

MEET THE BETRAYERS

Betrayers



Patron of the Akki

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Ik-Uk the akki was damned from the moment he spotted the bottle, though he would not realize it for another week.

He found the bottle in the rubble down slope from the entrance of a massive cavern complex, a set of caverns occupied and abandoned by different akki tribes over the centuries. Each tribe dealt with its detritus in the same time-honored akki manner – by tossing it out the door. As a result, there was an ever-spreading vale of trash, layer upon layer from generation upon generation of the akki.

And Ik-Uk, low among the low, scavenged among the debris for those bits he could eat or trade.

Ik-Uk had been fairly good at his craft, and he knew his territory well. So when the gas bubble erupted the night before from deep within the trash heap, sending a flaming geyser of blue-white fire into the sky like a flare, he knew that the bottom layers of the midden pile would be disturbed, and old, lost treasures might be brought to the surface.

And laying his hands upon the ebon bottle and dooming himself, he knew he was right.

The bottle was thin-necked, in the style of the elder dynasties, and inscribed with fluid characters that wrapped around its ebon surface. The runic inscriptions flowed as if incised with fire, and seemed to dance and meld as Ik-Uk watched them.

Were Ik-Uk a human, he would have taken the bottle to a place of safety. He would have sought council from others more learned than he. He would have had the writings untangled and made plain. He would have been cautious.

But Ik-Uk was an akki, and though knowledgeable in scavenging and other old things, was not the wisest of his lump-backed, horn-shouldered breed. So he rattled the bottle. Something solid thunked within. Encouraged, he pulled the lead stopper from the neck.

And fire jetted from the neck of the bottle. Had Ik-Uk been just a touch more eager, he would have caught the force of the explosion full in the face, and would have been spared what would later happen to him. He was not fortunate (having placed the butt of the bottle against his belly and used both hands to unstopper it), so instead he merely pitched backwards as the orange-red flames erupted outwards.

And, having left the bottle, the flames now swirled in the air before him.

Now despite his low status, Ik-Uk knew many things, and one of them was that fire needed something to burn, else it would dwindle and die. Wood. Clothing. Flesh. Even rocks would burn, given enough heat. But this flame was different, hanging in the air. And as Ik-Uk watched, twin dark splotches appeared in the flames and resolved into eyes, watching him intently.

Ik-Uk scrambled backwards. "Stay away!" he sputtered, grasping the neck of the bottle and brandishing it like a club.

Another dark splotch formed beneath the eyes. "I am remaining away," said the fire, which continued to resolve itself as Ik-Uk watched. The flames folded upon themselves, the tongues of fire resolving themselves into recognizable forms. It had a body that looked like fish drawn by an akki child, with lumpy folds of flaming flesh and a small dwindling body supporting an oversized head. The two upper dark spots resolved into flat bronze coins, solid and floating in a face of fire. Tiny useless arms or fins hung at its sides made of insubstantial flame.

The creature had the tadpole shape of an unborn akki – it resembled nothing more than a flaming fetus.

Now despite his low status, Ik-Uk knew of old things, and could identify a kami when he saw one. The kami were spirits, otherworldly creatures – beautiful, horrid, and very, very hostile. And this was definitely a kami,



though by its size was one of low status.

Though even a kami of low status could destroy an akki with but a thought. Ik-Uk scooted back over the detritus, club-bottle still brandished before him.

"Do not fear," said the creature, "May I serve you?"

Another pause, while Ik-Uk wondered how far he could get if he bolted. Not far, he decided.

"You are a spirit," he said at last.

The burning tadpole of a creature nodded, and would have blinked had its eyes permitted it. "A minor one, once part of a greater being. May I serve you?"

Ik-Uk stopped his retreat. The scavenger akki was of low status, but he knew the tales of helpful kami as well. Particularly he thought of the tale of Laughing Riko, an akki of whom it was said to have aided a fire kami, and was rewarded with great power. Laughing Riko became a great shaman among the akki, though many thought that he was little more than a pet of the fire kami.

This seemed like a fire kami, and it seemed friendly as well. And the idea of great power appealed to Ik-Uk.

"Why," said the akki slowly, gathering his wits, "Why were you in that bottle?"

"I am a minor spirit," replied the burning fetus, "Shorn off from a greater being. Against whom I trespassed and by whom I was imprisoned. Why do you fear? Are not kami good spirits to mortals?"

"Once," said Ik-Uk, lowering the bottle just a fraction of an inch. "Long ago, in grandfather time. Now the kami war with the living, and are kept shackled by spells, or supplicated with sacrifice."

