, heavily damaging the Chameleon’s hull and permanently destroying its only offense. The harpoon was largely unaffected; nothing that couldn’t be fixed overnight.

“What?! WHAT?!! Impossible! My... my Flame Cannon! How?!?!?” De Loco began flailing all four of his legs around in a fit even more severe than that of a foal having a temper tantrum because he couldn’t have any candy. His blood boiled and his breathing got so hot and heavy, that the glass bubble over his head began to fog up. “It can’t be! It Can’t Be! IT CAN’T BE! There was no WAY they could defeat me!!! This must be a dream... A DREAM, I tell you!!!” And then he passed out.

“Sir... sir!” the Vice Captain called as he tried to shake his insane boss awake. “Get a hold of yourself! We must retreat! Attention crew: we are heading back to Gemstone Mountain immediately!”

The Chameleon shook and wobbled as it retreated to the south, smoke billowing from the various dents made in it. When De Loco woke up, he was NOT going to be happy with what had happened to his precious ship.

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The King’s Hideout was hidden on a tiny island between two enormous mountains. It was literally in the middle of nowhere, making it extremely difficult to find without directions. The hut itself was no bigger than the average bedroom, and it was largely uninteresting in appearance so as not to draw attention to it.

The king was waiting for them on his makeshift throne, with two others by his side as guards. He was a very young-looking zebra, especially for being a king. Age must have a different meaning in Ixa’taka, the Air Pirates thought as they approached him.

“So you are the ponies who came from the East,” said the king. “I heard you drove off that fire-breathing beast. On behalf of Ixa’taka, I sincerely thank you. Now, what is it you would like us to do?”

“Actually, Your Majesty,” Vyse politely began, “we did have something to ask of you. We are looking for the Element of Kindness.”

“This Element of Kindness, I’m afraid we do not own. Or perhaps you speak of the legendary Sacred Pink Stone? The Valuans came looking for the same exact thing. I told them we knew nothing, and they thought I was lying. If, however, the stone did exist... you may find

it in the Lost City of Rixis.”

“Lost City?” Aika asked as her ears twitched.

“Rixis...” Fina pondered. “I believe that was the name of the capital of Ixa’taka in the Old World.”

“You are correct,” the King said, “and the legends are quite old. It is said that its entirety is made of pure gold.”

“GOLD?!?!?!?” Aika shrieked as her eyes widened greatly and she bounced around the room. “Let’s go! Let’s go! Let’s go! Let’s find Rixis right now!!!”

“Calm down, Aika,” Vyse smiled. “You’re embarrassing me. So, Your Majesty, do you know where Rixis is located?”

“I’m afraid not,” the King answered, “and it may not even exist. The zebras call it the City of Mists. My high priest, Isapa, may hold the key. If anyzebra knows its location, it is he.”

“I see...” said Vyse. “Would it be alright for us to meet Isapa?”

“Isapa is not here, the Valuans took him away. If you rescue him from them, I will have you to repay.”

“Let me guess,” Aika began. “They took him to Gemstone Mountain with the rest, right? Vyse, what should we do?”

“Well,” said Vyse, “I doubt we can find Rixis on our own. Plus, those zebras need our help. Let’s break into the mines and rescue them!”

“Hmmm...” Drachma contemplated. “It appears to be our only option. Breaking into a Valuan stronghold isn’t going to be easy.”

The King seemed pleased to hear this. “You’re willing to risk your lives to save Isapa? In that case, you can find the mountain south of Horteka!”

“Leave it to us!” Vyse assured as he beat a hoof to his chest. If he could escape from the Grand Fortress, a measly stronghold looked like nothing to him. “Onward to Gemstone Mountain!”

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Gemstone Mountain was a large, almost cylindrical mine that was probably a beautiful sight at one time. However, now it was covered from peak to ground in mechanical equipment and construction cranes. Even from the bridge of the Little Jack, the Blue Rogues could see several zebras locked in cages, while others worked tirelessly, digging at the ground with the tools given to them. They were filthy, and it disgusted Vyse to see these peaceful creatures being treated so cruelly. He landed the ship in a hidden location in the forest, and the four of them began sneaking to the top of the mountain, where the entrance was.

In a fancy looking office above the mine’s main hall, De Loco sat at his desk with an annoyed frown on his face. It wasn’t because of what had happened between him and Vyse the



previous day, no, De Loco had a more irritating peeve at his attention. Alfonso, the Valuan Admiral who'd been temporarily banished to Ixa'taka for his earlier actions, was in the same room as him. Worse, Alfonso was TALKING to him.

"Well, De Loco..." Alfonso began. "I've heard that the Air Pirates have crossed South Ocean and that they are on their way here."

"Yes..." De Loco responded, wishing he were anywhere but there. "I ran into them north of Horteka. They, ummm... narrowly escaped my Flame Cannon."

"Hehe... yes, well, fighting Air Pirates is a bit more difficult than burning down trees. But, I guess you already know that. Vyse was responsible for my demotion. I will make sure he suffers, and I will prove to all of Equestria that I am Valua's greatest Admiral. Soon, Galcian will be taking orders from ME. I simply don't understand why somepony as NOBLE as myself is forced to take orders from anypony other than Empress Teodora herself. Well De Loco, I must be going. I have some slaves to drive."

De Loco kept up his silence until Alfonso was out of the room, knowing that adding to the conversation would only prolong his stay. "Idiot," De Loco mumbled once alone. "Perhaps you should have stared into the mirror a bit longer this morning... I think you have a hair out of place. As for you Vyse, you damaged my precious Chameleon... You will pay for that... Oh, yes... You will PAY... The next time we meet will be the LAST!"

Vyse and friends managed to enter the main hall of the mine without being seen. Without even thinking, they continued trotting down the walkway until they stepped on an oddly-colored tile, setting off several alarms and causing the steel door behind them to slam shut and lock itself.

"Um..." Aika began. "The exit just closed by itself."

"I've got a bad feeling about this place," said Vyse.

