

Reflections

The halfbreed's back slammed onto the hard polished floor. For a moment he remained down, a cough escaping his jarred lungs. With a groan he sat up and rubbed the back of his head, then turned to the Oriental.

"Jeez Iroh, take it easy on me! I may be a fighter but that doesn't mean I like getting thrown around!" The old man laughed.

"Well I don't like throwing you, but you left yourself open and I had to take the opportunity!" He offered a hand to Dracustos. "To be honest, you're not easy to flip, even for me."

"Is it because you're so short?" the halfbreed teased as he let the man help him up. He soon regretted the remark. Iroh jerked the beast forward with the arm he held, and while Draco was off balance used the momentum and leverage to flip him again. He straightened himself.

"Not really, that just makes it easier to bring you down to my level," he replied with a grin. He received a snort as Dracustos looked at him from the floor.

"Are you sure you're in your eighties?"

"Unfortunately."

"Those ailments of old age getting to you?"

"Maybe a little. Sparring with you certainly doesn't help."

"Well that's what happens when you throw a two-hundred-pound halfbreed over your shoulder." Dracustos sat up and spun around. There was a moment of silence between them as Iroh stepped away, holding his arms behind his back.

"I've seen your last few battles, Dracustos. You're getting sloppy, attacking more like a feral beast instead of using what you've been taught. I know in the heat of battle you do what your gut tells you, but I even saw some of it while we were sparring." The Draconian sighed and looked to the floor.

"Sorry, I just... it sort of feels more natural I guess..."

"More natural, or is it Irascor's influence?" He was given a shrug. "Either way, it's getting you into trouble. You could have easily avoided what happened with Serra. You're much more skilled than that, Dracustos."

"That wasn't even a fair fight, Iroh, and I didn't want to hurt her."

"I understand that, Dracustos, but you can't always be slipping up like this. What if an old foe comes back? One mistake is all it takes. Just one."

"I know, I know," the halfbreed sighed, turning his gaze back to the floor. There was a moment of silence between them before the old man spoke again.

"I think we're done for today. It's getting mighty cold out; don't want you to freeze on the way home. But first, how about some lunch?" The old man made his way across the dojo to the door that connected it to the White Lotus, and Dracustos stood.

"Lunch? Isn't your diner closed today?"

"It is closed when I say it is, and right now it's open for us to have lunch," Iroh answered with a humored grin. Dracustos chuckled and shook his head before following him into the small establishment. Enough light filtered in through the paper shades to allow the old man to walk without bumping into things. Draco glanced at the fountain of the Four Chinese Dragon Kings as he passed it. For a moment he wondered if Iroh had ever spoken to one of these dragons, which would explain how he learned Dragontongue. There was still much about the old man he had yet to learn.

"What'll it be, Draco?" the Oriental asked as he flipped on the lights. He received a shrug.

"Surprise me."

"There is no surprising you; you know my menu like the back of your hand! Unless of course I add a little something..."

"You keep that damn sauce off my food, Iroh."

"Can't take a little heat?"

"A [i]little heat[/i]? That stuff is lethal!"

"Uh-huh."

"Seriously, I'm pretty sure I almost died from it."

“Sure.”

“That’s probably how I became Bonded with a spirit. You almost killed me with your sauce.” Iroh laughed and vanished into the kitchen. Dracustos remained standing for a moment before lifting the blinds of a window and taking a seat in the first booth. He looked out at the wintered town, covered in the white hues of snow, then back inside where the shadows of Kirin and phoenix and dragons stood against the wall from the decorative paper that covered the windows.

“Tea’s ready!” Iroh called as he set a steaming cup in the serving window. The halfbreed called back a thanks before summoning the cup into his hand, and he was greeted by the scent of darjeeling. Not long after another smell drifted through the air accompanied by the hissing and metallic clangs of cooking utensils as the Oriental worked his magic.

Suddenly Irascor stirred, gaining Draco’s attention.

[i]What is it?

*Something’s coming...**[i]* The Draconian turned his gaze back to the window, and then he sensed it. There was a sort of hostility about it, yet it wasn't dark, and it was powerful.

[i]Any idea what that could be?

