

Author of the Gust
Book One of the Antelope

RICK AUSTINSON



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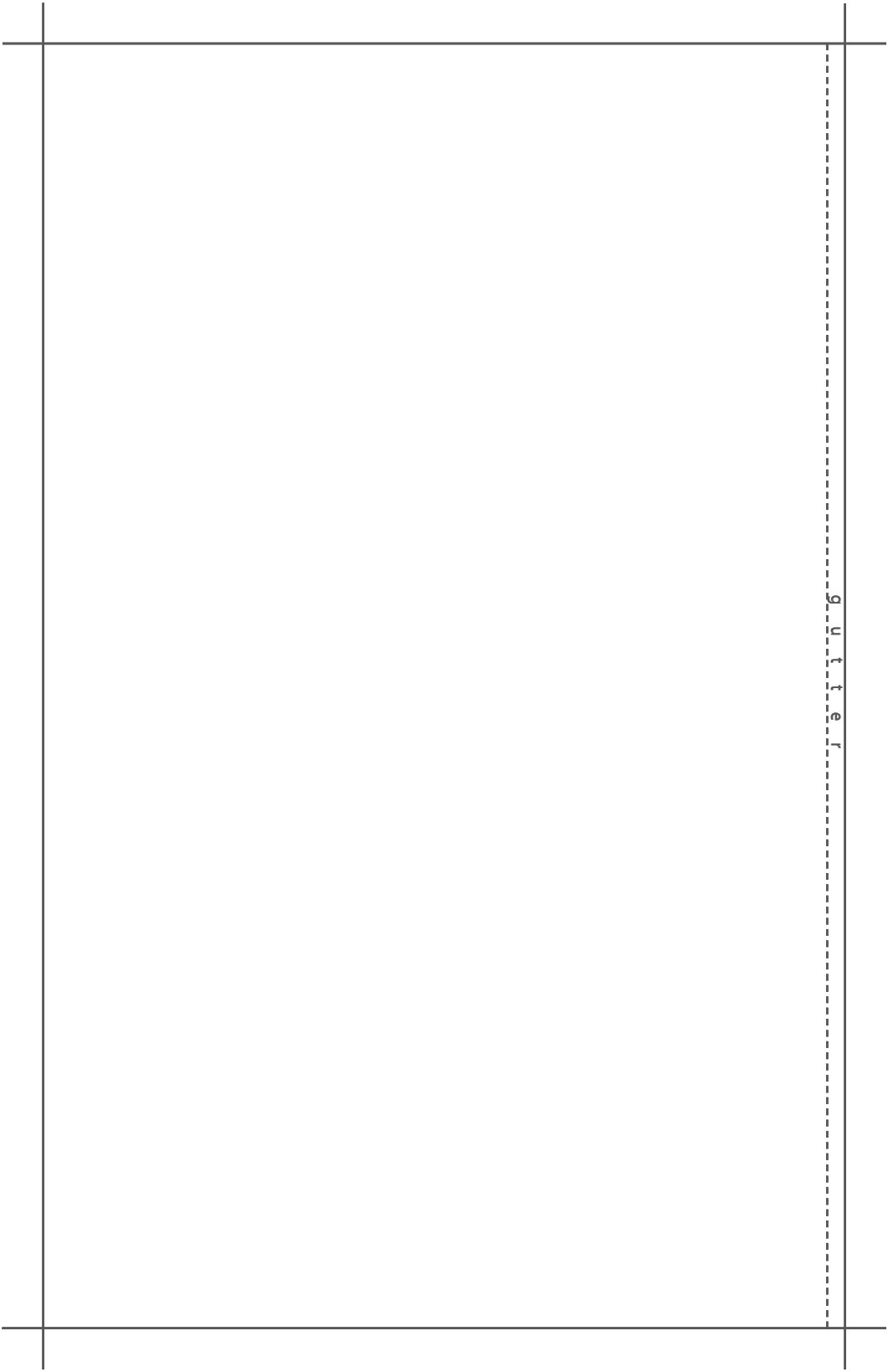
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*In loving memory of Gwendolyn Rains,
who departed this earth in 2007.
And whose love for reading left behind
some 98 boxes of book!
This one's for you Gramma!*



Acknowledgments

There are many important people who contributed to make this work the success that you hold in your hands.

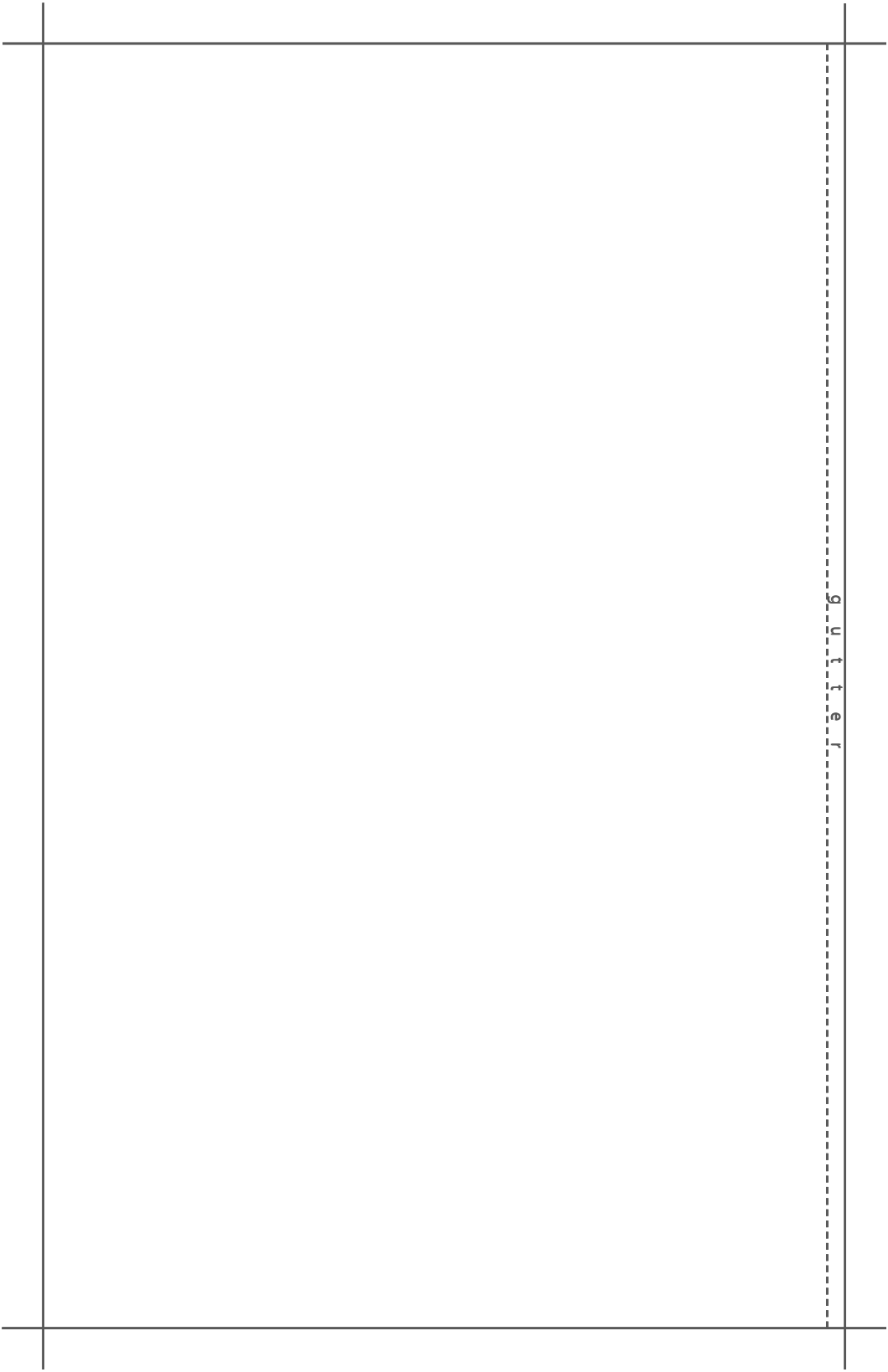
First of all, I must always mention my wonderful Father, who edited my numerous spelling and grammatical errors not once, but twice!

My brother Kris, the incredibly talented graphic-artist of the family, who's fine handy work is displayed on the cover.

Special thanks also go to Michelle Kiraly and Chan Kwon, who were helpful enough to read the raw manuscripts and offer invaluable feedback on the story, and address the glaring plot-holes which I had failed to notice.

