DAWN AND THE PIRATE ASSASSIN

**Chapter One**

*Captain Ravenheart’s Assassin*

*March 18, 1701*

Nearly everyone slept soundly in the lovely English seaside town. Only one still wandered the streets on this night. A woman in a long pink dress with bandages covering most of the right side of her face stood hidden in the darkness cast by a bakery.

Her heart raced as she gazed out over the moonlit waters, lined at its edges with the boats that had docked there for the night. She needed to commandeer one in order to make a quick escape and there wasn’t much time left: Sunrise would soon bring the town to life and it would be discovered that she was gone. The moment this happened, all would be lost.

It was a shame her most precious possessions would be left behind, but they were certainly not worth her life.

The woman eyed the largest ship, complete with three great masts and a new shine that even midnight could not hide. She was a greedy lady and wanted to take it, but was too smart to endanger her mission for it. She knew she would have to seize something a bit smaller, something that would not be missed quite as quickly. Her eyes finally rested upon a long, slender rowboat. She doubted very much that anyone would even notice its absence.

The only problem was the pair of guards marching back and forth on the dock in front of the boats, swords at their waists and guns at their shoulders. Killing them wasn’t an option: it would have only brought attention to her disappearance sooner. Instead, she needed a distraction.

She thought first of setting the bakery beside her to fire, but then a dark shape caught her eye on the horizon. A vessel so massive it had to be either a battleship or pirates. She hoped desperately for the latter, because the first would make escape impossible, while pirates would probably provide enough destruction and pillaging that no one would even notice that she and the small watercraft had disappeared into the night.

Suddenly, killing the guards didn’t seem like such an impossibility.

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The water parted noiselessly as the ship slid through it.

Already, well-armed men were climbing aboard rowboats and being lowered into the ocean, the quicker to get to shore. A specially crafted boat built for speed had been sent ahead. The assassin it carried would cut down any men left to guard the shore. Captain Ravenheart had no doubt of this success.

There was no light to be seen anywhere in Fingleton when they dropped anchor. As long as his men were quick, and they always were, the small village should be an easy target.

The Fingleton bank was all they were really there for, anyway. It was rumored to hold a map taken from the great pirate William Hollingsworth, who’d been hanged in a neighboring town only weeks before. Hollingsworth was a man Ravenheart envied greatly. Soon, however, that would all change, because he planned to use this map to inherit the untold riches of the deceased.

Captain Ravenheart walked to the edge of his ship and took in a deep breath of salty sea air. A cool breeze thrust his graying hair over his shoulders as he tightened his fist, wincing with the pain of his well-aged bones.

The years were catching up with him and, though he kept it to himself, he was nearly ready to retire to a quiet island where he could live out the rest of his days free of danger and smelly seafaring men. He’d loved every minute of the last thirty or so years that he’d spent pirating the seven seas, but a man needed to know when he’d had enough, though few could accept that their time is ever over. Ravenheart knew that his time had passed, or was coming close to ending. He wouldn’t be able to rest easy, though, until he had Hollingsworth’s treasure.

He would have to pass his hat off to one of his men eventually. Troy was the obvious choice, having proven himself as capable to be that man when he, as an adolescent, had hunted down Ravenheart and begged him to make him one of his crew.

The day they met, Troy Radford had claimed to be an orphan from Spain who’d trained his entire life to become the greatest assassin this world had ever known. Ravenheart had chuckled at hearing this clever tale. He’d found the boy charming and he served as a perfect kitchen hand for his ship. But the speed, stealth, and agility the boy possessed became so apparent over the following days, that Ravenheart was forced to consider the truth of what Troy had initially claimed.

Now he was Ravenheart’s first crewman, the obvious favorite of the old captain, and his most trusted friend. Ravenheart doubted, quite frankly, that he would have known half the success he’d experienced without the cunning and quiet skills of Troy. The rest of his crew was made up of typical, double-crossing pirates. But not Troy. He was a real man and the only one Ravenheart trusted. The dark shape moving toward the captain across the water’s glassy surface brought him back to the present. His men had probably just reached shore and already Troy was returning. Ravenheart grinned to himself. Yes, he was certainly the man for the job.