"Why is that?" asked the unblinking spirit.

The akki shrugged his oversized shoulders, "I don't know, but I bet humans are responsible. They always are."

The spirit crackled thinly for a few moments, hovering in the air before Ik-Uk. Then it said, "I have been away for a long time. Perhaps long enough that I have been forgiven by the greater being."

"Perhaps your greater being no longer exists."

"Perhaps." Another pause, filled with crackling of its insubstantial flesh. "Yet you released me. Payment is called for. May I serve you?"

Ik-Uk opened his mouth, but as he spoke he heard other voices from further up the trash hill – heavy, raspy voices that grated on his ears and put fear into his soul. Other akki. Other scavengers, who slept in this morning and were only now descending the pile. Any one of the other akki would be a fair match for Ik-Uk, but in a pack they would quickly try to take his find away from him.

Ik-Uk waved the bottle at the figures approaching over the hill of refuse. "Protect me!" he shouted, trying to keep as much of a frightened squeal out of his voice as possible.

"As you wish," said the burning spirit, and motioned towards the lead figure that was just topping the rise.

The lead akki, a large, broad-shouldered bruiser named Hu-Hu, screamed as his head erupted in a ball of crimson-white flame. He slapped at his face and ears ineffectively with wide, clawed hands, but quickly slumped, smoldering, to the ground. The screams became sobbing prayers, then soft wet noises, and at last nothing at all.

The other akki, four in all, were stunned to silence by the sudden turn of events, but only for a moment. Two screamed and charged towards Ik-Uk, the other two screamed and fled back up towards the cavern's mouth. The spirit motioned again, and the heads of all four of them exploded in bursts of bright-red flame. Each of them slumped and fell, their last curses lost in the crackling flames.

Ik-Uk stammered, "What did you do?"

"Protected you," said the unborn thing, wrapped in a nimbus of flame, "Is that not what you wanted?"

"Yes," said Ik-Uk, but then shook his head. The newly-fried scavengers were rivals in his trade, but they had families. Families that would put together two (Ik-Uk appears with a new fiery friend) and two (the crispy remains of their brethren are discovered), and come to the logical conclusion. "No," then shook his head again, "You must keep me safe from harm," he added.

"I can protect you," said the spirit, smiling, and for the first time Ik-Uk noticed the spirit had very, very sharp teeth -- bronze triangles floating, like its eyes, in a puddle of congealed flame

"Protect me, yes," said the akki, "But don't hurt anyone without my say-so. Can you do that?"

The spirit looked at him blankly, and Ik-Uk wondered if he had exceeded the creature's ability to comprehend. The kami were powerful, but they were not necessarily versed in the ways and subtleties of the mortal world.

And this particular kami had been away from the world longer than most. But it nodded and said, "How long shall I protect you?"

Now despite his low status, Ik-Uk realized that there was the rub. Say forever and the kami would resent it. And bad things happened around resentful spirits. To even say something like "For the rest of his life", the duration of said life would likely be very short. So instead he said, "For a year and a day."

Yes, that would be it. What is a year and a day to a creature that had spent an eternity trapped in a bottle? And after a year and a day he would know enough about the spirits and their limitations to protect himself from any type of resentful kami.

"For a year and a day," repeated the flaming creature, whipping its tadpole tail back and forth in apparent contentment. "That will be sufficient"

"And another thing," said the akki, "What you did to them," he motioned towards the smoking piles that had been other scavengers, "Don't do that to me. Ever."

"I would never think of that," replied the kami.

"Now," said Ik-Uk, "I need to get away from here."

"Where do you want to go?" asked the spirit.

"Away," repeated the akki, "From here." He thought again for a moment. He would need to find some powerful old relic to keep the kami in line. Yes, that would be it. He waved the bottle at the spirit and said, "You have been sealed up for some time?"

"It appears so, if the spirits now make war upon the mortals," said the kami.

"Then you know of old places of power," said the scavenger.

"I do. But such places may no longer exist," said the spirit.

"That is true," said Ik-Uk, "but their bones may yet remain. Take me there."

So for eight days the two moved westwards, deeper into the Sokenzan Mountains. They spoke little, save for occasional questions from the spirit.

"How do the akki live, in these later days?" said the flame-wrapped creature.

"As we always have," said the akki, "in the mountains."

"And they fear spirits?"

"Everyone fears spirits," said the akki.

"They even fear the patrons of the races?" asked the kami.