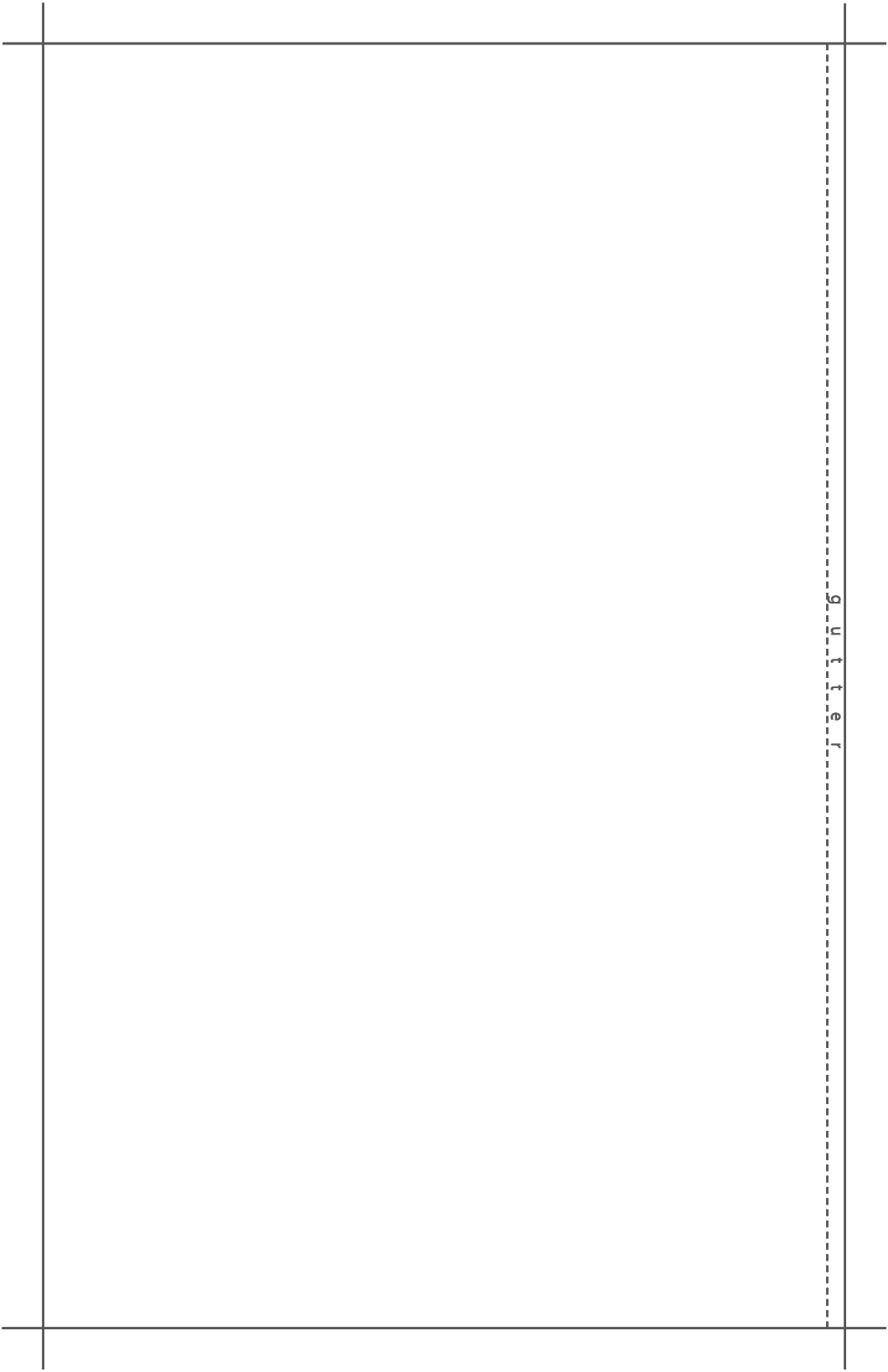
Additionally, I would like to pay tribute to Mathew Higgins, my good friend in Australia who created some AWESOME illustrations for me. His work can be seen on chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 9, as well as a little on the cover. Thank you again!

And last but certainly not least, Emily "Jinx" Pode, who drew the wonderful dragon picture in Chapter 7.



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Chapter 1: Rejection

“You miss a hundred percent of the shots
you don’t take.” – Wayne Gretzky

Every great journey and adventure that has ever been undertaken throughout all the histories has always shared one key thing in common: each began with a single step.

But for some, it wasn’t always a ‘step’ in the conventional sense.

Ryo landed headlong with a splash in the muddy drainage ditch beside the road

She should have seen that coming.

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Bits of green and brown moss clung to her face and foul-smelling grayish-brown water ran down her neck as she picked herself up and tossed back her single, long, black braid. Another day, another wonderful adventure in being knocked in a puddle.

The proud city of Ninpou was often called the City of Rain, because it rained there more often than anywhere in the whole of the empire. About four times a week, on average, except during the rainy season when it happened several times a day, and during the winter when it was dark for four solid weeks and snowed.

This meant of course that the city never lacked water, and older children never lacked puddles to shove Ryo into.

She stood, and with one stroke of her hand, whipped the muck off her face and glared at her opponent. Her dark green eyes were unblinking, unwavering, as she stared down her enemy. Ryo had eyes like a falcon, her mother always said, and her stare could even make grown men... laugh hysterically.

There is unfortunately nothing imposing about a little girl standing in a puddle, soaked to the bone and covered from head to toe in mud.

Without breaking her gaze, Ryo stepped out of the low ditch and onto the heather, where her enemy had drawn a knife.

He was an older boy, about a head taller and very muscled. But muscles were slow, awkward, and not very useful unless you had good armor to cover them.

"Why do I even bother to waste my time with you?" he snarled. "Why do I even TOUCH you?!"

“Because you’re a coward,” Ryo replied simply. “Who attacks from behind. Can we say ‘honor’? It’s easy, hon-or, now you try.”

Without another word, the boy leaned forward and lunged at Ryo with the knife.

Ryo caught his wrist with one hand, ducked low, and with a smooth, fluid motion, used the boy’s momentum to catapult him over her shoulder.

He landed on the heather behind her and rolled to his feet, but Ryo had already turned around.

Casually, almost conversationally, she reached behind her back and drew a short, hand carved wooden training knife from her belt.

“No, like this—Cut! Cut! Cut! DISARM! CUT!”

Ryo released the older boy’s arm and retrieved his razor sharp tanto from where it had fallen in the heather. For a moment she caught the reflection of the late morning sun high overhead in the glistening blade of the fine weapon. She bounced the rays expertly into his eyes and grinned mockingly.

Then, as the older boy reached to grab it from her hand, Ryo tossed the weapon up, giving it just enough spin to flip end over end three times, and land perfectly balanced on her out stretched pointer finger, digging in far enough to raise one crimson drop of blood that also caught the glint of the sun’s rays.

Ryo once more flicked the weapon up and caught it by the blade, then threw it into the ground at the boy’s feet. Her own wooden practice tanto hadn’t left a single mark as it passed thrice across his arm and once more across his neck, but she was quite sure it had cut deeper into his ego than any blade could.

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Ryo smeared the drop of blood under her right eye, leaving behind a dark crimson tear drop. She shifted back on her right leg and took a strong stance, retrieving the little wooden practice knife from her belt.

“Now,” she began quietly. “Would you like to try again?”

The boy sheathed his tanto and backed away, then spit on the ground at Ryo’s feet.

He was sixteen, a good three years Ryo’s senior, but when he’d come at her with the knife she’d dispatched him as easily as though he were a child.

People were always surprised by Ryo’s speed and strength. She was very slightly built for her age, but the way she moved allowed her to avoid attackers, and use their own strength against them. Here, standing in the alley after the day’s lessons, she wore the traditional attire of a Ninja: light black clothes that hugged her body tightly but stretched and flexed with her to allow total freedom of movement. Her dark hair was tied back in a close-fitting braid, and her dark eyes were narrowed into slits.

The boy was Kium Tamashiro, of the Tamakei Tamashiro family. Rumiko Tamashiro was his younger sister, a girl Ryo’s age. The Tamashiros were a wealthy family, and as such, thought they were entitled great honor. Ryo always thought that honor would be better deserved if they were more competent Ninjas.

Rumiko was a brat, and every other child knew it. Sometimes they even hated her as much as Ryo. It might have seemed natural for the two girls to develop a friendship, both being shunned by their schoolmates, but Ryo found herself at odds with Rumiko as much, if not more often than the others. Rumiko was boisterous, outgoing, and

generally loud. She treated her friends almost as badly as she treated her enemies.

There was a game the children often played, a training challenge called Catesca. Ryo didn't get to play often, but when she did she dominated. She liked Catesca because there were no real rules, hence no one could accuse her of cheating.

Earlier that day they had played a game, and Ryo had beaten Rumiko with an unbelievable move. It was so unbelievable that the other children gasped and some even clapped. Rumiko, in tears, shrieked something about telling her mother and ran off.

