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First Edition



So you've come here for a tale, eh? Well, here's one you haven't heard before. It's the story of the pirate hunters and their magic ship, the Red Wind. The captain is the Master of the Sea and hunts down any pirates that dare set sail in his waters. Skeptics might say that this is nothing but a story, but every sailor claims to have seen the ship once, racing across the waves without a single sail down to catch the wind.

“Drop your weapons, assassin!”
Ravin mentally selected the closest knife on his belt and kept his eyes on Shade. The other sailor was drunk, as seemed to always happen when they docked at a town. Ravin hadn't been part of the ship's crew for long before he'd learned to stay away from Shade during such occasions.

“If you sssssso much as make a move...” Shade staggered a step forward, his sword swishing the air dangerously close to Ravin's chest, “...I'll finissssh Jay'sss job for him.” His brown eyes narrowed, focusing on something just over Ravin's right shoulder for a long moment before darting to face Ravin again for a few seconds.

“*Shaaaaaaade,*” a feminine voice called down from the highest mast of the ship. “Leave Ravin alone.” A few bits of shavings floated on the wind—Sandaline must be carving again. It was polite of her to make any attempt to stop Shade—after all, she didn’t really trust Ravin either—but her half-hearted words made no difference.

Shade scowled and took a step closer. “I should stop you right now, before you kill us all. I know you’re just biding your time. Then you’ll strike, when no one is expecting it.”

Ravin slipped a second knife from his sleeve, a longer blade for his left hand. With a deep breath, he rubbed a hand over his healing ribs—only a small twinge in response to his poking fingers. Nothing compared to the searing pain he’d had to deal with for the last five weeks after cracking his ribs against the edge of a dock.

The ship rocked from side to side, perhaps excited about the coming action. Or maybe just from the wake of the large galleon sailing into Genady harbor. The sailors climbed the ropes, chanting a song, eager to set foot on land again.

“Assassins can’t be trusted.” Shade’s voice dropped to a whisper and he swayed from side to side, his eyes unfocused. “*Especially* live ones, carrying weapons.”

Ravin glanced over his shoulder. Today was the Selecting Day for the Scaera Dumeda, and Antovan’s royal port was stuffed full of ships from the other Allied Kingdoms. The last thing he needed was for word to suddenly get passed around that an assassin was nearby. Every sailor, merchant, and hopeful selectee would instantly be up in arms, and he couldn’t *possibly* fight off so many people all at once.

“Scared, are you?” Shade managed to gather himself into a fighting stance and then jumped forward, his sword tip

leading the way. Ravin blocked the attack with one knife while reaching towards Shade's chest with the other. The tip of his blade ripped fabric.

"Stop!" Justin Case, the first mate, poked his head above the hatch. "Shade, put your sword away!" He climbed the last few steps up the ladder and gently set down the box he'd brought above deck.

Ravin hesitated, but Shade turned, sputtering, his face a brilliant scarlet. Completely disregarding the first mate's orders, the man bore down on Ravin, whipping his sword around with both hands. Ravin stepped aside, flipped a knife lazily in the air, and slashed at the back of Shade's shoulders. This time, his knife came back with a drop of blood.

"I'll kill you for that," Shade muttered. He spun on his heel, staggered a step, and gathered himself again.

"Shade, *stop*."

Ravin risked a glance at Justin. The sailor tapped the butt of the pistol stuck in his belt, his sunburned face twisted into a scowl—but it was all bluff. Justin never moved fast, let alone joined fights.

"He's going to *kill* me!" Shade snarled.

"No, he's not. Just leave him alone." Justin took a step forward, but Shade lunged at Ravin again. The drunk missed Ravin and stumbled forward, nearly falling on the deck. He spun around, his breathing fast and heavy. How many bottles had he finished off before returning to the ship, intent on killing?

This had gone on long enough. Ravin moved into more aggressive action, blocking the sword with a knife and kicking Shade in the chest. Shade staggered back a step and Ravin surged ahead, knives flashing, forcing the man to a hurried

retreat. Two more steps and he stuck out a leg, tripped Shade, and sent him flying backwards over the ship's railing and into the water.

"He'll never forgive you for that." Justin ran to the railing and leaned over to watch Shade swim towards shore.

Ravin sheathed his knives and ignored the stream of curses and complaints Shade directed at him from the water. A reply to Justin was probably in order, but at the moment, he couldn't think of one. Instead, he studied the neighboring ships in the harbor. No one had noticed the little spar except for one old sailor who sat on the railing of the ship moored right beside them. He took a hand from his pipe and applauded when he caught Ravin looking in his direction.

"Shade's not dead." Ravin squinted at the old man, waved once, and turned back to Justin. No matter how many times he fought Shade and let him live, Shade still refused to believe Ravin didn't intend him any harm.

"I don't think you could kill him." Justin shrugged.

Ravin rubbed his shoulder and accepted the statement as a compliment. Despite what Shade believed, Ravin wasn't *actually* an assassin. The night he should have made his First Kill, he'd run away instead. Admittedly, that was only five weeks ago.

Five weeks of living longer than he'd expected. Five weeks of hoping his father—the man who'd trained him to be an assassin—truly believed him to be dead. Five weeks of not knowing where to go or what to do next.