"In particular the patrons," said Ik-Uk.

The spirit was quiet for a moment, and then said, "The patron spirits were good for their people."

"Once, perhaps," said the akki, "but now they have gone mad, and are nothing but voracious appetites incarnate. The Patron of the Orochi was once beautiful, but now is nothing more than a great worm made of woven vines. The Patron of the Nezumi was once radiant, but now stalks the swamps, a set of ravenous jaws on thin, stalking limbs. And the less said about the Patron spirit of the Moonfolk the better."

"And your race's patron?" said the flickering creature. "The Patron of the Akki?"

Ik-Uk suppressed a shudder and tried not to think of it. Instead he said, "No better or worse than the rest, I'd guess. The Patrons, and all the great spirits are feared now, thought of as little more than great beasts. They are to be hated and feared."

The kami, which resembled a burning, unborn akki, did not have a response to that, and they continued in silence.

They had moved out of the lands that Ik-Uk knew after two days, and now were in wild lands where few akki tread. The spirit banked its flames, looking no more than a warm flicker of air, the better not to attract attention.

They were ambushed twice: once by sun bears, and once by ogres. Each time the kami proved the truth of its promise by waiting for Ik-Uk to give permission, then immolating their assailants with but a thought. From the ogres Ik-Uk found a knife that he wore as a short sword. From the sun bears he gained fresh meat.

At last they arrived at an ancient mountain, its peak riddled with cavern entrances. To Ik-Uk's practiced eye, this had been home to numerous goblin civilizations, and yet it was lacking the traditional mounds of garbage at the base – had the natives of this abandoned complex found a better place to dispose of their trash?

"This is the place?" said Ik-Uk.

"Yes," said the kami in a voice that sounded like a sigh.

"It looks abandoned long ago," said Ik-Uk, dreaming of the treasure that would be within.

"Yes," said the kami, is a voice that definitely was a sigh, "It looks that way."

However, Ik-Uk was wrong in his estimation, as he discovered only a few hundred feet into the main hall. Dark-cloaked figures moved from the shadows, slender, strong fingers wrapped around his arms, and booted feet slammed into the back of his knees. Before he knew it he was pitching backwards, and he was unable to order the kami to protect him. He had a quick vision of another akki, this one with a tall golden headpiece, then a quicker vision of a club coming towards his face, and then nothing but blackness for a long time.

When Ik-Uk awoke, he could not move. He was bound at the wrists and ankles by strong cords to an x-shaped frame. He opened his eyes and found he was staring into a great void at his feet.

It was a chasm, deep beneath the mountain. The primal fires of the mountain itself flickered deep beneath his feet and huge shadows cast upwards from the depths. He was on a spur of rock hanging perilously over the lip of the abyss below.

Above him there was a cascade of drums and looking up, he saw other akki lining the upper ledges overlooking the cavern. Viewed from below, they looked as dreadful as ogres, and Ik-Uk noticed more than a few of them wore ornate headdresses similar to that the akki with the club.

He wheezed, his throat dry from the heat below. "Spirit!"

"Here," said the burning tadpole with its bronze eyes and teeth, floating a few feet from him.

"What happened?"

"You were attacked and knocked unconscious," the kami regarded him with a wide, unblinking stare.

"You were supposed to protect me!" hissed the akki.

"True," said the kami, "But you reacted badly when I killed your brethren mortals before, so I waited for you to tell me to. And when you were incapacitated, I waited for you to recover."

"You call that protecting me?" snapped Ik-Uk.

"They meant to kill you outright," said the spirit calmly. "I manifested before them and they changed their minds. They brought you here. So yes, I protected you."

"Well, protect me now," snarled the imprisoned akki. "Free me and kill them all, now!"

The kami remained floating next to Ik-Uk. None of the leering akki overhead burst into flame. Not even the ones with the golden headpieces.

"Well?" prompted Ik-Uk.

"I cannot," said the spirit, sounding almost regretful. "We are in the presence of a greater spirit, a kami as far above me as I am above you."

"You promised to keep me safe!" cried Ik-Uk, and now terror was creeping into his voice.

"I did," said the spirit, "And I will keep my promise. Payment is required. Yet I will move most carefully to keep all of my pledges. You will have to trust me. I will serve you. I will keep you safe."

And with that the spirit banked its flames and vanished from sight.

Ik-Uk cursed, but when that failed to make the spirit appear again, began talking to the space where it was moments before. "You can come back. You just get me out of this and we will be even."