Ryo had groaned inwardly and sighed with dread. Kasumi Tamashiro was a relentless woman with a fiery temper, who believed every word her daughter said as though it had come from the Oracle himself. Ryo would rather fight ten Pirates blindfolded than face another verbal thrashing from that woman. It was bad enough being yelled at, but Kasumi said all the things most adults were too polite to say out loud.

Apparently Rumiko's quest had ended with her brother, because he had come to avenge the girl's defeat. Come at Ryo with a knife, that is, thus leading to the confrontation that allowed Ryo to repeat the same move and add another win to her tally.

She left the quiet back alley and continued on her way, her own quest remembered and the confrontation already forgotten.

Ryo walked slowly down the street, listening to the bustle of life around her but not hearing it. It was clear to all that she was in a world of her own, and the bright smile she wore said that it was a good world.

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Today she was thirteen, which is a very special day for young people in the capital city of Ninpou. When a young Ninja is thirteen years old, they are allowed to leave school and join a ship at the lowest rank. Joining a ship meant a chance to see the world, and to gain fame and recognition.

This was the first real chance she'd had her entire life. Out on the ocean she could become a Samurai if she worked hard enough. She could finally get past all the prejudice she had grown up with. People would respect her, she would be known as Ryo of the Sea, or something like that, and she would someday have her own ship, maybe even a fleet!

And it would all begin today, when she joined a crew.

Ryo headed to one of the larger ports, the one where all the ships went when they were taking on new crewmembers. Ninpou was the place to get fresh young sailors, something the ships were always looking for. The captains liked to get the fearless youths, the ones who may not have skill yet, but had a fire and passion for the sea.

Ryo was virtually tittering with excitement by the time she reached the port. She was very headstrong by nature, and had gotten herself into more than a few situations she could have avoided by taking some time to think. Now was not the time to be headstrong, now was the time to be rational.

She surveyed the port carefully. There was every type of ship here; war ships, clipper ships, merchant vessels, all of every shape and size.

Now was not the time to be rash. The decisions she made today would affect the rest of her life. If she chose a merchant vessel, she could make a name for herself

gallantly defending it from Pirates, but only if it was a ship that ventured close to Pirate waters. If she took a raiding ship or a war ship she could really draw positive attention with her incredible fighting skills.

Ryo drew an excited breath and raced for the closest vessel.



There were already several young people gathered around this ship, where a crewmate was explaining some of the perils of life at sea. Ryo already knew all about that, she spent many nights hanging about local taverns listening to the sailors speak. She had been waiting her whole life for this chance to go out to sea, to see the world and be judged for her abilities, not her lineage.

Ryo moved in behind the group. The sailor went on to say he was now going to be taking names, and that he would choose from among them who would come aboard to be tested for the open slots on the ship. The young hopefuls formed a line, and Ryo was immediately shoved to the back.

The boy ahead of her was tall and older, probably closer to eighteen, but he looked scrawny and not very strong. His glasses were as thick as wine bottles, but his face showed a mask of determination. He looked ready to overcome any obstacle by sheer will alone.

“Name?” the crewmate asked.

“Nenyo Arroyo,” the boy replied.

“Fighting specialization?”

“Navigation.”

The crewmen looked up at Nenyo darkly.

“Fighting specialization?” he repeated.

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"I'm fully schooled as a navigator," Nenyo replied. "And quite skilled."

"We're not taking those who can't fight," the crewmen grunted and crossed Nenyo's name off the list. "Next."

The youth cursed angrily and stomped off in the direction of the next ship, tripping over a small barrel on the dock as he went.

"Name?" the crewmen asked. "Hey, kid, name?"

Ryo realized she'd been watching the boy Nenyo go, and hadn't been paying attention.

"Ryo Sansen," she replied confidently.

The man started to write the name, then looked back up at her as if she'd just insulted his mother.

"You're that half-breed girl," he growled. "We don't want you here, there's no room on this ship for Pirates!"

"But—" Ryo protested.

"Go!" the man shouted and started to stand. "Or I'll call the City Watch."

Ryo bit her lower lip and walked away. While she was fully confident she could take the crewmen in a fight she couldn't risk another confrontation with the guard. For her, it would mean the worst possible punishment.

Once, not so long ago, when a vendor refused to sell her an item, Ryo got the idea that maybe she would just take it. She knew she could defeat the vendor if it came to blows, so what was to stop her?

A half a dozen watchmen, that was what. They materialized as if out of nowhere. Ryo had, seeing her predicament, immediately confessed to the crime and offered to pay for the item, but it was too late.

Her punishment was fifteen lashes, and not the 'baby' lashes normally given to young Ninjas who committed

petty crimes either, she got the full-on adult treatment. The watchmen's justification? She was nearing thirteen, and should know by now that stealing is wrong.

While the punishment was harsh, it was not wholly unheard of. The concept of teaching a harsh lesson once rather than a gentle one several times was well known, and generally considered to be the root of Ninpou's almost zero crime-rate.

But Ryo being a solid month shy of her eleventh birthday at the time should have been more than mitigating. The shopkeeper wanted Ryo's hands cut off, and for a moment it seemed that the guards were considering it.

Still, it had taught her a valuable lesson (besides not stealing), it had taught her that she would always be treated differently, whether she did the right thing or the wrong thing.

Ryo moved on to the next ship, where again she found herself in line behind Nenyō. For him it was the same as last time, the crewmen on the dock asked Nenyō's fighting specialization and then turned him away when he had none.

"Name?" he asked Ryo.

"Ryo Sansen," Ryo replied. "I'm very skilled at—"

"Turn around, and walk the other way," the crewmen hissed. "Or I'll slit your throat while you sleep, you little Pirate filth."

Ryo almost ran.

Once again, she found herself in line behind the boy Nenyō, and this time when he was turned away she didn't even bother waiting to talk to the crewmen.



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The sun was setting over the now quiet harbor and the torches had begun to be lit. By nature, Ninjas were creatures of the night, but even the best Ninja needed a little light every now and then. The ships had all pulled up their gangplanks for the night, and Ryo was on the verge of tears.

Every single ship had been the same way: once they heard who she was, they turned her away. Even the ship that'd lost half its crew to scurvy and had the rest out begging for recruits turned her down. Ryo felt so terrible right then she'd almost run home crying.

But as terrible as she felt, she couldn't stand to go home. She had said a long goodbye to her mother that morning, promising she would join a ship and make a name for herself on the ocean. She was hurt from the day's rejection, but her mother would be even more heart-broken to see her daughter fail.

As she sat on a wide patio up and behind one of the buildings, she took a deep breath and fought back tears. She had come here, to this secluded little porch that by day served as an outdoor tavern, because she couldn't think of what to do next.

No ship, not one, would take her.

"Ehhh, we all face rejection, don't we?"

Ryo jumped. In the dim half-light of sunset she had mistaken the haggard old man for a pile of refuse left over from the day's activities.

Ninjas called this time 'the magic hour' during the sunrise and the sunset, when it was not quite light but not quite dark. Ryo, like most Ninjas, could see extremely well by day, and exceptionally well at night, but during the magic hour, in the failing light, her eyes couldn't focus.

The magic hour was a dangerous time for all Ninjas.

"I guess," she replied sulkily after her heart stopped beating so fast.

"Rejection, persecution, urp," the old sailor was clearly quite drunk. Even so, he was making a good deal of sense.

"We all have hopes and dreams," he continued. "Like I dream of another bottle, but we just can't get what we want..."

The old man rocked forward for a few moments and started to snore. Then, very suddenly, he looked up and his eyes opened wide and filled with fire.

"Sullen Michael, he took it!" the drunk raged. "The map, yes, took it, to Ronin!"

There was a long pause as he stared pointedly at Ryo.

"But what if we could just change the world?" he asked. "With the Tiger's Claw! Yes, the claw of the great Sabaoth! That can grant whoever possesses it their one greatest wish!"

With that he raised a finger for emphasis, then fell forward on the table and began snoring again.

Ryo carefully slipped off the crate she'd been sitting on, and left the patio. It was dark now, and the sky was filled with stars.

The ships were closed down for the night, those that hadn't left on the evening tide. The docks were silent, still, devoid of life. It was the one part of the city that already slept.

The old man's talk wasn't simple drunk ramblings, Ryo had heard of the Claw before.

In her reading, she had come across a reference to it once in the Chronicles of the Odei Clan, a book which covered four hundred years of history starting with Keno

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Odei, who forged the first Ôdachi, all the way to his descendant Ronodeihara, who was a great singer in Bikal one hundred years ago.

Shebodei, the grandson of the great warlord Kobo-Odei, leveraged his entire family fortune in a search for the Tiger's Claw. He led four thousand Ninjas and an armada of nearly a hundred and fifty warships on a ten-year-long campaign to find the treasure.

