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HODDER

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BOOK ONE

Blackthorne was suddenly awake. For a moment he thought he was dreaming because he was ashore and the room unbelievable. It was small and very clean and covered with soft mats. He was lying on a thick quilt and another was thrown over him. The ceiling was polished cedar and the walls were lathes of cedar, in squares, covered with an opaque paper that muted the light pleasantly. Beside him was a scarlet tray bearing small bowls. One contained cold cooked vegetables and he wolfed them, hardly noticing the piquant taste. Another contained a fish soup and he drained that. Another was filled with a thick porridge of wheat or barley and he finished it quickly, eating with his fingers. The water in an odd-shaped gourd was warm and tasted curious – slightly bitter but savory.

Then he noticed the crucifix in its niche.

This house is Spanish or Portuguese, he thought aghast. Is this the Japans? or Cathay?

A panel of the wall slid open. A middle-aged, heavy-set, round-faced woman was on her knees beside the door and she bowed and smiled. Her skin was golden and her eyes black and narrow and her long black hair was piled neatly on her head. She wore a gray silk robe and short white socks with a thick sole and a wide purple band around her waist.

‘Goshujinsama, gokibun wa ikaga desu ka?’ she said. She waited as he stared at her blankly, then said it again.

‘Is this the Japans?’ he asked. ‘Japans? Or Cathay?’

She stared at him uncomprehendingly and said something else he could not understand. Then he realized that he was naked. His clothes were nowhere in sight. With sign language he showed her that he wanted to get dressed. Then he pointed at the food bowls and she knew that he was still hungry.

She smiled and bowed and slid the door shut.

He lay back exhausted, the untoward, nauseating nonmotion of the floor making his head spin. With an effort he tried to collect himself. I

remember getting the anchor out, he thought. With Vinck. I think it was Vinck. We were in a bay and the ship had nosed a shoal and stopped. We could hear waves breaking on the beach but everything was safe. There were lights ashore and then I was in my cabin and blackness. I don't remember anything. Then there were lights through the blackness and strange voices. I was talking English, then Portuguese. One of the natives talked a little Portuguese. Or was he Portuguese? No, I think he was a native. Did I ask him where we were? I don't remember. Then we were back in the reef again and the big wave came once more and I was carried out to sea and drowning – it was freezing – no, the sea was warm and like a silk bed a fathom thick. They must have carried me ashore and put me here.

'It must have been this bed that felt so soft and warm,' he said aloud. 'I've never slept on silk before.' His weakness overcame him and he slept dreamlessly.

When he awoke there was more food in earthenware bowls and his clothes were beside him in a neat pile. They had been washed and pressed and mended with tiny, exquisite stitching.

But his knife was gone, and so were his keys.

I'd better get a knife and quickly, he thought. Or a pistol.

His eyes went to the crucifix. In spite of his dread, his excitement quickened. All his life he had heard legends told among pilots and sailormen about the incredible riches of Portugal's secret empire in the East, how they had by now converted the heathens to Catholicism and so held them in bondage, where gold was as cheap as pig iron, and emeralds, rubies, diamonds, and sapphires as plentiful as pebbles on a beach.

If the Catholic part's true, he told himself, perhaps the rest is too. About the riches. Yes. But the sooner I'm armed and back aboard *Erasmus* and behind her cannon, the better.

He consumed the food, dressed, and stood shakily, feeling out of his element as he always did ashore. His boots were missing. He went to the door, reeling slightly, and put out a hand to steady himself but the light, square lathes could not bear his weight and they shattered, the paper ripping apart. He righted himself. The shocked woman in the corridor was staring up at him.

'I'm sorry,' he said, strangely ill at ease with his clumsiness. The purity of the room was somehow defiled.

'Where are my boots?'

The woman stared at him blankly. So, patiently, he asked her again with sign language and she hurried down a passage, knelt and opened

another lathe door, and beckoned him. Voices were nearby, and the sound of running water. He went through the doorway and found himself in another room, also almost bare. This opened onto a veranda with steps leading to a small garden surrounded by a high wall. Beside this main entrance were two old women, three children dressed in scarlet robes, and an old man, obviously a gardener, with a rake in his hand. At once they all bowed gravely and kept their heads low.

To his astonishment Blackthorne saw that the old man was naked but for a brief, narrow loincloth, hardly covering his organs.

'Morning,' he said to them, not knowing what to say.

They stayed motionless, still bowing.

Nonplussed, he stared at them, then awkwardly he bowed back to them. They all straightened and smiled at him. The old man bowed once more and went back to work in the garden. The children stared at him, then, laughing, dashed away. The old woman disappeared into the depths of the house. But he could feel their eyes on him.

