

## MEET THE CHAMPIONS

# Champions of Kamigawa



## Security

*Gwendolyn Kestrel*

Three nights ago, the guards of the Kitanosu nezumi village heard a distinctive, disturbing noise in the distance that resembled a thousand voices weeping, crying, and screaming in emotional or physical agony. Frightened, they told the village leaders.

The leaders debated without resolution.

Two nights ago, the guards heard the same sound. Some said it was louder, as if closer, others claimed that it was softer, as if further away.

Anxious and uncertain, the leaders determined that they had no solution. They sent a messenger to a well-respected shaman, Forked-Tongue. She lived many miles away, but was known for her cleverness which earned her much wealth and power. The journey there and back took a full day for a stout, dependable runner like Fleet-Foot, the messenger chosen for the task.

Evening drew near. In the gloaming, two guards anxiously paced at their post.

"The moon is tinged with blood," White-Whisker said, pulling nervously at the single flaxen whisker in his dark hair that gave him his moniker.

"Don't look at the moon, look for Fleet-Foot," Carrion-Breath admonished. She paced nervously, peering into the darkness as if she could hasten the runner by sheer force of will.

"Do you hear it?"

"It's too early. We didn't hear it until midnight the last two nights."

"But I hear something."

A low moaning came, not from outside the swamp outside the village, but from between the guards and the settlement.



White-Whisker and Carrion-Breath whirled and drew their swords. The weapons' tips wavered and shook as the nezumi pointed them at the shadows.

The moaning changed to laughter as a bedraggled human warrior in mismatched armor stepped forward into the light.

"Sonokura!" the nezumi cried in chorus.

"You could have been killed!" Carrion-Breath said, brandishing her weapon with renewed vigor.

"I came to help keep watch," Sonokura slurred.

Sonokura was an ochimusha mercenary who stayed in the village. He came to the nezumi settlement almost a year ago, bruised and beaten from some unnamed battle or brawl. He had originally planned to spend "A night or two in the old temple." Night followed night and Sonokura fell into a routine. When he had money, he drank at the village inn, sleeping at night in the dilapidated temple. When his money ran out, he spent a few days scavenging repairable armor or weapons from the swamp, gathering just enough to buy his next bottle.

"Broke, huh?" White-Whisker observed. Sonokura, while generally good-natured, worked only when he needed money.

"Yeah, I haven't wanted to go out far, you know," he said. Scavenging near the village yielded little, the area too thoroughly picked over to find much of value. "The leaders offered me two coins to stand guard tonight."

"So, you took them, drank them away, and then joined us," Carrion-Breath teased. "You smell like beer."

“And you smell—” Sonokura knew he was making a mistake. No one spoke to Carrion-Breath about her odor without getting a sound thumping. Sonokura searched for some way to extricate himself. “Hey, isn’t that Fleet-Foot returning?”

Poom, click. Poom, click. Poom, click.

Though intended as a bluff, the soft, rhythmic pounding of clawed feet on the levied road leading to the village sounded in the night.

Fleet-Foot, obviously exhausted, ran up to the village.

“The Leaders,” he panted. “I must see the Leaders.”

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Fleet-Foot’s urgent news disquieted the Leaders. They called together a community meeting to share the news.

“So as we have heard, Forked-Tongue says that the sounds we have heard come from the Horobi, the kami of death’s wail. She advises that to defend the village from this kami, every third night we hear the wailing, we must give it a sacrifice for it to consume,” Grey-Brow, the oldest and most respected of the nezumi, summarized. “We have resolved in the future to send forth hunting parties to capture appropriate sacrifices. However, tonight is the third night. We need a sacrifice. Will anyone volunteer?”



The continuing background murmurings and side discussions abruptly ceased. Only silence replied to the Leader’s question.

Faintly, in the distance, the assembled nezumi heard the nervous bantering of the guards keeping watch.

“Sonokura,” one nezumi murmured.

“Sonokura,” another said more firmly.

“The human,” came yet another voice.

The gathered throng eagerly latched onto the outsider as the victim of choice.

The mob surged out of the meeting hall and rushed to the guards. With the element of surprise and their vast numbers, they quickly overpowered the ochimusha. Carrion-Breath and White-Whisker exchanged sympathetic looks, and their hands flexed on their swords, but neither stepped in to defend Sonokura.

Grey-Brow led the mob just a little ways outside of the settlement. There, they tied up Sonokura.

“What are you doing?” the mercenary asked, fear raising the pitch of his voice.

“What must be done,” Grey-Brow replied. “Sacrificing to Horobi.”

Sonokura fell silent. He looked at the assembled nezumi and saw only relief in their faces. He had no allies here and no chance of escape.

“We must make him wail and cry out to be a suitable gift,” Fleet-Foot reminded them of Forked-Tongue’s instructions.

“Do what you must,” Grey-Brow replied.

With the precise knowledge of a skilled runner, Fleet-Foot cut Sonokura’s leg tendons, ensuring that the mercenary could not flee. Sonokura screamed at the intense pain of the wounds.

“Back to the village,” Grey-Brow ordered. “Stay inside until sunrise.”

The villagers filed back to their homes.



Grey-Brow stood watch with Carrion-Breath and White Whisker. None of them spoke. All of them stared intently into the swamp. A small lantern illuminated Sonokura's bound form. The ochimusha called out for help and cried in pain. Carrion-Breath would close her eyes at the loudest or most pain-filled screams.

Soon, a chorus of wails and groans joined Sonokura's cries. The kami approached. Twice as tall as a human, its face resembled a horned skull. Its black robes trimmed with white fur floated above the ground as it moved toward the mercenary. In the robes, faces appeared and disappeared as the cloth shifted. The kami stood still for a moment, tilting its head to one side as if listening to the melody of Sonokura's screams. Sonokura began to plead for his life and endeavored to crawl away from the kami. The kami approached, and Sonokura's skin began to contort and tear as though being torn by unseen hands. Overcome with pain, his eyes rolled back in his head and twitched. The wailing grew louder, and countless worms and grubs emerged from the ground, squirming over Sonokura's wounds. The kami's form passed over Sonokura slowly. Afterward, only a mass of maggots, earthworms, and bones were left behind. Sonokura's screaming voice blended into the chorus of the kami's cries and groans, and it drifted away.

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Forked-Tongue sat in her treasury room, running her hands amid great chests of gold. She picked up a silver ewer ornamented with gems and gold filigree. As she held it up to the light, she thought, "Safe, my pretty things. I shall keep you safe. The nasty kami won't be able to take you from me." She put on a necklace of opals set in yellow gold. "Forked-Tongue's cunning will keep you safe. As long as the Kitanosu village keeps feeding Horobi, it won't leave them and it will keep staying far away from us, my pretty things. Far away."

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