He failed miserably, and lived out his days working as a baker in Ninpou.

Still, great warlords—or rather the grandsons of great warlords—don't lead thousands of people in search of a lie. Shebodei failed to find the Claw because he didn't know where to look.

Ryo now knew.

"We just can't stand to go home, can we?"

Ryo spun around reflexively. It was the boy who'd been ahead of her in line for the first ship, the one who'd been turned down repeatedly.

"I guess," Ryo shrugged. It was unusual. People didn't talk to her often, they didn't even make eye contact. "They wouldn't take you either?"

"It's the same way every year," Nenyo replied. "I try to find a ship, and all they want is fighters."

"They won't take me because I'm—"

"Half Pirate? Everybody knows."

It was quite well known, and most people who knew didn't actually talk to her. By hiding her face or simply going where she was not immediately recognized, Ryo could gain a modicum of acceptance. But once people found out, they never forgot.

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And they usually didn't try to make conversation with her.

Ryo folded her arms and glared at the boy.

"It's not like I care," Nenyo continued. "I have all the dexterity of a cow; everyone tells me I'm not a real Ninja either. What's it to me if you're half Pirate?"

There was a long pause as the two stared uncomfortably at each other.

"I'm Nenyo Arroyo," Nenyo finally said and extended a hand.

It seemed odd that anyone would even try to befriend her, and Ryo hadn't survived thirteen years without more than a few emotional scars. Though she didn't know his motivations, this Nenyo seemed sincere enough.

"Ryo Sansen," Ryo replied as they shook hands firmly.

Ryo continued on her way in silence, with Nenyo following a half a pace behind.

"So Ryo," Nenyo began. "We seem to be in the same general predicament, got any ideas?"

"Change the world," Ryo shrugged and kept walking.

"Was that a joke?" Nenyo asked as he followed after her.

"Kind of," Ryo said absently. "It sure wouldn't be easy."

"Mind elaborating?"

Ryo thought for several moments before looking back at Nenyo and sizing him up.

"There's this gem, I guess," she explained. "It... has magical powers. It can grant whoever holds it a single wish."

"Really?" Nenyo asked suspiciously.

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“Yup,” Ryo nodded. “I have it on a very reliable source. Well, ok, so it was a drunk, raving source, but I’m sure of it!”

She was sure. The fire in that old man’s eyes had been undeniable, he *believed* in the Tiger’s Claw. All they had to do was find a Pirate named Sullen Michael in Ronin, in Pirate waters.

“This Gem,” Nenyο began. “Where is it?”

“I don’t know,” Ryo admitted. “But I know who does, and where he is.”

“Feel like sharing?” Nenyο folded his arms across his chest and shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

Ryo mimicked his gesture and glanced up at the crystal clear night sky. The stars were out now and the sky was as sparkling and glimmering as a Samurai’s treasure room. With a sky like that, who could ask for anything more?

But the sky would be a million times more beautiful without the noise and light of the city. On the tranquil sea, the sky would be most perfect.

Ryo imagined for a moment what it would be like to have a ship to sail that sky in; to reach above the clouds and possess the sky the way she’d always dreamed. Out there on the sea where water and sky met she could have that sky, but what good was it here where she could not grasp it?

“A Pirate, named Sullen Michael,” Ryo explained. “In Ronin, in Pirate territory.”

“Well,” Nenyο breathed. “That’s three reasons to go right there.”

Ryo shivered nervously and shrugged, unsure what to say.

“Let’s make a plan,” Nenyο said seriously.



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Rejection

Ryo opened the door as quietly as she could, and slipped through the tiny house. To her astonishment the lanterns were still lit, and when she came around the corner into the kitchen, she found her mother sitting at the table.

To Ryo's further amazement, dinner was laid out for two on the fine china, and it was her favorite meal. Seaweed-wrapped sushi with egg rolls and fresh miso soup. Frunawho smiled warmly as Ryo sat.

Ryo's mother was a very beautiful woman. She had been young when she had Ryo, and was still considered fairly young by Ninja standards. Much like her daughter she had long, very dark hair and a slight build. But unlike her daughter, Frunawho's eyes were hazel, and the one feature of her otherwise attractive face that seemed plain. There was still a strong family resemblance though; when Ryo and Frunawho walked together it was very clear they were mother and daughter. In her day Frunawho had been quite a warrior, but upon Ryo's birth she retreated to Ninpou, to escape the fighting.

"How'd you know I'd be back?" Ryo asked glumly.

Frunawho's smile faded. "I didn't think you would to be honest, but I figured either way—"

Ryo smiled, she knew what her mother was thinking. Her mother had known all along no ship would take Ryo, but she knew just what to say to make Ryo not feel so put out.

"So was it too bad?" Frunawho leaned forward on the table.

"Not really," Ryo replied as she started eating. "Only about half the ships threatened me with gruesome death, the others just told me to leave."

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“Ouch,” Frunawho winced. “But the ships usually button up for the night at sundown, where have you been? I was beginning to think—”

“I met a friend,” Ryo said offhandedly. “We were talking.”

Frunawho looked as though she might explode with joy. “Who is it, honey?”

“He’s a navigator’s son,” Ryo replied. “None of the ships would take him either because he can’t fight for beans. We’re going to try at some of the other ports tomorrow.”

Ryo decided not to tell her mother about the Tiger’s Claw. Frunawho would probably say something about it being a wild goose chase or superstitious nonsense. But if Ryo and Nenyo could find a ship...

After the late dinner Ryo helped her mother with the dishes. Ryo missed her already, and she hadn’t even left yet. She knew her mother was feeling the same way; Frunawho had been missing Ryo ever since the day she had told her she wanted to go to sea. But Frunawho was proud of her daughter’s determination. She knew Ryo faced many challenges just for who she was, and she always knew Ryo would succeed no matter what.

“Ryo,” Frunawho said softly. “There’s something you need to see.”

Ryo gulped and watched as her mother pulled a long chest out of one of the cupboards and began working at the rusted metal latches. Ninja houses were full of nooks and crannies and small compartments hidden everywhere; Ryo had lived in the house her whole life and was still finding new places to hide things. That such a large chest had gone unnoticed all these years was no great surprise.

Frunawho opened the case and very tenderly produced a long bundle of canvas, which she began to unwrap. The bundle shrank quickly, but it seemed there must have been an entire sail wrapped around the object.

What was finally produced was a sword, but not a katana.

It was a Pirate sword.

“Your father gave this to me,” Frunawho explained. “The last time we saw each other. He said it was the only thing in the world he had that meant as much to him as I did, and that if he couldn’t have both he didn’t want either. I never really understood why the sword meant so much to him, but I understood why he wanted me to have it. It was the only thing he possessed that had enough value to him to mean anything.”

Ryo stared in awe at the sword, at her father’s sword. She too understood what it meant; her father giving this to her mother. A sword was a very special, very personal thing; and while its value in gold could easily be counted, its value in meaning was beyond measure. This sword represented a piece of a man’s soul, a piece he had given to a woman who meant more to him than a forged blade ever could.

“I want you to have it, Ryo,” Frunawho declared. “Take it with you on your journey.”

“But... but it’s yours, Mother,” Ryo wept softly. “Father gave it to you—I can’t take it away from you.”

“All I need of your father,” Frunawho whispered. “I carry inside me, in my heart. But you never knew him, and this is all you have of him. So I want you to carry this part on your hip, so you can have a piece of your very own.”

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Ryo smiled warmly and took the sword. It felt good to finally have something to connect her to her father, something more than the stories her mother told. This sword was the most precious gift she could imagine.

It was after midnight by the time Frunawho tucked Ryo into bed.

“I guess this is really the last time I’m going to tuck you in,” Frunawho said, smiling to hide her tears. “By the time you come back, my little girl’s going to be all grown up.”

“Don’t cry,” Ryo encouraged as she hugged her mother.

Frunawho smiled for a moment, then frowned and brushed Ryo’s hair back. In that classic universal mothering gesture, she licked her thumb and rubbed it under Ryo’s eye, wiping away the faint stain of blood from earlier that day.

“You should be careful,” she warned. “People fear little girls who cry blood.”

Ryo nodded and shut her eyes tightly. Imitating the ancient gesture, performed through epochs by battle-hardened Ninjas, was the one thing Ryo and her mother had ever disagreed on.

She drifted almost instantly off to sleep. No matter what, she could always fall asleep when her mother tucked her in, no matter how excited or sad she was.



The sun rose into a crystal blue sky, and Ryo met Nenyō in front of the tavern where they’d talked the night before.

“So what’s the plan?” Nenyō asked. “We gonna try and find a ship to Ronin? Or maybe stow away.”