*It seems to be some sort of spirit... one similar to me in a way...**[i]*

Something red caught the Draconian’s eye, the color standing out amongst the white of snow, and he was almost baffled at what it was. A samurai - a large one at that - was trudging through the cold powder. The stranger paused, looked up at the Lotus, and began to make their way to the door. Dracustos noted the painted mask, the exaggerated curved fangs reminiscent of Chinese and Japanese works.

*[i]“Iroh, someone else is coming in. Seems to be an Oriental,”**[i]* he informed. The old man exited the kitchen just as the samurai opened the door, and he gave a customary bow in greeting.

“Welcome to the White Lotus, stranger. Can I get you anything?” The newcomer bowed back.

“Something warm to drink, if you wouldn’t mind.” There was a less pronounced bow before Iroh returned to the kitchen. The armored man turned his gaze to Dracustos, and the halfbreed bowed his head to welcome him. He felt somewhat intimidated when he was

approached, the figure reminding him of a Gladiator he had fought before, and the crimson eyes didn't help. He sometimes forgot that humans could get so large.

"Do you mind?" the samurai asked, gesturing to the seat across from Dracustos. The beast shook his head.

"Not at all." The large man slid into the seat with surprising ease, and for a moment they sat in awkward silence. Dracustos was the first to speak. "Judging by your armor and accent, I'm guessing you're from Japan?" He was given a nod. "So, is this whole samurai thing a gimmick, or do you actually know the way of the sword?"

"Of course I do," the man replied, seemingly offended by the question.

"Draco, it is best you do not question him about such things. You can tell when someone isn't truly a samurai." Iroh appeared seemingly from nowhere, and he set a steaming cup in front of the guest before giving another bow. "Let me know if you need anything else." The behemoth bent his head in thanks, and the old man once again returned to the back. Draco rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment.

"Uh, sorry about that. I didn't mean to insult you." He was given a wave of the hand.

"It's fine, no harm done." The samurai reached up and removed his mask, revealing a nasty scar that ran across his face.

[i]Sheesh, this guy looks like the Shredder[i], Draco thought to himself as he watched the man sip his tea. He suddenly remembered he had his own cup and took a drink.

"So, what's your name, stranger?" The armored figure sipped his drink again before answering.

"I go by Oni." This earned a tilted head from the halfbreed.

[i]So he's taken the name of the spirit in him,[i] Irascor said. *[i]It's an old one as well... no doubt it's the reason he's still alive.[i]*

"And you?"

"Dracustos, but you can call me Draco. I'm curious, Oni; how old are you?"

The man slowly set his drink down, replying, "I have walked this earth for centuries."

"Centuries, huh? So you're Lost to Time. You're about the third or fourth person I've met who is unaffected by time's grasp."

Iroh returned from the back and set a plate down in front of the Draconian before taking a seat next to him with his own meal.

"A genuine samurai..." the old man commented, "I must say it is an honor." Oni gave a smile and continued to drink his tea. Dracustos hesitated eating, feeling it rude to do so in front of the samurai who had merely wanted a warm drink. Eventually he picked up the chopsticks laying on the side of his dish and dug in.

"Tell me, what's a warrior like yourself doing in a little town like this?" Iroh inquired. "We don't usually get outsiders through here unless it's the time of our festival."

"I travel around," Oni answered.

"In this weather?" Dracustos chuckled. "You must have tougher hide than I do, Samurai!"

"It's supposed to get worse tonight. Supposedly a storm is coming in..." Iroh said, stroking his beard in thought. "If you'd like, Oni, you are welcome to stay at my home until it passes. No one should be travelling as you are in the dead of winter, and I'm sure you're tired from your journey." Oni was quiet for a moment as he took another sip, seeming to think it over, before bowing his head again.

"That is very kind of you. May I know the name of my host?"

"You can call me Iroh."

For the next few minutes the two Orientals exchanged words, with the halfbreed occasionally adding his two cents. As they spoke, Dracustos couldn't help but notice the armored man's strangely red eyes were usually on him. Though he was used to being stared at, in a way it made him uneasy. After eventually finishing their meals and drinks, Iroh gathered their utensils and excused himself from the table to take care of them. In the moment of silence Oni glanced at the fountain at the back of the diner, then looked back to the blue beast.

"My father told me many tales of dragons, including some from our neighbors across the sea. I thought they were just stories... yet here I am in the company of one."

"Draconian, actually. I'm half dragon," Dracustos replied. He received a curious look.

"Half? How does that happen?"