De Loco, being in the room above, heard the sirens of course. Excited to see the pitiful foals who'd fallen into his trap, he sprung to the floor window that looked down on the main hall. Just as he'd planned, Vyse had triggered the alarm system.

"Ah! Vyse!" De Loco sung, fully aware that Vyse couldn't hear him through the glass. "How NICE of you to drop by. You saved me the trouble of finding you. Yes... I know that you are searching for the Elements of Harmony as well... You must be trying to rescue Isapa... Hehehe... good, good! You see Vyse, these mines are full of traps... Too bad for you. You can't escape, Vyse! You will never leave these mines alive!!!"

Fearful of what awaited them, the Blue Rogues calmly explored the tunnels of Gemstone Mountain. Eventually, they came to a hallway with a series of X's and O's imprinted on the floor. Vyse easily recognized this as a trap, and simply flew right over it. But there was a minor problem. Only he and Fina could fly, and they weren't strong enough to lift Drachma over the trap. Drachma would just have to walk over it. But which spaces were safe to step on? Naturally, their first impression was that the X's were the dangerous ones, so Drachma stepped onto an O.

After a second, nothing happened, so they all breathed a sigh of relief. But they had done so too soon, as the floor beneath Drachma fell open, dropping him into a mine cart that sped off somewhere.

“Captain!” the other three shouted. Vyse picked up Aika, and the three of them flew after Drachma in order to save him. When they reached the end of the tunnel, they found a dizzy Drachma lying on the floor, having crashed into the end of the line.

On the way down, Vyse noticed that there were several mine cart tracks that led to this place. He concluded that it was De Loco’s own twisted method of striking hopelessness into the zebras, for no matter how many times they tried to solve the puzzles, they would always be thrust back down here. Vyse wondered if they, too, were trapped.

“Hm?” came a voice from the corner of the room. “You don’t look like you’re a Valuan. Who might you be?”

A white, somewhat pudgy unicorn with glasses sat in the corner of the room. Although he wasn’t a zebra, it seemed he was still being forced to work in the mines, which implied he wasn’t a Valuan. Vyse highly doubted it, but unicorns were known for their intelligence, so even though he wasn’t a zebra, maybe this was the high priest they were sent to find.

“I’m Vyse. Are you Isapa?”

“No,” the unicorn answered with a smile. “It appears you have mistaken me for someone else. My name is Centime.”

“Then you’re Hans’s father!”

“You know Hans?! Then you must have been to Horteka. That’s where my wife and foals are... Everypony was okay, right?”

“Yeah, they were doing just fine. But, you should worry about yourself right now.”

“Oh, I’m okay. When I refused to help Valua, they threw me into these dungeons. I’ve been here for quite a while. You were looking for someone named Isapa, correct? If so, then you’ll need to venture further into these mines. I think I can help.”

Centime approached a nearby control panel. Even though it was of optimum security, Centime had no trouble hacking into it. After only a few keystrokes, Centime’s expression became one of success. “There. I’ve deactivated the weight sensitivity sensors in the trap floors. You should be able to walk over them without any problems now.”

“Wow, wait, really?!” Aika responded in hectic amazement. “Woohoo! You’re amazing, Centime!”

“Why, thank you. But for now, I think you should tend to your ally over there,” he advised as he pointed to Drachma, who was still resting on the floor. “I’ll go on ahead and see if I can’t disarm the other traps. It’s the least I can do for you. Good luck!”

Vyse, Aika, and Fina headed over to Drachma to help him get up on his hooves. But while they did so, Vyse couldn’t help but wonder... If Centime could disarm the traps so easily, why hadn’t he already escaped?

“Hehehe... good, good!” De Loco chuckled as he witnessed the events unfold on his security monitors. The fact that Vyse was making quick progress through his mines should’ve displeased him, but it only excited him more. There was a certain room he wanted Vyse to reach. “Soon, Vyse... VERY soon, you shall die! And when you die, I want you to die slowly! Yes... slowly... REALLY slowly... I want your brains to GUSH out of your head!”

“Pardon me, De Loco,” Alfonso barged into the office, instantly killing De Loco’s mood. “I didn’t mean to interrupt one of your... intellectual monologues. I came to tell you that Vyse has broken into the mines.”

“..... And you figured this out all by YOURSELF? What gave it away?? Was it the ALARM? Maybe it was the SIRENS.”

“Heh. Yes, well... The fact is, he was foolish enough to deliver himself to me. I shall go dispose of him.” Alfonso lifted his head proudly as he trotted out the door. And once he was gone...

“... YOU are the fool, Alfonso... Heh. The only reason you were made an Admiral was because of your family. You don’t stand a chance against Vyse. -I- shall kill him. I want him to die! Die... DIE... DIE!!! Soon... very soon!!! Hehehehe!”

Our Air Pirates had traveled through much of Gemstone Mountain’s tunnels now, and they hadn’t had a single run-in with a trap. It would seem that Centime was doing his job swiftly and efficiently, apparently working so fast that they couldn’t keep up with him. They never saw him once during their exploration of the mines.

Eventually, they came to what seemed like a series of jail cells. They were all open, as the zebras normally kept in them were all out working. But one remained locked. Using her unique thievery skills, Aika easily picked the lock, and found an extremely obese zebra inside with a long beard and no mane.

“Oh ponies so courageous and bold,” the zebra heartily began. “Is this a rescue attempt I’m seeing unfold?”

“Are you Isapa?” Vyse asked. “We’re on a mission from the King of Ixa’taka to rescue you.”

“Haha... Well, the King knows what I like, sending two pretty mares! Now if you gentlecolts could leave us to our affairs...”

“Oh, REALLY...” Aika sneered as she crossed her legs. “There’s no way this dirty old zebra is a High Priest.”

Something caught Isapa’s eyes, and he stepped closer to Fina. “Oh my, aren’t you a pretty sight? I believe that you are an Alicorn, am I right?”

“What?!” Fina responded. “How did you know?”