He saw his boots at the bottom of the steps. Before he could pick them up, the middle-aged woman was there on her knees, to his embarrassment, and she helped him to put them on.

'Thank you,' he said. He thought a moment and then pointed at himself. 'Blackthorne,' he said deliberately. 'Blackthorne.' Then he pointed at her. 'What's your name?'

She stared at him uncomprehendingly.

'*Black-thorne*,' he repeated carefully, pointing at himself, and again pointed at her. 'What's your name?'

She frowned, then with a flood of understanding pointed at herself and said, '*Onna! Onna!*'

'*Onna!*' he repeated, very proud of himself as she was with herself. '*Onna.*'

She nodded happily. '*Onna!*'

The garden was unlike anything he had ever seen: a little waterfall and stream and small bridge and manicured pebbled paths and rocks and flowers and shrubs. It's so clean, he thought. So neat.

'Incredible,' he said.

'*'Nkerriberr?*' she repeated helpfully.

'Nothing,' he said. Then not knowing what else to do, he waved her away. Obediently she bowed politely and left.

Blackthorne sat in the warm sun, leaning against a post. Feeling very frail, he watched the old man weeding in an already weedless garden. I wonder where the others are. Is the Captain-General still alive? How many days have I been asleep? I can remember waking

and eating and sleeping again, the eating unsatisfactory like the dreams.

The children flurried past, chasing one another, and he was embarrassed for them at the gardener's nakedness, for when the man bent over or stooped you could see everything and he was astounded that the children appeared not to notice. He saw tiled and thatched roofs of other buildings over the wall and, far off, high mountains. A crisp wind broomed the sky and kept the cumulus advancing. Bees were foraging and it was a lovely spring day. His body begged for more sleep but he pushed himself erect and went to the garden door. The gardener smiled and bowed and ran to open the door and bowed and closed it after him.

The village was set around the crescent harbor that faced east, perhaps two hundred houses unlike any he'd ever seen nestling at the beginning of the mountain which spilled down to the shore. Above were terraced fields and dirt roads that led north and south. Below, the waterfront was cobbled and a stone launching ramp went from the shore into the sea. A good safe harbor and a stone jetty, and men and women cleaning fish and making nets, a uniquely designed boat being built at the northern side. There were islands far out to sea, to the east and to the south. The reefs would be there or beyond the horizon.

In the harbor were many other quaintly shaped boats, mostly fishing craft, some with one large sail, several being sculled – the oarsmen standing and pushing against the sea, not sitting and pulling as he would have done. A few of the boats were heading out to sea, others were nosing at the wooden dock, and *Erasmus* was anchored neatly, fifty yards from shore, in good water, with three bow cables. Who did that? he asked himself. There were boats alongside her and he could see native men aboard. But none of his. Where could they be?

He looked around the village and became conscious of the many people watching him. When they saw that he had noticed them they all bowed and, still uncomfortable, he bowed back. Once more there was happy activity and they passed to and fro, stopping, bargaining, bowing to each other, seemingly oblivious of him, like so many multicolored butterflies. But he felt eyes studying him from every window and doorway as he walked toward the shore.

What is it about them that's so weird? he asked himself. It's not just their clothes and behavior. It's – *they've no weapons*, he thought, astounded. No swords or guns! Why is that?

Open shops filled with odd goods and bales lined the small street. The floors of the shops were raised and the sellers and the buyers knelt or squatted on the clean wooden floors. He saw that most had clogs or

rush sandals, some with the same white socks with the thick sole that were split between the big toe and the next to hold the thongs, but they left the clogs and sandals outside in the dirt. Those who were barefoot cleansed their feet and slipped on clean, indoor sandals that were waiting for them. That's very sensible if you think about it, he told himself, awed.

Then he saw the tonsured man approaching and fear swept sickeningly from his testicles into his stomach. The priest was obviously Portuguese or Spanish, and, though his flowing robe was orange, there was no mistaking the rosary and crucifix at his belt, or the cold hostility on his face. His robe was travel stained and his European-style boots besmirched with mud. He was looking out into the harbor at *Erasmus*, and Blackthorne knew that he must recognize her as Dutch or English, new to most seas, leaner, faster, a merchant fighting ship, patterned and improved on the English privateers that had wreaked so much havoc on the Spanish Main. With the priest were ten natives, black-haired and black-eyed, one dressed like him except that he had thong slippers. The others wore varicolored robes or loose trousers, or simply loincloths. But none was armed.

Blackthorne wanted to run while there was time but he knew he did not have the strength and there was nowhere to hide. His height and size and the color of his eyes made him alien in this world. He put his back against the wall.