Shade was on solid ground now, dripping salt water onto the shipyard with every squelching step. With an angry kick at the shore, he trudged into town instead of returning to the ship and facing Ravin again. Even drunk, the man knew when

he was beat. Not to mention his weapon still lay on the deck of the ship, within Ravin's easy reach.

A bell clanged once, marking the half-hour, and Ravin turned to face the town. He'd been in Genady a few times before, though never on a Selecting Day. Thankfully. Things were much too crowded for his comfort. Despite the growing heat, people flooded the streets and strolled through the market stalls, wandering about aimlessly, waiting until noon when the Selecting would begin.

"You think Sandaline tested well?" Justin picked up the box he'd carried up from below decks and opened it, sniffing the tiny tea bags stuffed inside. With a sigh, he snapped the box shut. Not once did he look at Ravin, apparently assuming his fellow sailor was listening. "She's really hopeful, you know, that she'll get selected this year."

"Yeah," Ravin tipped his head back to stare at the figure sitting on the top of the highest yard. Sandaline carved away at the mast, whistling to herself as she etched something into the wood. "She might, I suppose."

"Pity you missed out on taking the first tests, Ravin. Becoming an ambassador for the Alliance of Kingdoms and traveling around might be your sort of thing. Better than being a hired killing man."

"The last thing I need right now is my name shouted out to an entire kingdom. If my father hears it..." Sweat dripped down Ravin's spine. Probably just from the heat. "If he knows I'm still alive...the hunt will continue."

"Maybe next year, then?" Apparently Justin expected Ravin to actually make it to next testing.

Ravin, however, wasn't that confident. He'd tried to escape his father's brutal training many times while growing

up, but every attempt left him tracked down and beaten. He still had the scars. Even now, his father would eventually find him again, and this time, he likely wouldn't let Ravin live.

"I think they could use someone with your skills. I doubt your father would think to look for you there, anyway."

"My papers were lost that day I fought Jay." Ravin looked at the wood beneath his feet. He'd replayed that fight over and over in his mind for days. How Captain Jay Hill had found Ravin trying to hide on his ship, how Jay had bested him with only a rapier, how Jay had thrown him over the railing. Jay *claimed* he'd forgotten about the dock and had only intended to toss Ravin in the water.

Whether that was the truth or not, Ravin had landed on the edge of the deck, cracked his ribs, and slipped into the water, unconscious. The onlookers declared him dead and left, and then Jay had dived down to save him.

"Alright then." Justin grinned. Out of all the crew, he'd be the most obvious person for Ravin to call *friend*. He hadn't complained when the captain rescued the nearly-drowned assassin and brought him back on board. In fact, Justin had been one of the first people to be *kind*. He wasn't put off by Ravin's past, or his admittedly rude attitude. Then again, nothing really seemed to worry Justin except the tea stores running low.

"Captain on deck!" Sandaline scrambled down the rigging, her thick hair flying all over her face. "It's time to go! Come on! It's time!"

Captain Jay Hill stalked the deck of the ship with a limp, and his chin tilted up with an air of challenging the entire world. His plumed hat would have looked ridiculous on most, but he managed to wear the brilliant red feathers prouder than

any bird. Despite the polite manners and crisp speech, Jay Hill was a cunning warrior, capable of beating assassins. Ravin knew that from personal experience.

“Anyone else going into town?” Jay glanced at Ravin and Justin, still perched on the railing. “Get a chance to walk on solid ground?” He tossed his hat to Justin and ran a hand through his sandy blonde curls. Jay liked to wear his hat while at sea, but he usually left it with the ship when he went on land. He called it “blending in with the crowd” or something like that.

“Nah,” Justin hooked his legs around the rails and leaned backwards, hovering over the water. He propped his hands behind his head as if laying on a pillow. Jay’s hat balanced on his lap, the feathers waving above his nose. “I’m gonna stay right here and enjoy the peace and quiet of an empty ship. It’s not every day I get her to my own self.”

“Then this may be goodbye, Justin.” Sandaline patted the small bag she carried. “I’m ready, just in case.”

Justin waved a hand in farewell, which Sandaline returned. She didn’t give so much as a glance in Ravin’s direction. Instead, she looked up at Jay, her dark forehead wrinkling. “Do...do you think they’ll really call my name?”

“Only one way to find out!” Jay put a hand on her shoulder and threw his head back in laughter. “Come on, let’s see what the Scaera Dumeda will bring us!”

They started down the gangplank only to be chased down by a scrawny, black-haired boy of around eighteen. He climbed up the steps from the inside of the ship so fast he might have flown, and about jumped on top of Jay’s shoulders.

Arrow was rightly named—always moving like an arrow shot from a bow. He pranced ahead of Jay and Sandaline, his bare feet slapping against the wood of the dock, arms and elbows flying in all directions. Arrow *also* disliked Ravin, feeding off the horror stories Shade told him about assassins.

“You should go with them.” Justin poked Ravin in the arm with Jay’s hat. “Go walk around town, get some different sights for a while. We’ll probably leave Genady after all the announcements.”