“Hahaha! I am very observant, and am proud of my eyes. I could probably guess that goofy filly’s saddle size...”

“OKAY, THAT DOES IT,” Aika yelled. “I know we have to bring him back, but the King

didn't say anything about him being CONSCIOUS."

"Relax, Aika..." Vyse eased, feeling as though he was the only force keeping Aika from someday becoming a Black Pirate. "Right now we just have to worry about getting out of here alive. Let's go."

De Loco giggled to himself as he watched the Air Pirates draw nearer. "So, you've rescued Isapa... Very nice... Hehehe! But soon, you will DIE! You will die a HORRIBLE death and you will SCREAM and I will LAUGH! I've prepared my favorite room JUST for you... Please, come in and stay a while... STAY FOREVER!!! Hehehehe!"

The Air Pirates, plus Isapa, eventually came to the room adjacent to De Loco's office. They were separated by a one-way mirror, so they couldn't see De Loco. The room they were in was stained with blood, and another pair of doors lied on the other side of the room. The ceiling was covered in rusty, jagged spikes.

"Hehehehehehe! So, you've made it this far! I am impressed. But now you shall DIE!!!! You will pay for what you did my PRECIOUS Chameleon! Oh yes, you WILL." De Loco pushed a nearby button, and the door the Air Pirates came through slammed shut and locked itself, surprising and worrying them. "I love it! HAHA! All of the zebra slaves who tried to escape have DIED in this room. Hehehe! Vyse, I want to hear you SCREAM! Now I shall have my revenge!!! Let's start the show, SHALL WE?"

De Loco slowly reached for a nearby lever, giddy with excitement. But then something unexpected happened. The doors opposite the ones he just closed burst open. And standing on the other side of them...

"Long time no see, Vyse. It is I... Alfonso. I came here to watch you die!"

"What are you doing?!" De Loco shouted, forgetting he couldn't be heard. "Alfonso, you FOAL! If you're in there, I won't be able to CRUSH them!"

Alfonso brushed back his mane, and glared at the Air Pirates. "Somepony of my stature does not deal with filth like yourselves personally. Antonio! Finish them!!!"

From behind Alfonso, a very large bear-like creature entered the room. It was blue, and strangely translucent, making it seem like a ghost. Among its body lied several star patterns, which seemed to make up a constellation.

"W... what is that thing?!" Vyse asked as he drew his cutlass.

"Antonio is my personal war-beast," Alfonso explained. "An extremely rare creature found only in the wilderness of Valua called an Ursa Major! No pony has EVER defeated one. Well, except for me of course, but boasting is beyond me."

"Liar!!" De Loco shouted, still forgetting that they couldn't hear him. "Admiral Gregorio's the one who captured that thing for you, and that was only because you blackmailed him!!"

"Now, Antonio!" Alfonso ordered. "Kill them all!"

The Ursa Major charged the Air Pirates, and Drachma used his incredible strength to hold

the creature at bay. The beast roared in Drachma's face not from anger, but from the wound that Vyse had just inflicted with his weapon. Angry, Antonio turned its attention to Vyse and swiped his claws at him, but Vyse easily flew out of the way. Aika then threw her boomerang in front of the bear's eyes in order to confuse it.

Having been blinded by anger, the Ursa Major didn't even realize that it was all just a distraction. As the Ursa Major stood up on its hind legs to angrily swing at Aika's boomerang and at Vyse, Drachma was preparing to push it over into its back. All the while, Fina was struggling to prepare a powerful version of a simple sleep spell, one that would be enough to affect Antonio. When ready, the spell was cast, and the beast quickly lost consciousness while standing on its hind legs. It would've fallen forward, but Drachma was ready for this moment and charged forward, pushing it backwards instead.

"No!" Alfonso shouted as he stood behind Antonio. "Not this way!!!" Alfonso turned and tried to flee, but was crushed by his pet's incredible weight. It wasn't enough to kill or severely injure him, but he wouldn't be able to get out from under there without help.

"Ha! We did it!" Vyse cheered.

Aika chuckled. "That was too easy! Way to go with that spell too, Fina!"

Fina blushed. "Well, Alfonso's crew used a sleep spell on me before... So I guess you could say we're... even?"

"Still, I can't believe we actually managed to defeat an Ursa Major!"

"Um... That wasn't an Ursa Major. It was a baby. An Ursa Minor."

"That was just a baby?! Then... what's an Ursa MAJOR like??"

"... You don't want to know..."

In his office, De Loco had watched the fight unfold, almost hoping that he could see Vyse torn limb from limb by an Ursa Minor, but also happy to see Alfonso get crushed instead. "Hah! Serves you right, Alfonso! You got what you deserved! Oh, well... I guess I'll just have to skewer ALL OF YOU!"

De Loco reached for his lever and pulled it. The spiked ceiling above the Air Pirates began to descend, but after only a second, it stopped. The Blue Rogues noticed this, and were confused by it.

De Loco was furious, and repeatedly pulled the lever up and down, faster and faster each time he did so. "What? What?! WHAT?!?!?! What's going on? This trap has NEVER failed me before!!! Crush them! Crush Them!! CRUSH THEM!!!"

"Admiral De Loco!" the Vice Captain reported as he entered the room. "Someone has tampered with all of the machines in the mines. They are all malfunctioning!"

"WHAAAT?!?!?!?" De Loco resumed his temper tantrum, this time adding stomping to the mix. "Why? WHY? WHY?! How can this be?!?!? I don't understand!!!! Vyse!!! Why won't you just DIE?!?!?" And then he passed out again.

"Sir? Snap out of it! Please, get a hold of yourself..."

Still relatively confused, the Air Pirates, plus Isapa, exited the way Alfonso came in, walking around him to do so and ignoring his moans. At the end of the hallway they'd entered, Centime was waiting for them by the exit to the mines.

"You made it out of the mines unharmed, I see," Centime observed. "I made a few adjustments to the machinery in the mines. Did it help?"