"Well, my mother was human, and my father is a dragon. He's skilled with transformation magics, so he can take on a human appearance. Nowadays he usually uses it when he comes into town, or when we're training."

“Mmh, I wonder how much of the tales are true,” Oni said as he stroked his chin in thought. “You say he trains you?”

“Well, him and Iroh, though I mostly do hand-to-hand with the old man while my father schools me with the blade.”

“I see... Is it possible to best a serpent in human form?” Dracustos suddenly felt his body temperature rise, Irascor’s temper having been triggered by the question.

[i]Calm down, he’s just curious,[/i] the halfbreed commanded. He was given a growl.
[i]Do you really think someone of his heritage would want to kill a dragon? It would be dishonorable, unless the dragon was evil.

You seem to forget, halfblood, that I was slain by men who claimed to be held by honor,[/i] the spirit spat back. *[i]Humans lie, it is in their nature.*

Well unless he tries something, you need to be discrete. I should not have to tell you so often.[/i]

“Something wrong?” Oni questioned, head slightly tilted in concern. Dracustos rubbed the back of his head with a somewhat embarrassed grin. He really had to stop zoning out when speaking with Irascor.

“Sorry, I uh... do that sometimes... Anyways, besting a dragon is a true test of skill, especially since they can keep their abilities in another form. Elders and Ancients are especially crafty and can be near impossible.”

“Is your father an Elder?”

“Heh, not quite. A dragon isn’t considered a true Elder until they hit a thousand years, and he still has a few hundred to go.” The samurai gave a slow nod, then Dracustos grinned. “If you want to test yourself against a dragon, I suggest you start with a halfbreed like me.” A touch of ambition appeared in the man’s eyes.

“You do not mind if we duel?”

“Of course not. Part of being a samurai is honing your skills, right?” Oni nodded and put his mask back into place.

“If you two are going to cross blades,” Iroh said as he strode from the kitchen, “you are welcome to use my dojo.”

"You sure, Iroh?" the Draconian asked as both he and the samurai stood. "I don't want to accidentally wreck the place."

"As long as you don't light it on fire it's fine," the old man answered, his voice growing stern. "It's getting too cold outside for you, Draco, and you didn't bring anything warm to wear. Use the dojo."

"Alright, alright. Sheesh, you're more of my dad than anyone else." Draco turned, gesturing for Oni to follow, and led the way across the diner and through the door that connected it to the dojo. After taking a couple steps inside, the samurai paused to examine the area.

To his left a weapon rack lay, as well as on the far wall and another centered at the back, each holding various Oriental weapons. The back wall was mostly glass, as all but a few feet in the center was actually large windows with sliding doors leading to what looked like a small garden that was now frozen over. Beyond that there seemed to be another structure like a meditation room, connected by a hall on each side all lined with windows to view the garden.

"It's a nice place, isn't it?" Oni turned his attention to the halfbreed, who had made his way to the other side of the room. "So, you want to use bo staffs, or stick with your sword?"

"I am testing my skill, am I not? It is not a true test if there is no risk."

"As you wish. Iroh, you mind if I use one of your katanas?"

"You're not going to use yours?" the old man inquired. Dracustos shook his head.

"I'd rather not break Oni's sword by mistake."

"Good point. But I suggest using at least the O-Katana." Oni placed a hand on the hilt of his sword as Dracustos retrieved one from the rack. They both pulled their blades from their scabbards and took a similar pose, one foot forward with the knee bent, blade held with both hands. "Alright Oni, let's see where wandering around for centuries has gotten you."

Dracustos launched himself forward, covering the ground between them in the blink of an eye, going for a straightforward strike. It took the samurai by surprise that such a large beast could move so quickly, and his first block ended up a bit clumsy. The halfbreed swung for a sideways slice and Oni blocked again. Their swords bounced off each other with such force both stepped back to regain balance. Oni charged this time, going for a side attack. The Draconian dropped under the swing and came back up, slicing upward. Unable to defend, his opponent awkwardly leaned away from the sharp metal and lost his balance, but he was quick to roll and get back to his feet.

Dracustos came at him again, and again he was met with equal power. The halfbreed began to use more of his strength, pushing Oni back and making him slide across the floor. The armored man caught his footing and used his own might to push Dracustos away before going after him again. Their blades clashed a few more times, sparks flying every now and then as they ducked and weaved and spun around each other as if they were doing some intense sword dance where one wrong move could result in injury. The halfbreed proved light on his feet despite his size as he dodged Oni's blows, intending to strike while he was open. But the samurai also moved more quickly than his own size let on, and his strength showed each time the swords struck.