Apparently Justin didn’t expect Sandaline to be part of the talented folks selected for the final tests to become an ambassador.

And as much as Ravin didn’t really want to *walk around town*, he had to admit it would be nice to get off the ship, if only for a short while. He could leave the smell of the sea and rotting fish behind and maybe run a bit and feel solid ground beneath his feet.

“Catch up with them and buy some sweet buns.” Justin tossed a coin towards Ravin. “It’ll help Sandaline calm down if she’s eating something. And just save one for me. I’m going to do a few repairs to the kitchen while Heather’s out getting supplies.”

Heather was Jay Hill’s wife. They were recently married, but had apparently been childhood friends, from what history Ravin could gather. She ran the ship and bossed around the crew. Strange how someone with a soft voice and a soup spoon could be so intimidating.

“Thanks, Ravin.” Justin swung to his feet and headed for the kitchen cabin, whistling a tune and not even looking back to be sure Ravin left.

Ravin pocketed the coin and clambered down the ladder below deck. If he was going into town, he'd need his boots. And maybe a few more knives, just to be safe. There was no telling what might happen, especially when Shade was out and about and probably still quite angry at him.

The inside of the ship had been divided into rooms by large sections of canvas. Store rooms were split off according to the items held within—food supplies, weapons, and other supplies. Bedrooms of a sort were located on opposite ends of the ship: the women took the front of the ship, and the men hung their hammocks aft.

Most of the crew members kept their things in little boxes, nailed to the sides of the ship to keep from rolling around while sailing across the ocean. Ravin technically had a box for his things, but he didn't have much to put in it. The night he'd run from his *First Kill*, all he'd had with him was a small pack, filled mostly with weapons.

He kept his pack tied to the rafters right above his hammock, his favorite knife lashed to the front within easy reach. Most of his blades had been given to him by his father, but this one he had purchased with his own money, earned from working for Jay Hill. His first weapon without a taste of dishonor or blood.

Leaving the ship was a stupid idea, but he couldn't deny wanting to be on solid land again, if only for an hour or two. He hadn't been off the ship in five weeks. There was no way anyone could know where he was. His father must have heard of the fight at the docks, which Ravin had lost. Jay claimed the watching soldiers announced him to be dead when he fell into the water. That would surely have gotten around to his father and the other assassins hunting him.

He'd be safe for a short trip into town.

All the same, he grabbed enough weapons to fight off an army if need be.

“Heading out to town?”

The voice of the ship echoed in his head, but he ignored her, as always. She had started to talk to him after a few days spent on board, but by the time he'd realized he hadn't gone crazy, she'd mostly given up on addressing him. He had yet to actually talk *back* to the ship. Holding conversations with a ship at any given moment was not something he was interested in.

“I think you forgot one of your knives.”

Was that smugness in her voice? Ravin shuddered, left the room, and climbed back on deck. By now the crowds along the harbor had thinned as people hurried into town. Much better. The less people the better.

The instant he set foot on the docks he broke into a jog, getting out of sight as fast he could. In the shadows of the harbor master's house, he paused for breath. The fading bruises on his ribs pounded, but it was an easy price to pay for getting to stretch his legs.

Now which direction had Jay gone?

Ravin tilted his head back. The last time he'd been in Genady, nearly four years ago, he'd passed the amphitheater where the yearly Scaera Dumeda selecting was held. Middle of the city, a few blocks away from the castle. The best bet was to take the straightest course there and hopefully he'd run into Jay and the other sailors.

A faint sea breeze teased the loose strands of dark hair straggling free from the small tail at the back of his neck. He probably needed a haircut of some kind, but offering the crew

a knife and saying “put this close to my neck” was not something he was eager to do. So he merely attempted to blow the hair back out of his face and trudged on.

The crowds thickened the closer he got to the middle of Genady, and he weaved in and out, avoiding large groups of people. By the time he spotted Jay’s head bobbing above the crowd, he’d nearly been elbowed multiple times, and one poor beggar had grabbed his arm, asking for brandy.

“Hey, look who it is!” Jay stopped and waved. “You decided to come after all!”

Sandaline stood with her mouth open. Her knuckles paled as she gripped her bag tighter.

“Why’d you come?” Arrow asked, folding his arms. “Thought you were scared to go on land again?”

Ravin was going to give Justin a piece of his mind when he returned. “I’m buying you all some sweet buns,” he muttered.

Sandaline’s eyes widened. “Really? Jay said we couldn’t get any because they’ll...”

“Cover your face in stickiness, yes, but now that Ravin’s buying, we might as well accept our fate.” Jay pointed to a nearby market stall. “If you look a horrible disaster, then you’re all the more likely to get your name called and have to stand in front of all the people, right?”

Ravin purchased the full penny’s worth of sweet buns, pocketing one to save for Justin. Though between the heat and being squished, it probably wouldn’t be edible by the time he returned to the ship. Now he just had to survive the crowds long enough to get back to the harbor in one piece.

He glanced around the street, surveying the grinning faces of people, and regretted leaving the quiet of the docks. But he

did manage to smile a little when his ship mates thanked him for the snack. That, at least, was progress—for all of them.