'Who are you?' the priest said in Portuguese. He was a thick, dark, well-fed man in his middle twenties, with a long beard,

'Who are you?' Blackthorne stared back at him.

'That's a Netherlander privateer. You're a heretic Dutchman. You're pirates. God have mercy on you!'

'We're not pirates. We're peaceful merchants, except to our enemies. I'm pilot of that ship. Who are you?'

'Father Sebastio. How did you get here? How?'

'We were blown ashore. What is this place? Is it the Japans?'

'Yes. Japan. Nippon,' the priest said impatiently. He turned to one of the men, older than the rest, small and lean with strong arms and calloused hands, his pate shaved and his hair drawn into a thin queue as gray as his eyebrows. The priest spoke haltingly to him in Japanese, pointing at Blackthorne. All of them were shocked and one made the sign of the cross protectively.

'Dutchmen are heretics, rebels, and pirates. What's your name?'

'Is this a Portuguese settlement?'

The priest's eyes were hard and bloodshot. 'The village headman

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says he's told the authorities about you. Your sins have caught up with you. Where's the rest of your crew?

'We were blown off course. We just need food and water and time to repair our ship. Then we'll be off, We can pay for every—'

'Where's the rest of your crew?'

'I don't know. Aboard. I suppose they're aboard.'

Again the priest questioned the headman, who replied and motioned to the other end of the village, explaining at length. The priest turned back to Blackthorne. 'They crucify criminals here, Pilot. You're going to die. The *daimyo*'s coming with his samurai. God have mercy on you.'

'What's a *daimyo*'?

'A feudal lord. He owns this whole province. How did you get here?'

'And *samurai*'?

'Warriors – soldiers – members of the warrior caste,' the priest said with growing irritation. 'Where did you come from and who are you?'

'I don't recognize your accent,' Blackthorne said, to throw him off balance. 'You're a Spaniard?'

'I'm Portuguese,' the priest flared, taking the bait. 'I told you, I'm Father Sebastio from Portugal. Where did you learn such good Portuguese. Eh?'

'But Portugal and Spain are the same country now,' Blackthorne said, taunting. 'You've the same king.'

'We're a separate country. We're a different people. We have been forever. We fly our own flag. Our overseas possessions are separate, yes, separate. King Philip agreed when he stole my country.' Father Sebastio controlled his temper with an effort, his fingers trembling. 'He took my country by force of arms twenty years ago! His soldiers and that devil-spawned Spaniard tyrant, the Duke of Alva, they crushed our real king. *Que va!* Now Philip's son rules but he's not our real king either. Soon we'll have our own king back again.' Then he added with venom, 'You know it's the truth. What devil Alva did to your country he did to mine.'

'That's a lie. Alva was a plague in the Netherlands, but he never conquered them. They're still free. Always will be. But in Portugal he smashed one small army and the whole country gave in. No courage. You could throw the Spaniard out if you wanted to, but you'll never do it. No honor. No *cojones*. Except to burn innocents in the name of God.'

'May God burn you in hellfire for all eternity,' the priest flared. 'Satan walks abroad and will be stamped out. Heretics will be stamped out. You're cursed before God!'

In spite of himself Blackthorne felt the religious terror begin to rise

within him. 'Priests don't have the ear of God, or speak with His voice. We're free of your stinking yoke and we're going to stay free!'

It was only forty years ago that Bloody Mary Tudor was Queen of England and the Spaniard Philip II, Philip the Cruel, her husband. This deeply religious daughter of Henry VIII had brought back Catholic priests and inquisitors and heresy trials and the dominance of the foreign Pope again to England and had reversed her father's curbs and historic changes to the Church of Rome in England, against the will of the majority. She had ruled for five years and the realm was torn asunder with hatred and fear and bloodshed. But she had died and Elizabeth became queen at twenty-four.

Blackthorne was filled with wonder, and deep filial love, when he thought of Elizabeth. For forty years she's battled with the world. She's outfoxed and outfought Popes, the Holy Roman Empire, France and Spain combined. Excommunicated, spat on, reviled abroad, she's led us into harbor – safe, strong, separate.

'We're free,' Blackthorne said to the priest. 'You're broken. We've our own schools now, our own books, our own Bible, our own Church. You Spaniards are all the same. Offal! You monks are all the same. Idol worshipers!'

The priest lifted his crucifix and held it between Blackthorne and himself as a shield. 'Oh, God, protect us from this evil! I'm not Spanish, I tell you! I'm Portuguese. And I'm not a monk. I'm a brother of the Society of Jesus!'

'Ah, one of them. A Jesuit!'