Again their blades locked, and the dueling behemoths pressed against each other. Oni suddenly swiped his sword to the side, taking Draco's with it, and he rammed his head into what could be considered the bridge of the beast's nose. Dracustos reeled from the blow and staggered back dazed. He nearly fell, and barely managed to block the oncoming Odachi. But Oni caught him in a bad position for defense; the scaled beast was leaned back a bit, his feet were too close together, and his arms were bent uncomfortably. The samurai began to force him to the floor as the awkward pose put strain on the Draconian's arms and legs.

Something suddenly took hold of the halfbreed. It was like a deep body knowledge, like it somehow knew what to do. Dracustos fell back, pulling his sword with him, turning it in a backhanded sweep that cleared it from Oni. As he hit the floor he saw the samurai's eyes wide, seemingly surprised by the maneuver. He rolled and scrambled to his feet to find Oni coming at him again, having recovered from his shock. Dracustos dropped and swept his leg. The armored man managed to hop over it, but was unable to avoid the tail as the halfbreed turned full circle. He was flung nearly to the other side of the room, and the half-dragon paused.

[i]Irascor, was that you?

*Pay attention you fool!**[/i]* Dracustos glanced up in time to see the hilt of Oni's sword coming at his face. His head was thrown back from the force, and a strong kick to the ribs sent him into the wall. The halfbreed dropped his sword as he fell to the floor.

Oni waited a moment. When Dracustos didn't move, he sheathed his weapon and approached the Draconian to check on him. Suddenly he paused, noticing the creature's scales going dark as the black markings began to glow. Iroh noticed as well.

"Oni, get back! That's not Draco anymore!" he warned. The samurai held his ground, watching Draco's transformation as the angry spirit took hold. The beast lifted himself off the floor, his hands and feet scorching the polished wood. A snarl escaped his throat as he turned to Oni.

"You wish to best a dragon, Samurai?" he hissed aggressively. **[b]"Then fight [i]me[/i]!"****[/b]** Irascor charged. Having no time to defend, Oni braced himself. He caught the

black beast by the horns and almost let go as their heat seared his skin. He kept his grip lest he be impaled, but his body's instinct to retract from the danger made his arms weak. The dragon wrestled his horns from the man's hands and thrust them at him again. The samurai was thrown through the air, nearly scraping the ceiling, and when he landed he noticed a pain in his lower left ribs.

"Irascor, that is enough!" Iroh commanded as he stepped between them. "There is *[i]no[/i]* reason for this!"

"Get out of the way, old man!" the spirit barked. Iroh opened his mouth for a retort, but Oni placed a hand on his shoulder and gently pulled him back.

"I'll handle this," he grunted, "and I'll try not to hurt your friend." The samurai stepped forward, giving the old man no time to object. But he did not draw his sword. "Since I met Dracustos, I was wondering why those markings looked familiar," he stated to the black beast. "Now I know why. I was once told a tale of a dragon that was betrayed by the king of his realm, and that betrayal gave birth to a true Dragon of Wrath... and those marks were his symbol."

The dragon gave a furious roar.

[b]"Hold your tongue! You needn't remind me of who I am, Samurai!"[/b]

"I think I do!" Oni shouted back. "It was dragons that taught men the code of honor, was it not?"

[b]"[i]But they cannot hold to it![/i]"[/b] Irascor opened his jaws and belched flames at the armored Oriental. The man stepped to the side and wrapped himself around Iroh to protect him from the fire, and when it stopped he was suddenly being bitten on the arm and was thrown once more. The possessed Draconian reared up and roared again. **[b]"[i>I teach a king the Old Code and what does he do?! He turns his back on it and kills me![/i]"[/b]**

"AND WHAT OF *[i]YOUR[/i]* HONOR?" the samurai boomed. "HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN IT IN YOUR RAGE, OR HAVE YOU TURNED YOUR BACK ON IT AS WELL?" This seemed to enrage the spirit, and with another furious roar he charged. Oni braced himself for the horns, but instead Irascor reared up and swiped at his neck. The man tried to duck under, but the dragon was too fast and caught his head. He was thrown to the floor, and the beast pinned him with a hand to the chest.

