



The Black, the Red,
and the Blue

An eagle, an octopus, and a mysterious stranger sat in the bowels of a storm-tossed ship speaking of things to come. The waves were like a battering ram against the hull making the well-caulked boards shiver and sweat with every blow. A poorly trimmed oil-lantern nailed to the roof swung backwards and forwards vomiting up shadows against the sides of the ship's hold. The three men sat around a table drinking and eating and trying their best to ignore the fury of a sea that prowled mere metres from where they sat.

"Is it always like the this?" shouted the Black Eagle over the din.

"It's never advisable to sail through a storm, but you wanted to avoid Imperial entanglements and Takashi ships, so here we are," replied Jhango-Bo.

"How long will it take us to get to your Cove of Chimes?"

"Days still, probably longer because of this," he answered, pointing above. The men fell into silence. He was going to ask if Shiho Hiroto was scared of the water, but a tightness around the tattooed man's eyes made him change his mind. The pirate could tell a lot about a man from his eyes, what he was thinking, what he had done, what they were capable of doing; and he wondered, what manner of sharks swam behind Shiho Hiroto's eyes? For all who live by the sword, for too long, change. Their hearts harden, and they become beasts that wear the masks of men. But what about the Oni he thought, is he the opposite of that?

"What will you do when you get home?" asked the pirate, eventually, seeking to sound indifferent while avoiding eye-contact by staring at the rough wooden table.

"Why should I trust you?" asked Shiho Hiroto, wiping out the dregs of his bowl with a hunk of moss-green bread, "We've only just met," he added.

"You shouldn't, but it's going to be an even longer journey if we don't have anything

to say to one another." The pirate raised his eyes to focus on the Black Eagle's hands and was ready to make a run for it the second he went for his blade. The boat pitched abruptly from stem to stern in one violent motion as if it were falling off the edge of a cliff. Even Jhango-Bo raised his eyebrows at that one. The sudden lurch brought smiles to their lips and broke the tension that was brewing between them.

"Home? Ha! Let's hope we make it first," said the eagle, fetching a large stone bottle from his travel bag. He pulled the cork out with his teeth then spat it on the floor. He drank deeply before passing the bottle to the pirate. "Here's to not drowning at sea," he said, keeping his eyes on the pirate. Jhango-Bo raised the bottle in salute then took a deep swig that made his eyes burn, and his stomach roil even more than it already was.

"By the gods," he shouted, "what in the nine hells is that?" His voice was narrow and choked as he struggled to breathe.

"They call it jiu. It's strong, like me, and too much will kill you. Also, like me," he said, with just the hint of a smile. The Oni laughed and slapped the table with a sun-reddened hand that had long, dagger-like nails as black as ebony.

"So how did you meet?" asked the pirate.

"I'm curious. I've seen some unusual sights, but I'm yet to see such a being as this. And so close! I could almost touch it." Jhango-Bo's hand snaked toward the Oni's muscular forearm. A sudden snap of its teeth and a grunt saw the hand come back over the table in an instant.

"I met him on my travels. I was living by my sword carving out a reputation for myself as a Ronin. I would journey from one place to the next, to fight, kill, to do what I had to do before moving on. Then one winter I was up near the Tzentch Falls, in the Jade Pits, doing a bit of fighting for the crowds when they brought him out. He was a lot smaller then, almost like their version of a child, and I felt

sorry for him. They'd beaten him senseless and tortured him near death. They almost destroyed him. So I broke his chains, slew anyone that got in our way then robbed the counting-house on the way out. We've been together ever since."

"I like your style," said Jhango-Bo smiling, revealing a black tooth grin. "But why did you leave Jwar? I've heard it told that you had a very comfortable life. Status, money, power, all the things those without crave so dearly."

"I was taught the ways of Bushido. Righteousness, courage, benevolence, you know the rest, but what I never learned was self-control. I was careless, lazy, and did everything without thinking of the consequences. I was quick to anger, quick to lash out with my tongue, even my sword. I was arrogant, and that blinded me to what my father wanted for me, what he wanted for the Clan. So when he named my younger brother as his successor instead of me, I became enraged and turned my back on them. I felt betrayed, and my temper got the better of me. The last words I spoke to my father and my brother were words of anger, and now I'll never get the chance to apologise for my actions."