"I keep my promises," said the spirit, in a voice inside Ik-Uk's head.

The drums started up again from above, and this time were joined by an assemblage of rude horns, carved from the skulls of creatures extinct before these tunnels were first bored. A chant went up with it, a hellish mishmash of akki shouting and exulting. On the upper levels, the akki priests, resplendent in their golden, multi-pronged headgear and crimson and black vestments, capered along the edge of the precipice.

"What is . . ." Ik-Uk's throat burned now. "What is happening?"

"What do you remember of your patron, akki?" asked the familiar voice within his head.

"I don't know!" whined Ik-Uk, and tears began to run down his face.

"You spoke of the other patrons, but not your own," said the voice of the unborn flame, "What about your own patron?"

Ik-Uk gasped, "He was as great as mountain and as powerful as an avalanche and as warm as a volcano's blast." The akki gulped at the increasingly warm air. "Our patron was a master scavenger, the greatest warrior, the most powerful bully. But he fell and now hates the akki and is nothing more than hunger incarnate . . ." The akki's eyes grew wide as he realized where this was going. "No."

"As you said," said the spirit, speaking in his head for the drums were too loud now. "Kami are kept shackled by spells and supplicated through sacrifice."

"You promised to keep me safe!"

“And so I shall,” replied the kami.

Deep within the pit something large and malignant stirred, sending ripples of light and shadow upwards along the chasm walls. The air moved from warm to hot now, and there was a rumbling far below.

The rumbling grew in intensity, first rivaling, then eclipsing, the thunder of the drums. Now the shadows were moving up the pit as well, presaging the arrival of something huge from the depths.

Ik-Uk bellowed for the spirit to rescue him, to protect him, but his own voice was lost in the cacophony that filled the chasm as the Patron of the Akki surged up from the depths.

It was huge and terrible and beautiful, forged from the fires at the heart of the mountain itself. It was the color of molten bronze and the heart of its rasp-toothed maw glowed with soft flesh the color of blood. Its head was in the shape of a huge armor-headed turtle, its hooked beak gaping wide to reveal uneven rows of curved, lamprey-teeth, and its tail was lost within the fires at the roots of the mountain. Flaming shapes like living torches danced around its gaping, circular jaws, worshipful in its presence. The great beast's unblinking eyes were filled with hate, and its head was wreathed with flicking, floating bonfires.

It was the Patron of his people and it was beautiful and horrible and deadly.

Ik-Uk screamed, and a part of his mind saw that the flaming shapes orbiting the Patron's head had the tadpole-shape of unborn akki, and each resembled a flaming fetus.

The patron loomed up above the trapped akki like a serpent swaying above its prey, and for an instant Ik-Uk realized that the drums had stopped, and everything was silent, save for his own ragged shouts. Though even he could no longer say if he was shouting curses, or pleas, or prayers.



And then the beast, the great kami, the spirit of the Akki people, fell upon him, and he prayed in earnest for a quick and merciful death.

The Patron swallowed him whole, and Ik-Uk fell within the belly of the great spirit for an eternity, screaming until his voice was raw. But he did not hit bottom, but continued to fall. And when he has passed out and awoken and screamed and passed out and awoken a few more times, he gathered his remaining wits together to remember the kami -- the one that he had originally thought was a fire spirit, the kami in the form of a large-headed wisp of flame -- and called upon it.

And its voice was in his head and its form was next to him in the rippling blood-red darkness.

Ik-Uk cursed it with what was left of his mind, and cried at with what was left of his heart. “You betrayed me!” he bellowed, and at the same time pleaded, “Save me!”

“I have kept my word,” said the flickering spirit calmly.

“You have fed me to a beast!” screamed Ik-Uk, his sanity falling away from him at last like sand through a sieve.

“I have brought you to a safe place,” said the kami, this small kami, the smallest shard of a greater being. “Where is it safer than within my own bosom? Here no other akki may attack you, no ogre may ambush you, and no rival may steal your treasures. In bringing you here, I have been forgiven as well, reunited with my greater part. And you will be safe here for a year and a day.”

“And when the year and a day is over,” said the kami, “You shall not burn. I promised you that as well. I shall pull the flesh from your bones bit by bit, but you shall not burn.” And at this the kami, shard of the Patron, cast in the form of an unborn flame, smiled fully, and showed row upon row of sharp bronze triangular teeth.

And Ik-Uk screamed with the last of mind and the last of his heart and fell into the reddish darkness in the belly of his Patron, and screamed for almost a year and a day.

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