"[i]Don't you [b]dare[/b] accuse me of turning against the Code, Samurai, [i]" Irascor snarled. Oni grunted at the heat through his armor, but made no attempt to push the dragon off.

"Then why do you seek to destroy the innocent?"

[b]“[i]//i/ WAS INNOCENT!”[/b] Heated claws dug into the armor as flames licked the edges of the black beast’s mouth. The samurai still didn’t move.

“You think you’re the only one who has felt the sting of betrayal’s blade? I too have been turned against, but I don’t take it out on others like you seem to do,” he grunted. Irascor snarled and began to press down, bending the breastplate as scolding talons began to dig into skin. “Tell me, dragon... if you still hold your honor, then why are you trying to kill a stranger in a fit of rage?”

Irascor froze, seeming to mull over Oni’s words. He suddenly retreated, his talons leaving gashes in the red armor. When the man got to his feet, he found the dragon pacing. After a moment Irascor slowed, then stopped and turned back to Oni. He reared up, and Oni prepared for another attack... but it never came. The spirit glanced at Iroh, then back to the samurai, and spoke hesitantly.

“Perhaps... I’ve not been in the right mind... for a long time...” Iroh cleared his throat to get the dragon’s attention and stepped forward.

“I think it’s time you let Dracustos back in control, before that form harms him too much,” he suggested. He was given a nod before the beast’s scales regained their saturation. Dracustos staggered and fell, and Oni caught him before he hit the floor. He looked to Iroh.

“Will he be alright?” he asked. The old man nodded.

“Irascor takes a lot out of him. He just needs some rest.” The Draconian groaned, then his eyes cracked open. He supported himself on the samurai and saw his footprints burned into the floor, and he glanced between the Orientals.

“Irascor came out again, didn’t he?” he asked tiredly. Iroh nodded, and he sighed. The halfbreed looked over the building.

“Sorry about your dojo, Iroh.”

“No worries, it wasn’t your fault.” The old man glanced outside. It had started to snow and the wind was picking up. “I think it’s time to head home. Will you be alright on your own, Draco?”

“I think so,” Dracustos said before letting go of Oni. He managed to take a step before his legs gave out, and the samurai caught him again. “Huh... guess not.”

“Alright then.” Iroh made his way to the front door. “Oni, could you carry him please? Looks like you’re both staying with me tonight.”

Wind and snow battered the sides of the house as the winter storm brought its fury unto the land. Oni sipped his tea and looked over his room again, the paper walls giving him a sense of home along with the tatami he knelt on.

A large shadow passed along the wall, followed by a knock at his door.

"Come in." The door slid open and Dracustos stepped in, making sure to close the door behind him. "Good to see you up and moving, Draco. Feeling better?"

"Yes," the Draconian answered with a nod, "very. And you? Iroh told me Irascor got you with a horn."

"I'm fine; I'm a fast healer." A half-hearted chuckle came from the halfbreed.

"You must heal faster than I do to be alright after taking a horn to the ribs." He approached the samurai and knelt in front of him. He opened his mouth, hesitated, then spoke. "Listen, Oni... I really must apologise for Irascor's behavior. I should have warned you about him."

"That you should have, but you needn't feel responsible for what he does. Our actions are a reflection of who we are... and he is broken."

"He's certainly been quiet since he fought you. I think he's thinking about whatever you said to him."

"I merely showed him back to the right path, but whether or not he continues to walk it is his choice. Hopefully he won't attack any more innocents out of rage." Dracustos nodded, then glanced at the armor that lay at the back corner of the room. The breastplate was scorched and indented with three gouges down it.

"Look, I'll feel bad if I don't at least try to make this up to you in some way, so how about tomorrow before you leave, we can take your armor to my father and he can repair it? It won't take long; he might even give it some sort of enchantment."

"It wouldn't be too much trouble?"

"Of course not. I should be fine enough by morning to take you there." Oni smiled and bowed his head.

"I would be very grateful. Is everyone in this town so kind?"

“Pretty much. Honestly, you probably won’t come across another place like this in your travels, but let’s hope I’m wrong.” Dracustos stood slowly, seemingly stiff from the fight. “Well, I’d best go to bed. Good night, Oni.”

“Good night, Dracustos.”