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Troy’s solid biceps flexed as he pulled the oars back time and time again, bringing the vessel back to the ship. A bit of his black hair came loose of his ponytail and wrapped around his one gold earring with the wind.

He was nearly to Ravenheart’s ship with the woman he’d found stowing away in his tiny boat, the woman he suspected was the key to everything. But, for her own safety and his own success, no one else could know.

“Please let me go,” she cried. “I didn’t know this was yours. It looks so similar to my family’s. I’m really sorry, sir.” Her tears were disgustingly annoying.

Troy ignored her as he secured one of the ropes hanging from the great ship to the center beam of his boat and began hoisting them up out of the water. He could just make out the outline of the massive skeleton carved into the front corner of their ship.

The woman’s crying became more desperate. “I beg of you. Don’t put me on a pirate’s ship. I’ll never tell anyone I saw you. I’ll do anything you ask. Just please let me go.”

The bandages on her face and the fact that her pitiful pleading was not accompanied by any physical attempt to harm him or get away only confirmed Troy’s suspicions of who she was. He didn’t trust one word she said.

“Troy,” Ravenheart’s voice came from above. “Who’s with you, boy?”

“Troy Radford?” the woman gasped. “Ravenheart’s assassin?” She stared up at the captain, her eyes gigantic. “You’re Captain Ravenheart? The dreaded pirate? Oh, what shall become of me now?” She wailed loudly, swooning against the side of the boat.

Ravenheart helped to swing the boat onto the ship. “Why did you bring this woman onboard?” he asked the other man.

Troy stepped out of his boat and grabbed the woman’s arm to force her to stand in front of him. “I found her out alone and thought of what a perfect hostage she would make, should the need for one arise. Even when we’ve left Fingleton, men will trade our escape for her safety.”

The woman knelt at Troy’s feet. “Thank you for sparing my life.”

Ravenheart gave her a revolted look. “Have you gone mad? A woman has never stepped foot on my ship, and I do not intend to sail with one now. Throw her overboard.”

He cringed and stepped back when the woman grabbed at his torn shirttail.

“Please, I cannot swim,” she pled. “I will serve you well in exchange for my life.”

“But look at how beautiful she is,” Troy said. “And the dressings on her face make her appear weak and vulnerable. You know as well as I do that many men adore that sort of thing.”

All three turned to stare at the water when they heard the splashing of oars drawing six boats full of men closer and closer.

“Captain,” Troy said loudly. “I have never steered you wrong before.”

“Take the ropes, men,” someone shouted below. “Talon, Bloodgood, stand ready to hoist her up.”

“It’ll take more ‘n two men with all this loot weighing us down.”

A gleam came to Ravenheart’s eyes at the mention of such loot. “Aye,” he said to Troy, anxious to be done with the matter of the woman and to go to his men. “Take her below, boy. Keep her out of sight of the men. We’ll talk about it in the morning.”

Troy took the woman’s arm and began walking her to the trapdoor that led below deck.

She kept her head low as she continued to cry.

*Take her below, boy*, he thought irritably of the captain saying. He was into his third decade now and far past being a boy. Even if Ravenheart was more of a father than a captain to him, he wished the old man would stop referring to him that way.

Troy took his cutlass from his belt and used it to wedge open the door near the backend of the ship. He raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Ladies first,” he said to the woman who began climbing down using the boards that had been nailed into the back wall in the room beneath them.

Once Troy had climbed down too, she was led to a floor even lower than the first and ordered into a small area in one corner, boxed in with metal bars she could not escape. There was much he needed to speak with her about, but not tonight.

Captain Ravenheart would want him in his office if the crew had recovered that map.