“We’re not going to get to the Pirate city on a Ninja ship,” Ryo replied. “Unless it’s actually going there, and no Ninja ship would venture that far into Pirate waters without a very good reason.”

“Alright...” Nenyō replied. “So what then?”

“Maybe we can charter a ship,” Ryo suggested.

“Charter ships are expensive,” Nenyō shook his head. “And their rates are based on how dangerous the mission is.”

“Maybe we can find a really crazy captain,” Ryo suggested. “And convince him it’ll be worth the risk.”

“Or maybe we can get a ship,” said Nenyō slowly. “Like as a derelict, and fix it up. Then we’d just need a crew...”

“Then let’s go out Swamp Bottom!” Ryo blurted a little louder than she’d intended. She started stomping hurriedly down the street, and Nenyō ran to catch up.

“Aren’t we being a little hasty?” Nenyō asked. “We don’t even know if—”

“We won’t know anything until we look around,” Ryo replied. “No sense coming up with ideas that won’t work.”



Swamp Bottom was the shallow, silty bay where two big rivers met the sea. As a harbor it was useless, only deep enough for the bigger ships to get in at high tide. The water was muddy and smelled bad from the rivers, and the bay was littered with trash. This was where Ninja ships came to die, or at least rest for a bit.

The dying hulks lay on the bottom, hulls sticking out of the water at odd angles with rotting timbers. The few

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that were still afloat had been picked apart by salvagers, leaving little but sleeping derelicts.

Save for one shabby vessel that looked complete.

“What do you think?” Ryo asked.

Nenyo shrugged. “A few coats of paint,” he said. “And she’d be fine. Yeah, just a few coats of paint, some new sails, probably a new hull—”

“You two gawkin’?” an old man called. “Or looking to make a purchase?”

Nenyo and Ryo glanced at each other and walked down the pier to where the old man sat by the gangplank of the ship. He looked quite haggard and tired, but there seemed to be a deep fire burning in his eyes, even if time and alcohol had threatened to smother it.

“Is she for sale?” Ryo cocked her head and asked.

“Aye,” the old Ninja sighed. “And I’ll take almost anythin’ for her, so long as it buys enough saki to forget her.”

The ship was old, that was obvious, and its construction looked unplaceable. She was clearly built for speed, but was unlike any Ninja or Pirate ship Ryo had ever seen. It was quite common for Ninjas to steal Pirate ships, and vice versa, but this ship was neither. In her day she must have been quite the vessel, but now the paint was peeling and faded and the sails were in rags, and she listed to port as though she were a tired old woman.

“Forty years,” the old man raised a fist and pounded the air to emphasize his point. “Forty years I sailed the seas on that ship. Started as just a cabin boy and worked me way up, til the captain he gave her to me when he died. The Antelope was the fastest ship on the sea; could get from here to Rivanna Bay in under a month.”

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Ryo and Nenyō glanced at each other and nodded in disbelief. Between Rivanna Bay and Ninpou was a common trading route that usually took between six weeks and two months.

“My crews, they never understood,” the old captain lamented. “Left me, every last one of them they did, three years ago after our last run. Said I was ‘dangerous company’. They didn’t understand.”

“Why’d they say you were so dangerous?” Ryo asked curiously.

“Aye, ‘twas for the way I captained her it was,” the man sighed. “Got ‘em into a few rough scrapes I did. ‘Course, they seemed not to care that I also got ‘em back out. Adventuring’s a dangerous art, it is.”

“Do you think we could put together a crew?” Ryo whispered to Nenyō. “And come up with enough gold for the ship?”

“And what adventures we had!” the old captain bellowed. “We took the Antelope deeper into Pirate waters than any Ninja ever dared! Oh, to have such a great adventure as that again. I would gladly trade my life, for just one last great adventure.”

Nenyō and Ryo looked at each other again.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Nenyō asked.

Ryo turned to the old sea captain.

“Sir,” she announced. “How would you like to embark on the greatest adventure of all time?”



“We need a crew,” Ryo said simply. “And enough capital to stock the ship.”

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“I don’t have any money,” Nenyō shrugged. “And neither does Captain Gaysu.”

“Well, let’s just look for a crew first,” Ryo replied. “Then we can worry about money. Maybe we can convince whoever we recruit to put up capital—”

“Who would join a ship with no money?” Nenyō interrupted. “It’s not my way to be pessimistic, but I don’t know how we’re going to do this right now.”

“Who knows,” Ryo shrugged. “Perhaps a solution will present itself.”

They had entered the next harbor, a big one frequented by the raiders. They were just walking down one of the piers along the shore when a man was rolled down the gangplank in front of them.

“Please!” the man begged. “Let me stay on! I promise I won’t fall asleep again!”

“No!” the two crewmen who had thrown him off shouted in unison. “You were practically useless in the last raid! Now get going and don’t come back, and take your ‘fair share’ with you!”

One of the crewmen threw a small bag at the man’s head and struck him squarely, sending him to the ground.

The crewmen turned away and busied themselves with the ship, and Ryo rushed to the man who had fallen.

He wore all black and the scarf of a Ninja, and he was literally bristling with weapons. What surprised Ryo though, was that instead of being knocked out cold he was actually sleeping peacefully.

“Are you all right, sir?” she asked as she shook him awake. The man’s eyes opened cautiously and he looked at her, blinking.

"I think," he said slowly. "Did I hit anything on the way down?"

"Just the ground," Ryo admitted. "What happened, couldn't you dodge that?"

"Oh sure," the man rubbed his eyes. "If I was awake."

"You fell asleep?" Nenyο asked.

"Yes."

"Standing up?"

"Yep."

"Pardon my asking," Nenyο said slowly. "But how?"

"I dunno," the man shook his head. "I just, ya know, fall asleep. When I get nervous."

"That bites," Nenyο apologized.

"I know!" the man stood up. "I've been thrown off of so many ships—"

"What's your name, Ninja?" Ryo asked.

"I am called Shadoo," Shadoo announced proudly. "Of the Towen House."

"Shadoo of the Towen House," Ryo repeated, imitating his proud voice. "Would you join our crew?"

"Depends," Shadoo said slowly. "Who's in it?"

Ryo gestured to Nenyο. "Him, me, some drunk old sea captain we met in Swamp Bottom."

"But we have a ship!" said Nenyο.

"I find my options surprisingly limited," Shadow admitted. He took a knee and lowered his eyes to Ryo.

"Fair lady, I would join your crew in a heartbeat!"

Ryo hopped up and down excitedly. "Yippee!"



"There's just a few problems so far," Ryo explained as she and Nenyο walked down the street with their newfound

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friend and shipmate. “We have a ship, but not much of a crew yet, and no money to finance the voyage.”

Shadoo held up the bag the men on the ship had thrown at him. “Will this help?” he asked. “I know I’m a skilled fighter, but my tendency to fall asleep quickly alienates me from most crews. All I want to do is sail and fight; I don’t care about the money.”

“Terrific!” piped Ryo as she opened the bag. To her astonishment it was full of gold and precious gems, enough to finance half a dozen voyages.

“We had quite a raid,” Shadoo sighed. “On a big Pirate stronghold. I fell asleep, of course, coming off the ship, and by the time I woke up there was nothing left to do but carry away the treasure. The men who fought received a share ten times that, but—”

“This’ll be plenty,” grinned Ryo. “But we still need a crew.”

“Try the Ruffian Row,” Shadoo suggested. “A lot of fighters and sailors hang out there in between trips. There are some who will work cheap.”

“Some like you?” Nenyo asked.

“Basically.”

Nenyo nodded. “At this point we’ll take what we can get, no offense.”

“None taken. Where are we making for anyway?”

“Ronin.”

Shadoo stopped dead. At first Ryo and Nenyo thought he had fallen asleep again, but he was just standing still, eyes open, and shaking all over.

“You—we—are going to the Pirate city?” he questioned.

“Yeah,” Ryo replied. “We need to find someone there.”

"In the Pirate City?"

"Yes, that's where he's supposed to be."

"The Pirate city?"

"Yes."

"*The Pirate city?*"

"Yes, the Pirate City, Ronin, which stands at the far side of the globe and where no Ninja has ever set foot."

The shining city of Ninpou sat directly over the southern pole of the Earth. Hence, all Ninja-built compasses pointed south, and Ninja-made maps used south as the dominant direction. A Ninja is always guided by the South Star, it is said.

But for Pirates, it was the north. Ronin was on the North Pole, Pirates navigated by the North Star. Ronin sat squarely atop the North Pole, and Pirate compasses pointed north.

"Just checking," Shadoo nodded.

"What's the mater?" Ryo questioned. "Thinking of backing out?"

"No," Shadoo shook his head. "I'm just wondering if you two really know what you're getting into."