Aika perked, now realizing what had happened in the previous room. "So THAT'S what that was..."

"Yes, yes... Well, let's be on our way. All of the zebras have left already. With all of the traps and security systems turned off, they managed to overpower the guards, steal their ships, and flee!"

"You freed the zebras?! You're amazing! But... if you could do all of this at any time, why did you wait until now?"

"Isn't it obvious? If I had wandered around on my own, De Loco would've easily caught me. I had to wait until he was heavily distracted by something. Or rather, somepony."

"I get it! You were just biding your time until the right opportunity presented itself. Heh, you really know your stuff!"

"You're a good stallion, Centime," Vyse thanked. "We're glad we could help you."

"Thank you very much," Centime returned the thanks. "Well, I must get home and see my family. Maybe we'll meet again someday!"

Almost all of the Valuan ships had been stolen by the zebras during their prison break. Now, the only ones remaining were the flagships (which were indoors and couldn't be accessed without security clearance) and a few others. Centime helped himself to one of these few others while the rest of the Blue Rogues returned to the Little Jack. Having rescued Isapa, they had completed their escape from Gemstone Mountain.

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On their way back to the King's Hideout, the Little Jack passed over Horteka. All of the zebras that escaped from the mines had returned safely, and were happily reunited with their families. Centime informed everyone in the village that they had the Blue Rogues to thank. As the Air Pirates flew overhead, everyone in Horteka waved to them in thanks. This... is why Vyse loved his job.

By that evening, the Little Jack had returned to the King's Hideout with Isapa completely unharmed. The king was very pleased by what he saw. "I thank for saving the zebras and my priest. I did not doubt your efforts in the least."

Isapa bellowed. "Yes, thank you for rescuing me. I'd love to thank you two fillies personally... But I have work to do; it was nice meeting thee."

"Not so fast!" Aika halted. "You were supposed to tell us the location of the Lost City!"

"Ah, that's right! How could be I be so blind? It had completely slipped my little zebra

mind! Hahaha!”

Vyse lowered his head and looked at the king with concern. “Your Majesty, with all due respect... Where did you GET this zebra? Is he really a High Priest?”

“Of course, my skeptical young pony,” the King replied. “He has much knowledge of ancient history.”

Isapa stepped forward and closed his eyes. “Listen carefully, listen well. The legend of the Lost City, I am about to tell... \*ahem\*

“On the longest day of the thousandth year, the stars will aid in her return...”

“That is all. Now, what did you learn?”

“Whaddaya mean, ‘That is all’?” Vyse questioned as he glared at the priest. “I have no idea what you were talking about!”

“To be honest, I haven’t a clue! The ones who must solve the riddle... are you! Ahahaha!”

“I give up!” Aika shouted in frustration. “If you didn’t know, you should’ve said so in the first place!”

“Calm down, Aika,” said Fina, being the mediator for once. “Listen to what he just told us. ‘On the longest day of the thousandth year, the stars will aid in her return...’ I know what it means! This year marks the end of the New World’s first millennium. It has been one thousand years since the Rains of Destruction fell. Now, what is the longest day of the year?”

“... Summer Solstice, right? That’s when we hold the Summer Sun Celebration. Hey, wait... That’s tomorrow!”

“Wait, really?” Vyse asked, impressed with their own timing. “Wow, what luck. I can’t believe we arrived just in time!”

“Luck has nothing to do with prophecy,” Isapa explained. “For you see Vyse, this was your destiny.”

“And the ‘stars that will aid in her return’?”

“I believe,” Fina continued, “that the position of the stars tonight will be what guide us to the Lost City. We will just have to wait and see.”

As the sun set that evening, the stars in the sky became more and more visible. On that night and that night alone, the brightest stars in the sky formed a strongly apparent constellation -- one of an Alicorn, pointing straight West. Vyse knew a lot about astrology; he had studied the subject much as a foal. When sailing the empty skies, knowing the positions of the stars was an essential part of navigation. Using this knowledge, he easily calculated the exact location the new constellation was pointing to: a distant mountain near the western edge of Ixa’taka. With their destination in mind, the Air Pirates rested up in preparation for their next adventure.

The following morning, the ponies awoke and prepared to depart for the western mountain. Strangely, the king, Isapa, and their two guards were nowhere to be seen. The hut in which they had slept that night was abandoned save for themselves. Vyse didn’t think anything

of it, and assumed the king merely wished to tend to the zebras who'd returned to Horteka. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that something funny was going on.

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The trip to the western mountain was short and swift, and only took a couple of hours. They landed the Little Jack at the base of the mountain, where a bunch of ruins were found. Inside a giant, stone zebra head, a strange platform floated in midair, waiting for someone to step onto it. The four Air Pirates did so, and to their initial surprise, it began to ascend. It rose for what felt like half-an-hour, and when it stopped, they were met with more ruins, where more floating platforms and stairs were seen. The view was covered in thick water vapor, and scattered about the whole area were giant craters.

"Now I know why they call this place the City of Mist," Aika realized. "But I don't remember seeing any mist before we got on the platform."

"The air is thin..." Vyse observed. "It's a little hard to breathe. We were going up for a long time. I think these mists are actually clouds. But this doesn't look anything like a Lost City of Gold... There's just a bunch of ruins up here."

"In the Old World," Fina began, "Rixis was the capital of the Pink Civilization. It was destroyed by the Rains of Destruction. Since then, it's been frozen in time."

"Those craters must have been caused by the gemstones that were bombarding the city..."

Aika frantically looked in all directions, and after her worst fears had come true, she turned and glared at her teammates. "I'm-not-seeing-any-gold-here..."

"As time passed," Drachma began, "stories about this city probably got more and more exaggerated."

"\*SIGH\* We were supposed to find gold here... I should have slapped that dirty old zebra silly when I had the chance." Aika slumped into disappointment, but as her angle changed, so did her line of sight. In the middle of the ruins, a shadowy silhouette stood quietly in the mist. "..... Vyse... If this city has been dead for generations, then who is THAT?!"