And the woman could go nowhere for now. So he would wait until morning, when everyone slept and no one would hear them.

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“Ahoy there, do you have it, men?” Ravenheart said forcefully the moment the first boat had been raised.

“You wouldn’t believe the treasure that’s stored up in that bank,” Baldswell said in a raspy voice. The oldest member of their crew, he was a gangly thing, with no hair and only five teeth. “And it’s right on the shore, too. After we unload all this, we can get the rest in two more trips I reckon.”

Ravenheart’s eyes were crazy as he grabbed the tip of the small boat and yanked it until it teetered over the ship’s deck. “The map. Did you get it?”

“Course we did, Captain.” Baldswell pushed two buckets full of gold coins aside so he could get a better grip on the third one. “It’s right—in—here.” He struggled to lift the bucket and hand it to Ravenheart.

The captain could see the scroll wrapped in sheep’s skin sticking out of the coins and reached for it. “Good work, men,” Ravenheart said excitedly. “Load the other boats, lift the anchor, and set sail. The more distance we put between us and Fingleton before anyone finds out it’s missing, the harder it’ll be for them to come after us.” He turned away to go to his quarters as an uproar began behind him.

“This int’ even half o’ what’s back there!” Baldswell shouted.

“And all that int’ a hundredth part o’ what we’ll find with this map!” Ravenheart called back over his shoulder. “Now do what I said and get me Troy!” Then he marched twenty paces to his tall cabin door and entered his quarters.

Slamming the door shut behind him, he sat at his sturdy, mutilated desk and began to untie the binding wrapped around the hide. His fingers trembled with anticipation.

Ravenheart hadn’t dared go in search of Hollingsworth’s treasure before his death. Although he may be accused of cowardice, he could admit that it was from fear. Hollingsworth’s name alone was enough to make men tremble and children cry.

But now that he was deceased, and all his crew with him, Ravenheart’s lust for the treasure rumored to be worth more than a man could imagine had grown, unhindered by fear. And in his hands, he held the map that may very well lead him right to it.

The captain threw the strap to the floor once it was untied and began to unroll the priceless piece of parchment. He was pleased to see right away that he recognized the land in the bottom right-hand corner. It was the top of Scotland.

But he was not pleased at all to see where the trail of blood red ink led. First it went through the forbidden Sea of Death, indicated by rolling swirls topped with drawings of human skulls. The dead walked freely among the living there. No man had ever gone into the Sea of Death and come out alive. Or so it was believed. Then the trail continued through a hollow island shaped like the head of a bat surrounded by sea serpents. The bat’s hellish fanged mouth was gaping wide open where water rushed through it, as if waiting to devour whatever sailors were brave enough to visit. With his knowledge of the size of Hollingsworth’s ship, there was no doubt in his mind that his ship would fit through it. From there, arrows indicated that a current washed clear through the underbelly of the island and out through the hollow at the other end which would bring ships straight to a second island nearby with an X in its center, offering no indication of how to reach the designated mark.

He continued to stare at it with a grave expression until the creak of his door being opened drew him out of this trance. Troy entered the room with his usual air of confidence.

“The men are raising the anchor and preparing for a hasty departure, Captain,” Troy said, moving to his side.

“Good to hear, but what do you make of this, boy?” Ravenheart said distractedly, having already returned his attention to the map.

Troy only had to stare at it for a moment. “It looks more dangerous than anything we’ve done before.”

“Yes, suicide even. But are you with me?”

Troy placed a hand on the old man’s shoulder. “To the very end, Captain.”

“Aye, you’re a good man, Radford. Best keep the dangers of this voyage to ourselves for now.”

Troy nodded. He understood that some of their men would probably lose their lives in the search for Hollingsworth’s treasure. Perhaps even all of them, including him. But it was a risk worth taking for the reward.

But it was the exhilaration of flirting with death that had driven him to become an assassin and pirate. He was in love with the thrill it gave him.

And besides, he just might have all the answers they needed two floors below his feet.

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