"I am a battle-hardened warrior, and I fear Ronin. The Town House has been regarded for centuries as producing the greatest fighters the world has ever known."

"But I, am a sad disgrace to my family. So since I was but a lad, I have taken on the most dangerous and foolhardy missions anyone can offer me, because I must do my best to bring honor to my name."

"But you are young, you have yet to seek honor and glory, and to begin such an epic at such an age—well, it leaves me to question your motivations."

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“Well...” Ryo began slowly. “It’s like this... I’m Ryo Sansen.”

“Note to self,” Shadoo replied with a sigh. “Ask people’s names *before* signing onto ships with them. Still, I imagine I could do much worse—I can’t imagine *how*, but I’m quite certain I could. What is it you hope to find in Ronin, fair lady?”

“A pirate named Sullen Michael,” Ryo explained.

“Any particular reason this Pirate is so special?” Shadoo pressed.

“He’s supposed to know the location of the Tiger’s Claw,” Ryo explained. “A gem with magical powers.”

“That sounds awfully suspicious.”

“Hey,” Ryo said defensively. “We have it on a very reliable source that Sullen Michael knows where it is.”

“Really now?”

“Well, it was more of a drunk, raving source,” Ryo laughed nervously. “But still—”

“You’ve heard of this thing, you wanna go for it for whatever reason, and you’re doing anything it takes.”

“Yup.”

“Alright, I’m in,” Shadoo sighed. “Come on, I know a man who might join what could possibly be called our cause.”

They followed Shadoo to the Ruffian Row, where he took them to a small shrine. Next to the shrine outside an even smaller hut, a priest sat cross-legged. At first glance he was apparently praying, but as they got closer they realized he was drawing in the wet dirt with the end of his staff.

A priest’s staff was an interesting item. They were long, taller than the priest himself, and often covered with or made from metal. Bronze or brass was usually the order

of the day. This particular staff was six feet long, and had a sort of simple loop at the head. The loop had four little brass rings around it, so that when the bottom of the staff was struck against the ground, the rings would jingle musically.

What was often most notable about the staves was also the least noticed. Ryo's practiced eye spotted it easily: a tiny seam in the metal about two thirds of the way up. A staff was a formidable weapon by itself in the right hands, but the staff of a priest also contained a concealed double-edged blade. Priests were masters of both staff and sword, but as a rule were never supposed to engage in combat. The truly enlightened trained solely as a form of meditation.

"Romanji! You old hound!" Shadoo called. "Holding up?"

"As well as anyone can," the priest replied lazily. "Care for another anti-sleeping concoction, or perhaps you'd like to try the blessing?"

"Your potions make me sleep for days and your blessings are—" he glanced over his shoulder and smiled at Ryo and Nenyō. "—Ill effective. May we sit?"

"Please," Romanji gestured to the grass around them. "Welcome to my shrine. My blessings are cheap and my potions are stomach-able, though neither is guaranteed to work."

"These two are forming a ship," Shadoo explained. "And given the dangerous nature of the voyage, I think a priest might be a useful addition to the crew."

"Well, if you can find one of those you'll be in luck," Romanji replied with a laugh. "But in lieu of such a man, I will gladly serve in his place."

"Pardon me," said Ryo. "But aren't *you* a priest?"

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“Not in the traditional sense,” Romanji explained. “I perform blessings and do the standard horology, but let me just say that—”

“Romanji doesn’t believe in God,” Shadoo chuckled heartily.

“Who knew?” Ryo blinked.

“An atheistic priest,” Nenyō scratched his chin. “Well, I suppose some sacrifices are to be made. Tell me priest, would you join our crew?”

“Why not?” Romanji replied with a shrug and stood up. “Rent’s past due on the shrine anyway and the landlord said he’s going to take it from my hide if I don’t have it tomorrow.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Nenyō began slowly. “Can you do anything else besides give bad blessings?”

“Sure,” Romanji shrugged. “While my horticulture and faith may be questionable, I am a skilled physician. The ruffians that live in this neighborhood can’t afford to go to the healers in the city. I found I made more money actually curing them than giving bad blessings. I don’t do the funky herb thing real good, but I have practical medicine down.”

“Yay!” Ryo cheered. “One more for the Antelope!”

“You’ll find the ship down in the Swamp Bottom cove,” Nenyō explained. “Tell Captain Gaysu we sent you, and that you’re to join our crew. It’s a long walk back to our side of town though, Ryo, I think we should get going.”

Ryo nodded. “It was nice to meet you!” she waved to Romanji and Shadoo.

“So how do you think we stand so far?” Ryo asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

“We have a washed up captain, a half sunk ship, a narcoleptic Ninja and an atheistic priest,” Nenyó replied. “How can we fail?”



Ryo arrived home again while the sun was still setting. Her mother was inside, sewing something, but she didn't look surprised to see Ryo.

“Hi mom!” Ryo called as she walked in the door.

“Hello dear,” Frunawho smiled sweetly. “Any luck today?”

Ryo sat in a chair across from her mother and nodded vigorously.

“We couldn't find a ship that would take us,” she explained. “But we found an old captain with a ship and no crew, and he said if we could find one for him, he would take us. So all we have to do now as put together a crew.”

A wide smile spread across Frunawho's face.

“Oh Ryo,” she cried. “That's what I love about you! When the world cuts off all paths, you just make your own!”



Nenyó let himself quietly into the storehouse and slunk between the maze-like shelves of supplies. Feeling his way through the darkness, he finally stepped out into the light of the fire and the small living area hidden in the back.

Hidden was not an accurate word. Concealed would probably be better. Hidden implied that it wasn't supposed to be there.

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It was a little nook in the back of a long, low room where a fireplace had been installed some while ago. The fireplace was made of mud bricks, in contrast to the clay which made up the building walls, thus proving that the fireplace had indeed been very cheap. The original purpose of the alcove was lost, but it now served as a living area for the building's night watchman.

"Hullo Nenyó," the man said quietly and turned another page of the book he was reading. "How did it go today?"

"Bad, as usual," Nenyó spat. "Fighters, fighters, fighters. Don't ships need navigators anymore?"

"Your father never fought," the man commented. "Never had to."

"Dad only did the run between here and Rivanna Bay," Nenyó scowled. "Nothing to fight along that route."

The man closed his book and stood up, momentarily obscuring the firelight with his massive frame. He stretched, flexed his rippling muscles, and then started for the blanket that had been stretched across the entrance to the alcove.

"Got to go make my rounds," he said quietly. "By the way Nenyó, you're back awfully late tonight, same as last night."

"I had a bit of a waking dream," Nenyó shrugged. "Miagi, I'm not sure if I've said thank you in the last couple of days."

"As always, no need," Miagi waved. "When your father died you had nowhere else to go, and I meanwhile had promised him over your mother's funeral pyre that if anything were to befall him, I'd look after you."

“Yeah, but I think he meant until I could look after myself,” Nenyó admitted. “Which I should well be able to by now.”

“I placed no restrictions on my oath,” Miagi told Nenyó.

Nenyó gulped and nodded. His father had been a sailor on a ship with Miagi some twenty years ago, but had retired to take a wife and became a map maker. Nenyó’s mother died giving birth, so Nenyó grew up with his father.

Then, nearly a year ago, the elder Arroyo took ill and passed on. Nenyó was seventeen then, and should have been able to stand on his own well enough. He knew his father’s trade, and had actually been running the shop for the past year while his father was sick.

But the Arroyos’ benefactor who owned the shop and the tools (and ostensibly all of the Arroyos’ possessions) had not been so accepting, and forced Nenyó out as soon as his father passed. For reasons Nenyó could scarcely understand, the benefactors didn’t like him, and not only saw to it that he was ousted from his father’s shop, but also that he would never find work in the city of Ninpou again.

With no work and no money, Nenyó had few options beyond joining a ship.

And no ship would take him.

But Miagi had sailed with his father for a long time, and even been childhood friends with the man. He took Nenyó in gladly, and freely shared what little he had.

And it was very little indeed. A small alcove in the back of a very large storehouse, and food taken from the

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stock of same. The fact that Miagi had so little made his sharing of it mean even more.

“Unfortunately,” Miagi said apologetically. “I fear life may place some restrictions for me. The storehouse owner is seriously questioning his need for a night watchmen, especially a—well me, he is questioning what good I am doing him here, and I fear I may soon be left to... seek employment elsewhere. I will still try to help you as much as I can but... it would be good if you could perhaps find employment of your own.”

“Yeah,” Nenyó nodded. “I can’t thank you enough for putting me up all this time and—hey! Maybe I can return the favor!”

“There are not many who would hire me in this city,” Miagi said carefully.