Everypony turned in the direction Aika was facing. But they saw only mist. "... Where?" Vyse asked. "I don't see anything."

"... Huh? But... but... there was someone there!"

"Aika, who ELSE could possibly be here? It's just your imagination acting up."

"Why don't you believe me? I know I saw something. Fina... Do you think that maybe I saw a ghost?"

"A... ghost?" Fina asked. "Umm... what's a ghost?" Fina looked at each of her friends, hoping for an answer, but was met with only silence and exasperated smiles.

"Heh... It's been a while since you said something like that... A ghost is... umm, how should I explain this...? Well, it's something very scary, that's for sure!"



“Really? Well, if you’re this scared, then this ‘ghost’ must be something scary indeed.”

“The two things I hate most right now are dirty old zebras and ghosts. Vyse... let’s... let’s not go in! We’ll be cursed!”

“Oh come on, Aika...” Vyse argued as he crossed his legs. “There’s no such thing as curses. Or hexes. We came all this way for the Element of Kindness, and we’re not about to go back empty-hooved. Though, I guess you COULD always just, you know, giggle at it.”

“Do you honestly think that laughing at my fears will make them disappear?! \*sigh\* Alright, alright! I’ll go with you! I can’t believe I’m doing this...”

Although what remained of the ruins felt like a temple, Rixis was once a city, and many of its broken buildings gave an air of residence. Zebras once lived and thrived in this place; it was the capital of an entire nation. Now, it was abandoned and desolate. Strangely, the magic platforms that acted as transportation across the town were all active, with brand new gemstones powering them. Aika’s fear of the place being haunted only increased with the knowledge of this fact.

On the far end of the city was a magic platform that didn’t seem to lead anywhere. They stepped on it, and it began to carry them even higher than they already were. They very soon reached the peak of the mountain, which lied just above the clouds. Vyse was excited to be in Upper Sky, a place most ponies had never managed to venture. On the highest point of the mountain lied a small temple with an altar at the top of its stairs. The Air Pirates climbed these stairs, and found that their search was likely at an end.

“Well,” Vyse began. “It looks like the Element of Kindness should be here...”

“Hey, everypony... Look over here!” Aika called, as she pointed to the front wall. “This drawing looks kind of like Fina!”

In the center of the front wall was an ancient glyph of what looked like an Alicorn, with yellow coat and pink mane. The fact that it was an Alicorn was the only similarity Aika drew between it and Fina, really.

Vyse put a hoof to his chin as he examined the drawings. “I wonder if this is that ‘Fluttershy’ the zebras were talking about...”

Fina was too busy to notice the drawings. She was translating some ancient text written on a nearby column, and was reading its contents aloud. “‘We, who have come from the Temple of the Magenta Moon... have sealed within the forests, after the Rains of Destruction washed away the lands, the Gigas known as the Manticore... And upon its sealing, the Element of Kindness was kept within these walls...’ This is written in the holy language of the Magenta Temple. The Alicorns must have inscribed these words when they were here.”

“These are the ruins of Ixa’taka, right?” Vyse asked. “Why would Alicorns come here?”

“The Rains of Destruction nearly destroyed the Pink Civilization. But even after they fell, many warlords from around Equestria still sought the Elements of Harmony. The Manticore did its best to protect it, and in doing so, destroyed even more of the land in its rampage. The

Alicorns came here to contain him. But they came too late. The Pink Civilization was destroyed, and the zebras were reduced to only a few tribes of scavengers..."

Drachma looked at the Alicorn drawing. "The zebras probably began revering the Alicorns as gods because they were able to contain the Manticore."

"It all makes sense now..." Aika realized. "That's why they thought Fina was this 'Fluttershy'."

"But..." Vyse interrupted. "It says the Element of Kindness is kept within these walls, right? But I don't see it anywhere. I wonder where it is..."

The ponies' contemplation was halted when they all heard a noise come from behind a nearby column. "Who's there?!" Vyse shouted.

A startled zebra emerged from behind the column, and began galloping down the stairs.

"That's it!" Aika shouted. "That's the ghost I saw earlier!"

"Vyse!" Drachma shouted. "Don't let him get away! He might have the Element!"

Vyse soared high into the air and arced his course, ready to land right on top of the zebra as soon as it reached the bottom of the stairs. The zebra did not even notice that Vyse was chasing him, until it was too late. Vyse crashed into the zebra and pinned him to the ground. The other Air Pirates soon caught up and surrounded the zebra.

"Hmph," Aika snorted as she crossed her legs. "So this is the 'ghost'..."

Drachma pointed his mechanical hoof at the shivering zebra. "Who are you? Why are you following us?!"

"Don't kill me, please!" the zebra pleaded. "I am an Ixa'takan priest!"

"A priest?" Vyse asked. "So you followed us all the way from Horteka?"

"... I could never follow you up to this height. You see, I have been here since last night. If anyone manages to reach this place, I am to leave and report to the king, posthaste!"

"Wait a minute... You mean the King has been to this place already?"

"Yes... After you decoded Isapa's clue... We came while you slept, to get the Stone before you. Upon finding the Element, the King it chose... to rid our lands of our arch foes."

"Rid your lands of...? You aren't going to..."

The zebra remained silent, fearing he had said too much already.

"Tell us!" Drachma demanded. "Or do you want me to crack your skull?!"

"Alright, I'll tell you! I'll confess!" the zebra continued. "The King intends to awaken the Gigas! The Manticore will chase them back to the eastern skies, and we will forever be safe from their cruelty and lies."

"What?!" everypony shouted. They had been used by the very zebras they were trying to help. Ridding the lands of the Valuans was something they all wanted. But awakening one of the Gigas, especially one this ferocious, was far too great a risk. The Air Pirates rushed back to the Little Jack, praying they wouldn't be too late.