'Yes. May God have mercy on your soul!' Father Sebastio snapped something in Japanese and the men surged toward Blackthorne. He backed against the wall and hit one man hard but the others swarmed over him and he felt himself choking.

'Nanigoto da?'

Abruptly the melee ceased.

The young man was ten paces away. He wore breeches and clogs and a light kimono and two scabbarded swords were stuck into his belt. One was daggerlike. The other, a two-handed killing sword, was long and slightly curved. His right hand was casually on the hilt.

'Nanigoto da?' he asked harshly and when no one answered instantly, **'NANIGOTO DA?'**

The Japanese fell to their knees, their heads bowed into the dirt. Only the priest stayed on his feet. He bowed and began to explain haltingly, but the man contemptuously cut him short and pointed at the head-man. 'Mura!'

Mura, the headman, kept his head bowed and began explaining rapidly. Several times he pointed at Blackthorne, once at the ship, and twice at the priest. Now there was no movement on the street. All who were visible were on their knees and bowing low. The headman finished. The armed man arrogantly questioned him for a moment and he was answered deferentially and quickly. Then the soldier said something to the headman and waved with open contempt at the priest, then at Blackthorne, and the gray-haired man put it more simply to the priest, who flushed.

The man, who was a head shorter and much younger than Blackthorne, his handsome face slightly pock-marked, stared at the stranger. 'Onushi ittai doko kara kitanoda? Doko no kuni no monoda?'

The priest said nervously, 'Kasigi Omi-san says, "Where do you come from and what's your nationality?"'

'Is Mr. Omisan the *daimyo*?' Blackthorne asked, afraid of the swords in spite of himself.

'No. He's a samurai, the samurai in charge of the village. His surname's Kasigi, Omi's his given name. Here they always put their surnames first. "San" means "honorable", and you add it to all names as a politeness. You'd better learn to be polite – and find some manners quickly. Here they don't tolerate lack of manners.' His voice edged. 'Hurry up and answer!'

'Amsterdam. I'm English.'

Father Sebastio's shock was open. He said, 'English. England,' to the samurai and began an explanation but Omi impatiently cut him short and rapped out a flurry of words.

'Omi-san asks if you're the leader. The headman says there are only a few of you heretics alive and most are sick. Is there a Captain-General?'

'I'm the leader,' Blackthorne answered even though, truly, now that they were ashore, the Captain-General was in command. 'I'm in command,' he added, knowing that Captain-General Spillbergen could command nothing, ashore or afloat, even when he was fit and well.

Another spate of words from the samurai. 'Omi-san says, because you are the leader you are allowed to walk around the village freely, wherever you want, until his master comes. His master, the *daimyo*, will decide your fate. Until then, you are permitted to live as a guest in the headman's house and come and go as you please. But you are not to leave the village. Your crew are confined to their house and are not allowed to leave it. Do you understand?'

'Yes. Where are my crew?'

Father Sebastio pointed vaguely at a cluster of houses near a wharf,

obviously distressed by Omi's decision and impatience. 'There! Enjoy your freedom, pirate. Your evil's caught up with—'

'*Wakarimasu ka?*' Omi said directly to Blackthorne.

He says, "Do you understand?"

'What's "yes" in Japanese?'

Father Sebastio said to the samurai, '*Wakarimasu.*'

Omi disdainfully waved them away. They all bowed low. Except one man who rose deliberately, without bowing.

With blinding speed the killing sword made a hissing silver arc and the man's head toppled off his shoulders and a fountain of blood sprayed the earth. The body rippled a few times and was still. Involuntarily, the priest had backed off a pace. No one else in the street had moved a muscle. Their heads remained low and motionless. Blackthorne was rigid, in shock.

Omi put his foot carelessly on the corpse.

'*Ikinasai!*' he said, motioning them away.

The men in front of him bowed again, to the earth. Then they got up and went away impassively. The street began to empty. And the shops.

Father Sebastio looked down at the body. Gravely he made the sign of the cross over him and said, '*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.*' He stared back at the samurai without fear now.

'*Ikinasai!*' The tip of the gleaming sword rested on the body.

After a long moment the priest turned and walked away. With dignity. Omi watched him narrowly, then glanced at Blackthorne. Blackthorne backed away and then, when safely distant, he quickly turned a corner and vanished.

Omi began to laugh uproariously. The street was empty now. When his laughter exhausted, he grasped his sword with both hands and began to hack the body methodically into small pieces.