“No, but there might be a ship that would take you,” Nenyó grinned. “It’s kind of a long shot, but if you aren’t going to be working as a watchman, it’s worth a try. We need anyone we can take and well... if it comes down to it, I’ll make sure there’s a slot for you. C’mon, I’ll show you in the morning.”

Miagi nodded and ducked through the blanket, and Nenyó drew a long breath. There was no good reason why the Antelope should take the old Ninja, and plenty of bad ones. But Miagi had done more for Nenyó than anyone could have asked, and if push came to shove, Nenyó would sacrifice his own place on the ship if it meant helping his dear friend.

As he climbed into one of the hammocks near the fire, a smile spread over his face. There was still a lot that had to happen for the dream to become a reality, but Miagi could help.

If they worked together, they could make it happen.



Dawn broke early and Ryo's feet hit the floor, bounced once, and reflexively returned her to her bed where she sat blinking. The Sansen house was one of several built on a large flagstone foundation, left behind from a storehouse that had burned down years ago. Ryo and her mother were fortunate, most houses in their price range would have had dirt floors, or possibly rotting wooden timbers if they were lucky. The stone was nice, easy to keep clean, and amazingly cold in the early mornings.

Ninja beds were often built high off the ground. The logic was why waste the space over a bed which you were just going to lay down in? The optimal height, as it was reasoned, was exactly halfway between the floor and the ceiling, thus providing the best compromise between storage space under the bed and head room over it.

Ryo's bed wasn't quite at the 'optimum height', her little alcove in the house had a low, sloping ceiling, and her bed was only about four feet up. She had compensated though by building shelves all around the walls above her and filling them with her various possessions. Ah storage, the packrat Ninja's friend.

Of course it was different among the wealthy. Rich people had all the space they needed, and didn't have to worry so much about economy of storage. The current trend was actually to sleep in depressions in the floor, thus wasting maximum space.

Ryo, of course, didn't like to waste anything. She lived by the simple mantra of waste not, want not. It worked

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too; she never wasted anything, and was rewarded with wanting for very little.

Training yourself not to want things also helped, but it was a hard discipline for one so young.

As Ryo sat rubbing her startled feet, she realized what had awoken her. There it was again now, a knock at the door. Ryo took a deep breath, braced herself for the cold of the floor, hopped off the bed, and raced across the tiny house.

Ryo was in her black cotton pajamas when she reached the entryway. Her mother was asleep, so Ryo only opened the door a crack, and looked immediately into Nenyō's eyes.

"Hi!" she said excitedly. "Starting early?"

"We better," Nenyō nodded. "I've got someone here I want you to meet."

"Can it wait just a few minutes?" Ryo asked hurriedly. Then she noticed the man leaning over Nenyō's shoulder and looking at her with a thoughtful expression.

"This is Miagi," Nenyō explained. "He's not much of a fighter either, but he's strong and knows his way around a ship. He... sailed with my father."

"Does he want to join our merry little band?" Ryo asked excitedly.

"He does," Nenyō replied slowly. "But... ah... you have to realize, he's kind of a pacifist."

"You're a thing that babies suck on?" Ryo blinked curiously.

Miagi gave her a friendly grin.

"No, that's a pacifier," he corrected. "I am a pacifist, it means I don't fight or engage in any kind of violence."

The Pacifist Movement had started—and ended—in Ninpou. Some bold Ninjas had proposed that there was great suffering in the world and that they could end it if everyone stopped fighting. This, of course, did not catch on well in a city where children learned to fight from the day their tiny hands could first grasp a blade.

The Pacifist movement started small and ended small, and its few hard-liners numbered less than a hundred. They were never punished for their beliefs, because one thing the Ninja culture prized above all else—aside from fighting skill—was the basic freedom of belief. If these Ninjas chose to live as they did, that was their right. It was also the right of the other Ninjas to laugh at them until their sides hurt.

Ryo remembered once coming home grinning, and telling her mother a joke she'd heard about a pacifist, and being scolded fiercely for it. You can't judge people for their beliefs, Frunawho patiently explained, because judging someone for their beliefs is just as bad as judging them for their lineage and Ryo had had quite a few experiences with that.

"Well, that's ok," Ryo nodded. "Because we don't turn anyone down. We took a priest who doesn't believe in God, I think a pacifist Ninja won't hurt."

"You met Romanji?" Miagi blinked.

"Miagi works for one of the larger storehouses," Nenyō explained. "The ones that supply ships for voyages. He's got connections, he can definitely help—"

"Nenyō, just look at him," Ryo said and gestured. "We'd be crazy *not* to welcome this guy!"

Miagi smiled again and nodded. "The young lady is quite wise beyond her years."

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“Miagi and I are going to start arranging for the supplies,” Nenyō said. “We’ll meet you down by the ship later, ‘k Ryo?”

“K,” Ryo nodded.

She closed the door as the two walked away, and then grinned from ear to ear. She was worried that the storehouses wouldn’t sell them supplies for the journey, but with Miagi it wouldn’t be a problem. Plus he made six in the crew, which was very nearly enough. Gaysu had said the Antelope would take a crew of twenty, but they could probably manage her well enough with eight. There was also the chance they could pick up more crewmembers later, so Ryo wasn’t worried.

The fact that Miagi was a pacifist wouldn’t be a problem. They weren’t planning any raids, they instead intended to rely more on stealth. Tactically, not fighting would be wiser.

Ryo was an avid scholar of tactics. She had heard an account once of a small band of Ninjas defeating a much larger army of Pirates, and she wanted to know how. To that end, she had read and committed to memory everything she could find on the subject of tactics, searching for that elusive secret.

She had never found the simple answer but she had learned: when outnumbered, avoid open conflict.

It was all coming together now. They had a ship, money, and most of a crew. For the first time the dream was truly beginning to look like a reality.

Ryo dressed as quickly as she could and raced out the door. It wouldn’t be long before they could begin the voyage.

As she made her way towards the Ruffian Row the sound of shouting in an alley caught her attention. Cautiously, she peeked around the corner and saw four people arguing over a dice game.

"Come on!" a woman shouted. "Just gimmie one more go at it!"

"You ran out of money three rolls ago!" one of the men bellowed. "Face it, you lost!"

"Yeah, well, I didn't want your stupid money anyway!" the woman spat back and stood to leave.

"Hold on!" one of the others screamed. "You still owe us fifty-seven weights!"

Slowly, the three men surrounded the woman and started reaching for knives.

A bold thought occurred to Ryo, and she drew a deep breath.

"Sister! Sister!" Ryo shouted hurriedly as she ran into the alley, using her best 'naïve little girl' voice. "There you are!"

"What?" the woman asked suspiciously. "Oh, yes! I've just been visiting with these—friends—of mine."

"Come on, sister!" Ryo shouted and grabbed the woman's hand. "You've gotta come home now! Mommy needs you!"

"Ok," the woman replied nervously and followed Ryo. "Whatever you say."

"Wait just a second!" one of the men snarled as she and Ryo reached the edge of the alley.

"Run?" Ryo suggested.

"Good plan, kid," the woman replied.

They raced through the now-crowded streets of Ninpou in the general direction of the Antelope.

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“What’s your name, kid?” the woman shouted as they vaulted over a cart.

“Ryo,” Ryo replied.

“Thanks for the rescue then, Ryo,” the woman voiced. “I’m Lelu, in case you were wondering.”

They skidded around a corner and reached the long sloping road that stretched toward the bay of Swamp Bottom.

“Any idea where we’re headed?” Lelu asked.

“That way?” Ryo suggested. “There’s a ship down there, and hopefully my friends.”

“Friends are good,” Lelu nodded.

They reached the gangplank of the Antelope, just as Miagi and Shadoo were walking down.

“Shadoo! We need help!” Ryo called.

Miagi eyed them curiously as he and the Ninja touched the cobblestones and turned to face Ryo and Lelu’s pursuers.

“That woman,” one of them panted. “Owes us—”

“Owes you what?” Shadoo glared as his hands passed over various weapons. “I have different swords for different disputes, you see.”

“She owes us money,” the man explained. “Fifty seven weights of—”

“Copper,” Miagi suggested as he stepped around Shadoo and folded his arms menacingly. “I suggest you say copper.”

“Or else what?” the man growled. “In case you haven’t noticed, we outnumber you!”

“In case YOU haven’t noticed,” Miagi informed him pointedly, and indicated Shadoo, “His swords outnumber all of us.”

Miagi dug into his pocket and produced a handful of copper and a few silver coins.

"I suggest you cut your losses," he said and offered the pittance. "Or else allow my friend here to cut them for you."

"We'll be back for you," the man spat in the direction of Lelu. "Sometime when you haven't got a cavalry of sods to rescue you!"

"Good luck!" Lelu waved as the three men retreated hastily.



"Well, thanks again," Lelu exhaled.