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Sitting aboard his wooden flagship, the King of Ixa'taka flew along the edge of the battlefield, opposite the Valuan fleet that now confronted him. The Element of Kindness, a pink, crystalline butterfly, shone brightly in his hooves. "It is time," the King said. "Our plan is in motion. High Priest Isapa... give me the potion."

Isapa uncapped a flask and fed its contents to his king. It was a special, tribal hallucinogen for inducing hypnotic trances in whoever drank it. As long as the King possessed the Element of Kindness, it would not allow him to willingly perform acts of violence. Thus, he must be hypnotized and given orders, so that he might control the Gigas more properly.

"Now, Your Majesty. Hear my command," Isapa chanted. "Awaken the Manticore. This, I demand!"

Now unaware of his own actions, the King stared blankly in a superfluous direction as he held the Element up. It shone even brighter than before, and the lands beneath them began to vigorously shake. The earth cracked and opened, and from the depths of the earth rose the Pink Gigas.

The Manticore was a giant lion, as big as a mountain, with a scorpion tail and two small bat wings, too small to even lift its weight, therefore proving useless to it. The Manticore stomped around its former prison, shaking the dirt it had been buried in out of its fur. Once free from its earthy chambers, and fully aware of its surroundings and situation, it bellowed a mighty roar and approached the Valuan fleet.

Aboard his new flagship, Alfonso watched as the Manticore awoke. He brushed back his mane. "So, the King was hiding the Element from us after all... Heh, this is going to be easy. All I have to do is take the Element from him and the Empress will be pleased."

"Awaiting orders, Admiral," his new Vice Captain reported. "Oh, and I heard that you were injured in the mines. Are you alright, sir?"

Alfonso immediately lost his composure and began swinging his hoof at the Vice Captain. "Ergh! I don't EVER want to hear you speak of those mines again! Understand?! All ships, prepare for battle! Follow my flagship, the Cygnus!"

As the fleet approached the King, one of the grunt ships was the first to get exceptionally close to the Pink Gigas. Following its orders, the Manticore swung its paw at the ship, and with a heavy swipe, the ship spun out of control and slammed into a nearby landmass, exploding and crashing to the ground.

"Blast!" Alfonso sneered. "Retreat!!! We cannot get past the Gigas!"

"But... but... sir..." the Vice Captain argued. "The battle hasn't even started yet."

"Why are you questioning my orders?! I refuse to die in these FILTHY lands! All ships, return to Valua at once!"

Every ship in the fleet turned 180 degrees and fled northward. Two grunt ships headed for each corner of the giant Iron Net they had used to block off the northern exit, and undid its

bindings. With the way open, the Valuans had finally left Ixa'taka. That is, except for one very persistent unicorn...

"Hehehe..." De Loco chuckled aboard his flagship, the Chameleon. "Well, it looks like the Manticore's awake..."

"Admiral De Loco!" his Vice Captain reported. "The experimental Gemstone Cannon is ready!"

"Looks like it's time for me to test out my newest weapon! Target the King's ship!"

"... What? Sir, aren't you going to fire at the Gigas?"

"The Gigas only follow commands from the one holding their Element. So if we destroy the King, the Gigas will be defenseless. This is what happens when you cross me, foolish zebras! Fire the Gemstone Cannon!"

The front of the Chameleon's hull had been rebuilt into an enormous cannon, with what appeared to be the entirety of the ship as its barrel. The whole ship charged with electricity, all of which was focused at the front tip. When at last it was fully charged, it fired an incredible beam that shot right past the Manticore's head and heavily damaged the port side of the King's ship. Everyzebra onboard was rattled around by the impact, but the one zebra who was unable to brace himself was the King, who had been knocked unconscious.

"Wake up!" Isapa pleaded as he shook his King. "You can't be beat! This isn't good... We must retreat! The King was controlling the Pink Gigas. If he doesn't wake up, it will surely kill us!"

The zebras aboard the ship turned tail and fled the battlefield. Until the King awoke, there was no way to command the Manticore to cease its rampage. With nozebra to give it orders anymore, it began acting on its own, and destroyed everything it saw.

"Hehehe... So close!!!" De Loco snickered. "It looks like there is still some fine-tuning to be done. I'm sure Vyse has seen the Gigas, and he's probably on his way right now to try and save everyzebra. Be ready for him."

"Sir!" the Vice Captain reported with ironic timing. "A ship has been spotted off port side!"

"He's here! HE'S HERE! I've been waiting for this! Well, Vyse... it's time to die... Wait 'til you feel the power of my Gemstone Cannon! You should feel honored that you are helping me test out my greatest creation ever!"

The Little Jack had arrived on the scene too late. The Manticore was freed, and now, no longer under anyzebra's control. However, an obstacle prevented our Air Pirates from solving this problem.

"The Manticore is in range..." Aika reported. "But, there's a ship blocking our way! It's De Loco!!!"

"It looks like we'll have to get past De Loco first," Drachma observed. "Look out for that cannon."

“Aye aye, Captain!” said Vyse. “Bring it on, De Loco!”

The Chameleon and the Little Jack got into battle position, but unlike last time, the Chameleon was actually moving at a steady pace. De Loco had learned not to underestimate Vyse this time. “I’ve been waiting for you, Vyse! Now, you will learn the true power of the ever-changing Chameleon!”

“It looks like he’s serious this time,” Drachma deduced.

“Vyse!” Aika shouted. “Just make sure to watch out for that big cannon he fired at the King! One hit of that and we’re dead!”

De Loco brought the Chameleon to a complete halt, and began issuing orders to his crew. “Prepare to fire the Gemstone Cannon! Halt all systems and redirect all power! Hehehe... you can’t catch me off-guard if my ship isn’t moving, Vyse! Heehee... Now, feel the power of my Gemstone Cannon!!”

“The enemy vessel has stopped!” Aika noticed. “What’s going on?!”

“It looks like he’s got somethin’ up his saddle,” Drachma assumed. “But, now’s our chance. We need to hit him as hard as we can while he’s just sittin’ there. Get into position! We’re gonna take him out with the Harpoon Cannon right now!”