Blackthorne was in a small boat, the boatman sculling happily toward *Erasmus*. He had had no trouble in getting the boat and he could see men on the main deck. All were samurai. Some had steel breastplates but most wore simple kimonos, as the robes were called, and the two swords. All wore their hair the same way: the top of the head shaved and the hair at the back and sides gathered into a queue, oiled, then doubled over the crown and tied neatly. Only samurai were allowed this style and, for them, it was obligatory. Only samurai could wear the two swords – always the long, two-handed killing sword and the short, daggerlike one – and, for them, the swords were obligatory.

The samurai lined the gunwales of his ship watching him.

Filled with disquiet, he climbed up the gangway and came on deck. One samurai, more elaborately dressed than the others, came over to him and bowed. Blackthorne had learned well and he bowed back equally and everyone on the deck beamed genially. He still felt the horror of the sudden killing in the street, and their smiles did not allay his foreboding. He went toward the companionway and stopped abruptly. Across the doorway was pasted a wide band of red silk and, beside it, a small sign with queer, squiggled writing. He hesitated, checked the other door, but that too was sealed up with a similar band, and a similar sign was nailed to the bulkhead.

He reached out to remove the silk.

'*Hotté oké!*' To make the point quite clear the samurai on guard shook his head. He was no longer smiling.

'But this is my ship and I want . . .' Blackthorne bottled his anxiety, eyes on the swords. I've got to get below, he thought. I've got to get the rutters, mine and the secret one. Christ Jesus, if they're found and given to the priests or to the Japaners we're finished. Any court in the world – outside of England and the Netherlands – would convict us as pirates with that evidence. My rutter gives dates, places, and amounts of plunder taken, the number of dead at our three landings in the Americas and the one in Spanish Africa, the number of churches sacked, and how we burned the towns and the shipping. And the Portuguese rutter? That's our death warrant, for of course it's stolen. At least it was bought from a Portuguese traitor, and by their law any foreigner caught in possession of any rutter of theirs, let alone one that unlocks the Magellan, is to be put to death at once. And if the rutter is found aboard an enemy ship, the ship is to be burned and all aboard executed without mercy.

'*Nan no yoda?*' one of the samurai said.

'Do you speak Portuguese?' Blackthorne asked in that language.

The man shrugged. '*Wakarimasen.*'

Another came forward and deferentially spoke to the leader, who nodded in agreement.

'Portugeezu friend,' this samurai said in heavily accented Portuguese. He opened the top of his kimono and showed the small wooden crucifix that hung from his neck.

'Christ'an!' He pointed at himself and smiled. 'Christ'an.' He pointed at Blackthorne. 'Christ'an *ka?*'

Blackthorne hesitated, nodded. 'Christian.'

'Portugeezu?'

'English.'

The man chattered with the leader, then both shrugged and looked back at him. 'Portugeezu?'

Blackthorne shook his head, not liking to disagree with them on anything. 'My friends? Where?'

The samurai pointed to the east end of the village. 'Friends.'

'This is my ship. I want to go below.' Blackthorne said it in several ways and with signs and they understood.

'Ah, so desu! *Kinjiru*,' they said emphatically, indicating the notice, and beamed.

It was quite clear that he was not allowed to go below. *Kinjiru* must mean forbidden, Blackthorne thought irritably. Well, to hell with that! He snapped the handle of the door down and opened it a fraction.

'*KINJIRU!*'

He was jerked around to face the samurai. Their swords were half out of the scabbards. Motionlessly the two men waited for him to make up his mind. Others on deck watched impassively.

Blackthorne knew he had no option but to back down, so he shrugged and walked away and checked the hawsers and the ship as best he could. The tattered sails were down and tied in place. But the lashings were different from any he'd ever seen, so he presumed that the Japaners had made the vessel secure. He started down the gangway, and stopped. He felt the cold sweat as he saw them all staring at him malevolently and he thought, Christ Jesus, how could I be so stupid. He bowed politely and at once the hostility vanished and they all bowed and were smiling again. But he could still feel the sweat trickling down his spine and he hated everything about the Japans and wished himself and his crew back aboard, armed, and out to sea.

'By the Lord Jesus, I think you're wrong, Pilot,' Vinck said. His toothless grin was wide and obscene. 'If you can put up with the swill they call food, it's the best place I've been. Ever. I've had two women in three days and they're like rabbits. They'll do anything if you show 'em how.'

'That's right. But you can't do nothing without meat or brandy. Nor for long. I'm tired out, and I could only do it once,' Maestsukker said, his narrow face twitching. 'The yellow bastards won't understand that we need meat and beer and bread. And brandy or wine.'

'That's the worst! Lord Jesus, my kingdom for some grog!' Baccus van Nekk was filled with gloom. He walked over and stood close to Blackthorne and peered up at him. He was very nearsighted and had