"Don't mention it," Ryo waved. She turned curiously to Miagi and raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were a pacifist?"

"I am," Miagi nodded. "But, one need not make their intentions not to fight clear, in order not to do so."

To be a pacifist in the Ninja culture was a very difficult thing indeed. Ryo remembered well her own Rite of First Combat, a solemn ceremony carried out at the age of three, also the day she received her first weapon. The ritual had been simple enough, officiated by her mother in the alley behind their house. One of Frunawho's friends, an older woman with a face like a prune, had been there as well, as a witness. There were all kinds of rites and rituals throughout Ninja culture, and since Frunawho was very dedicated to bringing her daughter up to be a proper Ninja, she did her best to see to all of them. Usually, the family bore witness, but since Frunawho had no relatives in Ninpou, she'd turned to an old friend.

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The Sansen family had never been large or wealthy, Frunawho had grown up very poor. Her parents both died at sea by the time she was twenty, and they had no family tomb. Just a monument somewhere on an island a few thousand miles to the north. Frunawho thought she might still have a brother somewhere, but hadn't had any contact with him since she was very little. Her last memory of him, she often said, was when he officiated her Rite of First Combat.

Ryo remembered the day well as she attacked her mother with the knife, while Frunawho skillfully dodged and parried all the blows.

Barely a toddler, Ryo of course had no hope of landing a blow, but that was not the point of the ritual. The whole point was to baptize the young Ninja in combat, to give them their first taste of wielding a real, sharpened blade. Ninjas trained with wooden sticks from the moment their hands could first grasp the hilt, but steel waited until the Rite.

Ryo had actually been surprisingly young for her Rite, for most Ninjas it waited until the age of four or even five, but really it could be carried out as soon as the parents felt the child was ready.

Somehow, the Ninjas had never really seen themselves as violent, until the Pacifism Movement began. Violence, Ninjas reasoned, was born of anger. No anger while fighting, they said, meant no violence. The pacifists disagreed, and said that it was impossible to fight without violence. Members pointed out that from the time they could walk, Ninjas were trained to fight, encouraged to fight, sometimes even *forced* to fight, until by the time they

reached adulthood they had completely forgotten that sometimes the answer was *not* to fight.

This concept was of course looked upon as preposterous by the majority of Ninjas, who could not conceive of a situation which could not be solved through violence.

"Well, whatever the big guy says, I owe you guys," Lelu grinned.

"Just like you owed those guys?" Shadoo suggested.

"Nah, that was money," Lelu waved. "I mean I *really* owe you! Hey, what's going on over here?"

"We're forming a ship," Ryo shrugged. "For a voyage to Ronin."

"Ronin, eh?"

"Yep."

"So... the other side of the globe?" Lelu asked. "I think I like the sound of that, got room for one more?"

"You're not afraid of going to the Pirate city?" Shadoo blinked.

"Should I be?"

"It is *the* Pirate city."

"And this is *the* Ninja city," Lelu shrugged. "There's not a lot of difference as far as I'm concerned, except that I don't have any gambling debts there."

"I've never met such a fearless Ninja," Shadoo said reverently.

"And you still haven't!" Romanji shouted as he came up the street. "Lelu, small city, ne?"

"Yes, very," Lelu nodded. "What's up Rom?"

"I told you not to call me that," Romanji hissed.

"What did you mean by 'I still haven't met such a fearless Ninja'?" Shadoo asked disappointedly.

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“I mean Lelu here is not a Ninja,” Romanji replied. “She’s a con-artist, a smuggler, and a compulsive gambler. Oh, and she’s also a mermaid.”

“A MERMAID?!”

“A girl’s gotta have hobbies,” Lelu shrugged.

“A smuggler?” Ryo asked hopefully. “Does that mean you know your way around a boat?”

“I know my way around a lot of things,” Lelu replied.

“Honestly,” Romanji began seriously. “Despite her—checkered past—I think Lelu’s expertise on this particular voyage would be a valuable asset. She can sail better than anyone, she’s a fast thinker, and she knows how to avoid detection.”

“Plus I can hold my breath for a really long time,” Lelu nodded.

“And, Ryo did say we don’t turn people away,” Miagi stated. “If she would like to join the ship.”

“I think we’re starting to look like a crew,” Ryo grinned.



“This is absolutely perfect!” Ryo grinned excitedly.

“I would hardly call it perfect,” Nenyο moaned as they made another long walk up to Ruffian Row. “This is the most mismatched crew I think I’ve ever heard of!”

“But that’s what makes it so perfect,” Ryo explained. “We all have these strengths and weaknesses that perfectly complement each other.”

“We’ve got two non-fighters, a Ninja who falls asleep, an insane captain, an atheist priest, and a mermaid who lost her fins gambling!” Nenyο lamented.

“No, we have a trained navigator, a strong man with experience stocking ships, a battle-hardened Ninja, a seasoned captain, a doctor, and an ex-smuggler,” Ryo replied. “See? You can build a perfect machine out of imperfect parts.”

“Optimistic, aren’t we?” Nenyoy laughed. “But you’re right, working together we can do anything, I hope.”

They had reached a corner where a few people sat around an open wok and a dark-faced Ninja sat skillfully frying food. As they approached, the few people gathered around took their food and walked hurriedly away.

Ryo and Nenyoy sat in the vacated seats and looked up at the sullen chef.

“What will you have?” he asked sulkily.

“You know,” Nenyoy said, turning to Ryo. “We need to think about finding a cook for the ship. I mean, we’ve got everything else, but we are going to need someone who can cook.”

“Do you have any prospects in mind?” the cook asked.

Nenyoy and Ryo looked at him curiously.

“You just said you were looking for a cook,” the man shrugged. “I’ve been looking for a ship.”

“Well that was convenient,” Ryo laughed.

“The ruffians here don’t like me much,” the cook shrugged. “Say I dampen the mood. I’ve been looking to get away, maybe see a bit of the world.”

“We’re planning a very dangerous voyage,” Ryo hazarded.

“Danger, safety, it doesn’t make a difference to me,” the cook shrugged. “I’m Krim by the way.”

“Hi Krim,” Ryo waved. “We’re going to Ronin.”

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“That’s suicide,” Krim pointed out.

“Is that a problem?”

“Not really.”



It was late morning as the ramshackle crew of the Antelope formed a chain from the cart on the road to the deck of the ship.

The bags of rice and flour and other provisions were being piled on deck, and if all went well they would be shoving off on the evening tide. Ryo had said goodbye to her mother once more, and was again feeling the exhilarating mix of excitement and apprehension. This time it would work, this time it would happen.

The Antelope was going to Ronin.

One item in the cart that surprised Ryo was several bolts of fabric in a variety of colors. They had dozens of other things, sails, salted fish, lengths of bamboo, but the fabric seemed most out of place.

“Mine,” Lelu smiled as she handed a bolt up to Ryo. “I had an idea late last night.”

Ryo nodded and passed the material on up the chain, not in a mood to question it further. She was too excited; she couldn’t focus on anything. Just doing her job without shaking was hard enough.

“You guys must be planning quite a trip,” the young man who had driven the wagon said. “Going anywhere special?”

“Specially suicidal,” Krim sighed. “We’re apparently trying to get to Ronin.”

“You mean the Pirate city?”

“The very same.”

The man glanced cautiously over his shoulder.

“So, far away from here?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“As soon as the ship is stocked,” Ryo shouted from her position in the line. “We’re hoping tonight, on the evening tide.”

The man glanced up and down the road again.

“Do you think,” he began cautiously. “I could come with you?”

“Is everyone who wants to join our crew trying to escape someone else?” Nenyó asked tersely.

“I’m only trying to get away from a bad reputation,” the man admitted. “See, I haven’t been on a ship in three years. My last voyage—ended badly, I was lost at sea for a month, then when I was rescued the ship I was coming in on sank in the harbor. Since then, no ship will take me. They say I’m... cursed.”

He looked around at the crew of the Antelope hopefully.

“I only want to redeem myself,” he explained. “Prove that I am a true Ninja.”

“It seems like most of us here have something to prove,” Nenyó replied. “What’s your name, Ninja?”

“Haku,” the man replied with a grin. “Just Haku, no last name now.”

It was a sad thing when a Ninja lost his last name. A family name meant honor, heritage, a connection to the community.

They had tried to strip Frunawho of the Sansen name when Ryo was born, but her valor in the last battle of Receon had won her great, if temporary, fame. Talk had

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persisted of stripping Ryo of her family name, but the Code wouldn't allow it. She was a child, and children of Ninjas were inherently pure. Still, as Ryo entered adulthood, she would no doubt become a nameless one like Haku, for without a name a Ninja could not have honor.

“Well, Haku,” Gaysu said with a confident grin. “Welcome aboard the Antelope.”

End Chapter 1

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