The Chameleon began charging all of its energy, redirecting it to the front of the ship. When all of the energy was stored up, De Loco attempted to fire the Gemstone Cannon. But... nothing. The cannon did not fire.

“What’s going on?!” he shouted. “Why didn’t the Gemstone Cannon fire?!”

“Lord De Loco!” his Vice Captain began. “The last blast we fired drained nearly all of the ship’s energy! We need to wait until power has been properly restored! Perhaps firing this prototype Gemstone Cannon was too much for the ship to handle. I think that maybe we should...”

“Silence! SILENCE!!! I don’t want to hear ANY excuses! Fire! FIRE!! FIRE THE GEMSTONE CANNON!!!”

“They’re still just sitting there!” Aika pointed out. “They probably used too much energy on their last attack!”

“Now’s our chance!” Vyse shouted. “Fire the Harpoon Cannon!!”

The Harpoon spun and shot towards the Chameleon. At the same time, the Gemstone Cannon gathered what little power it had remaining and attempted to fire. The Harpoon struck just as the energy was about to erupt, causing a massive explosion of gemstone radiation and destroying much of the ship’s military hardware. By the time the Harpoon was reeled back in, the Chameleon was still airborne, but it was no longer suited to fight.

“This cannot BE!” De Loco shouted as he once again resumed his tantrum. “How could I lose TWICE?! No... NO... NO...! NO...!!! This has to be a dream...! IT’S ALL JUST A BAD DREAM...!!!” And then he, once again, passed out.

“Sir! Get a hold of yourself!” his Vice Captain shouted, though he should expect this by now. “We can’t face the Gigas in this shape! Everypony, back to Valua!” The Vice Captain took

over piloting the Chameleon and sailed north, following their allies who'd fled moments ago.

"Alright!" Aika cheered. "De Loco's retreating!"

"It's too early to celebrate," Drachma stated. "We still have to stop the Manticore!"

"But... he's too big!" Vyse argued. "How can we stop him?"

Drachma pointed to a large crevasse with a river flowing along its floor. "See that canyon? No matter how strong that thing is, if it falls into the canyon, it will be stuck."

"I see... So, all we have to do is knock him down!"

"Aye. Wait for him to pass in front of it, then give it everything we've got!"

"Got it! Alright, everypony! Let's take him out!"

The Little Jack sped toward the Manticore, who'd already destroyed several nearby landmasses in its rage. Its sights now fixated on the Air Pirates, it turned around and attempted to swipe its claws at them. The Little Jack's speed would prove to be an important asset. Were it not for that, the Manticore's claws would've made quick work of them right there. The ship flew from side to side, avoiding the Manticore's swipes and inching closer to the canyon in an attempt to lure it.

The Manticore was becoming more frustrated, and began trying to sting the ship with its scorpion tail. Its tail's speed was far greater than that of its heavy paws, and Vyse struggled to avoid the stabs. Deciding it needed to be distracted, the other crewmates fired some cannons at the Gigas. Without even trying to, one of the blasts struck the palm of the creature's left paw, something it reacted to quite strangely. It roared angrily, as if in severe pain. Looks like they'd found its weak spot.

The Little Jack crossed the canyon, and as the Manticore stood up on its hind legs in order to try and reach them, Vyse spun the ship around and ordered the immediate firing of the Harpoon Cannon. Target: the Manticore's left paw. It spun and fired straight at the suspended paw, striking it in the center and sticking forth like a splinter. With an even louder roar than before, one that almost sounded like a shriek, the intense pain the Manticore felt caused it to lose its balance, and it fell into the canyon, becoming stuck between its walls.

"Alright!" shouted Vyse as the Harpoon reeled back in. "We knocked the Manticore into the valley!"

"Good job, colt!" Drachma congratulated. "Now's our chance to grab the Element of Kindness from the King and send that thing packin'!"

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The battle was over. All of the Valuans had fled, the zebras were freed, and the Manticore had resumed its peaceful slumber. Ixa'taka had been saved, thanks to the Blue Rogues. The Element of Kindness now shone in Fina's hooves as she and her crewmates attended their audience with the King.

“Vyse...” the King began. “You saved the zebras, you saved our lands, you ended this terrible war. We’ve realized our errors and have you to thank. We should never have summoned the Manticore.”

“With great power,” Vyse stated, “you need great responsibility. The Gigas are far too dangerous...”

“We realize that now, and apologies are due. So our Element and trust, we bear upon you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty... We will do our best to achieve peace.”

“The Valuans fled when faced with our threat,” said Isapa. “When they escaped, they took down the Net.”

“If we pass through there,” Drachma began, “we’ll reach North Ocean. That will take us back to Valua.”

“The Element of Loyalty should be there,” Fina stated.

“Okay, everypony,” Vyse addressed. “We’re heading back to Valua. They’re REALLY upset with us now... Getting the Element of Loyalty isn’t going to be easy.”

“Sounds pretty dangerous,” Isapa sung. “But have no fear. For you are all welcome to stay behind here! It’s an island paradise, beyond any you’ll conceive. After sampling our luxury, you’ll never want to leave!”

“What do you say, Aika?” Vyse joked. “Who knows? Maybe you’ll find some more ghosts, too.”

“Vyse!!!” Aika retorted. “Don’t even joke about them around me... You know I’m afraid of them... I’ve had enough ghosts to last me a long time...”

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The Blue Rogues waved their final goodbyes to the zebras of Ixa’taka, and continued their journey north. The Iron Net that had once blocked the way had sunken into Deep Sky completely. With Ixa’taka no longer blocked off from the rest of the world, it wouldn’t be long before trade routes could be established between them and the other nations.

North Ocean was vast, wide, and empty, with even less landmasses than Middle Ocean. It lied on the other side of Middle Ocean’s northwestern sky rifts, and southwest of Valua. The western borders of North Ocean were blocked off by a particularly strong sky rift, even thicker and darker than normal ones. Even the strongest of pegasi wouldn’t be able to fly through one of these.