"And you never heard of the Dragon War when you were gone? No one mentioned it to you at all?"

"No. You know how vast the Empire is, Jhango-Bo, why would news of a dispute between two rival families on a tiny island be anyone's business but their own? And, if I remember correctly, the Empire had concerns of its own at that time, we all did, with that situation from the west. Maybe I did, maybe I didn't, I can't recall. You don't get called the Drunken Master for nothing." The Black Eagle drained the bottle then threw it over his shoulder. He fetched yet another from his bulging travel bag leaving the pirate to think that there was nothing in it except bottles.

"So why now? Why risk your life for a Clan that doesn't exist on an island where you have a price on your head? The waves continued to

batter the boat turning it this way and that. It was like being inside the belly of a runaway dragon.

"Revenge," answered Shiho Hiroto eventually. "Revenge?"

"I was in the marketplace one morning, buying provisions for myself and my friend. We were going north looking for work, and I needed some libation and weapons for the road. It was in the big market, the one in Xiang, near the fort, have you been there?"

"No, but I've heard of it. Go on."

"Well, I was looking for a new sword and a tetsubo for my companion, preferably something from the Minimoto, when I spied a set of battle armour on display in the corner of the merchant's tent. I recognised it at once. It had belonged to my father." The pirate narrowed his eyes but remained silent.

"I asked him, the merchant that is, how he got it, and he told me he'd bought it from a trader who had brought it from Jwar. Then he chuckled and said that its owner wouldn't need it anymore as the Takashi Clan had killed him and his entire family. I merely smiled and asked him how much he wanted for it. It was more than I had, more than I had ever had actually, so that night I waited for him to finish his work then confronted him in his tent. I told him who I was and that I would repay him, but he said that the Shiho were nothing but untrustworthy dogs. We argued, he died, and I took the armour. Later that evening I was visited by a ghost. It was my father."

"What did he say?" asked the pirate.

"He was sitting cross-legged before me, shimmering under the starlight, cheeks wet with grief. He was wearing the armour that I had just stolen. The chest plate hung askew, and I could see his bony chest beneath it, and there was this thick red line across his stomach from which his intestines peeked. He stared at me with such misery and defeat, then he plunged his hands into that hole, drawing his guts out slowly as if pulling on a rope. He

stuffed them in his mouth and chewed them like a rabid dog, each mouthful more desperate than the last; then he spoke, and said, Son, it tastes so bitter, so bitter, I cannot find the door to leave this cursed place; we are cold and so hungry, but it is so bitter! You must avenge us, avenge us all, or we will be trapped here for eternity. There was a line of ghosts behind him, my entire family, all dead, all beheaded, mutilated, even the little children. They howled and wept and begged for help. So that's what I have sworn to do, to avenge the Shiho Clan by killing every single Takashi swine I can get my hands on."

"I'll drink to that," said Jhango-Bo, "there's nothing finer than vengeance. Especially when they don't expect it, but you'll have a hard time getting help. The Takashi have eyes and ears everywhere. There are rumours they even have the Silvermoon Trade Syndicate looking for you too. It seems as if the Black Eagle is known to all the wrong people." Shiho Hiroto shrugged his broad shoulders looking unconcerned at the size of the task that lay before him. It was immense, especially if he wanted to be successful.

"I'll find out who still supports me before I make my move," he said. "The enemy of my enemy being my friend as they say until he becomes my enemy again, then he's just wormfood after that. Besides, they think I'm still in the Empire, not drinking sake with a pirate and an Oni on the way to the Cove of Chimes." The storm had abated enough for the pirate to consider a game of chance.

"Well, Shiho Hiroto, I wish you luck, and I hope that for all our sakes your plans come to fruition. It's a rising tide that floats all boats," said the pirate with a wink. "Now who's up for a game of 37?" he added gleefully, rubbing his calloused hands together.

"Count me out," answered the Black Eagle, "I'm far too predictable when it comes to risk and reward."

"How so?" asked the crestfallen pirate who had visions of making some extra coin over

the following days.

"Because I always bet on black, that's why..."