The part of Valua that connected to North Ocean was not the capital, but the northern wilderness that the city itself was blocked off from. The only way to get to northern Valua was through North Ocean or northern Nasr. Because the safest way to reach Ixa’taka was through North Ocean, it was through this route that Valua sent its troops there, and set up the Iron Net to prevent outside interference.

And it was because of Valua's high levels of activity in this region that the Black Pirates were attracted there. Slowly flying through North Ocean was a rather rotund wooden ship, shaped like a fish and waving a black flag. Onboard this ship was the most horrifically obese pegasus you ever would see, stuffing his face with various foods. He had a yellow coat, curly black mustache, balding mane, and a fork for a cutie mark.

"Apple fritters, hay fries, carrot cake, berry punch, muffins, and pumpkin pie decorated with flowers! This is wonderful! The ship we hit yesterday really had some great food on board!"

"Captain Gordo!" reported one of his pirates/chefs. "A ship armed with a gigantic harpoon has been sighted off the port side!"

Gordo stopped eating. "I see... good, good! Another ship full of goodies is there for the taking! I'll take on anypony if I think they have good food on board. I really hope they have something that goes good with cupcakes..."

"Vyse!" Aika reported. "There a ship heading right for us. And they're Black Pirates."

"I know that flag..." Drachma realized. "It belongs to a pirate named Gordo. He's known as the Gourmet Pony. He attacks other ships and steals their food. He rarely uses his cannons because he's afraid he'll burn the food on the other ships. He'll do anything for a good meal. As far as Black Pirates go, he's a strange one."

"You're telling me," Vyse agreed. "He's getting awfully close..."

Gordo's ship, the Bloodlust, pulled up next to the deck of the Little Jack. Once in position, Gordo and his crew began hopping on board.

"They're boarding us!" Aika shouted. "They're challenging us to hoof-to-hoof combat!"

Vyse smirked. "Well, while they're here, we might as well kick their plots..."

It was an even four-on-four fight, right there on the deck of the Little Jack. Gordo's three lackeys kept the Blue Rogues at bay while he prepared for something on the backlines. The Black Pirates under Gordo's commands also doubled as his chefs, and strangely, they fought using frying pans. They were a silly bunch, and were probably underestimating today's opponents. Vyse and his friends had no problem avoiding their attacks and fighting back.

It wasn't until it was too late that they realized it was all a distraction. Gordo had been preparing a fort of apple pies, both to protect himself, and for use as ammunition. Once ready, he began throwing apple pies at the Blue Rogues. Although pies are not normally considered suitable weaponry, they were nonetheless a huge distraction. As the Blue Rogues attempted to evade the pies, Gordo's chefs used the opportunities given to beat them with their frying pans. And if they got hit in the face, it would blind them.

Vyse attempted to flee the pie barrage by flying up and over the chefs and going directly after Gordo. But Gordo managed to blind him with a pie, causing Vyse to crash in his disorientation. The Black Pirates were beginning to win, but then Fina came up with an idea that would put a serious hole in their plan.



Fina ordered her pet Parasprite, Cupil, to eat all of the apple pies. He buzzed around happily, as he had not eaten in a while, and ate every drop of apple pie on board, leaving only tin pans. It all happened so quickly, Gordo didn't realize what was done until it was over. With no more distractions, the Blue Rogues overpowered the Black Pirates. His ridiculous strategy a failure, Gordo surrendered.

Gordo chuckled as he bowed and rubbed the back of his head. "We give up... You and your crew fought well... Your name was Vyse, right? I don't think I've ever seen you in North Ocean before."

"This is the first time we've ever been to North Ocean," Vyse explained. "For now, we're riding aboard Captain Drachma's ship, the Little Jack."

"Drachma? Wait... that name's familiar. Drachma, were you ever in North Ocean before?"

Drachma glared at the fat pegasus. "... What if I was?"

"Then it IS you! I've heard all about you! You're the pony who's chasing the dragon, Punta. If I remember correctly, it was to avenge your son, right?"

"ENOUGH!" Drachma shouted as he stomped his artificial leg into the deck. It shook the entire ship, and everypony became strongly intimidated by his sudden outburst. "I don't know what stories you've been hearin', but I suggest you keep `em to yourself... And unless you want me to throw you overboard, you should GET OFF MY SHIP..."

"Ahh... that's quite alright... we'll be going now..." Gordo and his crew flew back onto their ship and sped off.

"And what are YOU staring at?!" Drachma shouted as Vyse, Aika, and Fina looked at him with gaping mouths. "Are you going to stand there all day?! Get back up to the bridge before I throw YOU overboard!"

"Yessir!" they all shouted before galloping back inside, although Fina stopped to bow to her captain before leaving his company.

Now alone, Drachma took a deep sigh, and looked up at the clouds. He whispered to himself... "Punta..."

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At the northern edge of North Ocean were the ruins of an old lighthouse no longer in use. These ruins marked the western edge of the Valuan continent, letting our Air Pirates know that they were no longer in North Ocean and had finally returned to Valua.

"Looks like we've reached Valuan airspace," Vyse deduced as he looked up at the Red Moon and the dark clouds it created. "So, this is where the Element of Loyalty is hidden, right?"

"Yes," Fina confirmed. "It is sealed somewhere within these lands, along with the Red Gigas."

Aika smiled and looked up at her captain. "Considering how much trouble we've caused

the Valuans already, we should be extra careful, right Cap'n?" Drachma did not react. He simply stared at the floor, silently. "... Cap'n? What's wrong?"

"Ah... um... nothing," Drachma muttered. "I'm sorry... were you saying something?"

"... Nothing really. It... wasn't anything important..."

The ponies were quiet for the rest of the trip. They all glanced at their poor captain with expressions of worry. It was obvious that something was troubling him, but all they could do was wonder what.

## **End of Chapter 4**

## [Chapter 5](#)