

MEET THE BETRAYERS

Betrayers



Personal Battles

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Iwamori's fist slammed against the oak, and the tree, which had stood for hundreds of years, fell with a deafening crash. The renegade orochi in its highest branches leaped to a neighboring tree seconds before the ground shook with the fall's impact.

"You're starting to irritate me, monk," Shisato hissed, venom dripping from her fangs and pooling a sickly green on the forest floor.

"You've been hunting me and my kind for too long," came the flat, rumbling reply. "I think it is I who should be irritated."

Shisato's eyes glittered in the shadows of the rustling leaves. "You know that I could leap down there right now and fill you with poison before you could even blink."

"You could try." The monk was tall and massive, with a chest like boulders and arms that were as thick as the oak that lay at his feet. He cracked his knuckles, a snapping sound that rang through the quiet of Jukai. "I think you might find that my skin is thicker than you may think. Or, I could simply pluck you out of the air and wring your neck. Do you think your father would be terribly displeased with me if I did that? It would save him the trouble of doing it himself."



The glitter in the orochi's eyes became twin pinpricks of fire. "I know what you're trying to do, monk. Goad me into making a mistake. Well, it won't work. I'll kill you on my terms, at a time of my choosing. I suggest you make peace before then."

Iwamori's powerful legs sent him flying towards the tree, towards the voice. But Shisato had vanished before the last syllable of her words evaporated on the wind. Iwamori grunted.

"You'll not escape me for long, renegade. I swear I'll have your skin decorating the walls of my rooms."

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Iwamori bowed low, reminding Ansho of the little boy, so filled with awe and respect, who had joined the order all those years ago. "I'm sorry, Master Ansho."

"You have no reason to apologize. You never do. Shisato is a problem, but she is hardly the most pressing at the moment." The old monk's face was wrinkled, but his body still held much of the power it had during his youth, still burlier and more muscular than many men half his age. As one of Dosan's most senior students, and a fighter whose deeds were still told in poems, he kept a predator's eye on his duties administering the defense of the monastery and Jukai. "In fact, I question the wisdom of seeking her in the first place."

The younger monk's body rose, horror etched onto his face. "You think I should not have left the monastery without a defender? You're absolutely right, Master, and I apologize for..."

Ansho waved a withered hand. "Calm yourself, young man. If that's what I meant, I would have said so. But it's not."

Iwamori climbed to his feet, towering over his mentor like Boseiju. "Nevertheless, my failure in stopping Shisato means that I have been lax in my training. After my meditations, I will train harder, I swear."

"If there is one thing I know I can always depend on, Iwamori, it is your training." He said this with a tight little smile that Iwamori wasn't sure how to interpret. "I know you will do well." Ansho paused, his eyes drifting over his student. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course!"

"I would like you ask yourself what your purpose is, in your life and in your training."

Iwamori blinked. "To reach enlightenment, and defend Jukai against all who wish to destroy it, of course. Isn't that a question you ask of your newest acolytes, to test their inner strength?"

"Perhaps, but I think you would benefit from it too." A silence passed. "Go on, now, go on with your training. I'm sure we'll speak later. Iwamori bowed and left his master's chambers. Ansho shook his head. "So much trouble, that young man..."

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When Iwamori meditated, it seemed that the entire world stopped just to give him peace. Birds ceased their singing, leaves refused to rustle, and the gentle breezes whistling through the trees held their breath. He found it easy to slip into the inner depths, where the outside world ceased to be; he wasn't really sure how. He sensed that Master Ansho was somewhat disturbed by this, but he had no idea why.

As always, when his meditations were done and his eyes opened, he found himself filled with an odd sense of disappointment. Perhaps it was because he had failed to find an answer to Master Ansho's question, other than the one he'd already offered? Frankly, he wasn't sure if there really was another answer.

Iwamori knew that he wasn't the most learned of Dosan's pupils; there were many who'd reached greater paths of enlightenment than him. He wasn't the strongest; there were some who were even stronger than he, though not nearly as many as there were wiser. But for some reason, everyone knew his name, even in an order like Master Dosan's, whose ranks were swelling with desperate refugees the longer the Kami War raged.



A low tolling echoed through the forest, sending the monastery into a sudden flurry of activity. Women dropped their bundles and ceased their training. Men scooped up children and grabbed weapons. Iwamori, his blood pounding through his veins, failed to fight back a small smile as he broke into a run, rushing to the high wooden gates that kept the rest of Jukai at bay.

As soon as the gates came into view, he was immediately beset upon by monks, some armed with spears, others carrying nothing but fists. They shouted and gestured and pleaded for orders. There was no official hierarchy among the monks; they accorded each other respect based on what they knew of each

other's path and wisdom. But whenever the warning bell sounded, whenever the monastery was in danger of attack, there was only one man to turn to: Iwamori.

"Calm down!" he roared. The babbling halted at once, the silence only broken by the continual rumbling of the warning bell. "What is the danger?"

"A kami has been sighted over Jukai," one of the monks shouted louder than necessary.

"Just one?" Iwamori's voice grew sharp and irritated. "I hope that there's more to it than it sounds right now, or I'll be very disappointed in whoever had the warning bell rung."

The monk swallowed. By now, Ansho had toddled up to the crowd, his ears pricked. "It's not a matter of number, Brother Iwamori... It's a matter of... stature."

"It's the Kami of Honored Fallen!" one of the others burst out. "Korin could see him even while he was still in the western reaches! He's coming this way!"

Iwamori's face was now grim. Even in Jukai, word had spread about Eiyō - a great kami, mightier than most, who'd laid waste to a legion of the daimyo's best officers. "I see."

"We're ready to defend the monastery in any way you see fit." The rest of the monks nodded, their faces hardening and their hands wrapping around their weapons.

"You will trust me to do the right thing?"

"Of course!"

"Good." He looked over the group, a hodgepodge of builds, heights, ages, and hearts. "Then here is my command: stay here and defend this place with your lives. I will go out and attempt to turn Eiyō aside."

A murmur wove through the group; Ansho frowned. "Alone?" one of the monks asked tentatively.

"Yes, alone. We will need every defender we can if the Kami of Honored Fallen makes it this far, and having others with me would slow me down at a time when speed is of the essence." He fixed the others with a harsh glare. "Unless you doubt my capabilities."

With mutters and shakes of the head, the monks reluctantly disbanded and took up defensive positions. Only Ansho stood his ground, that frown still on his face. Iwamori turned to his master. "Don't worry. I'll make sure you are all safe."

"And yourself? Who will keep you safe?" Ansho asked quietly.

"Does it matter, if the rest live?" He turned away. "Open the gates!" Ansho watched as his student strode alone through the monastery gates, watched until the massive doors slammed shut behind him.

"Oh, Iwamori... I see you haven't answered my question yet." He made no move to seek shelter or move from his spot. He stood staring at the gates, as if already searching for the young monk to return.

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The forest was eerily silent, except for Iwamori's own footfalls crushing leaves and branches underneath his feet. This already was a sign; there were no birds or animals at a time when Jukai should have been teeming with them. Even the minor kami that harassed hunters and travelers were strangely absent. They knew what was happening, even if it took a while for humans to realize.

With three leaps, Iwamori jumped into the heights of an ancient tree, and his head peeked over the vast green canopy of Jukai. To the west, slouching forward as if it were walking on the treetops, was a metallic figure whose armor shone a dazzling glow in the midday sun. It might have been mistaken for a passing samurai, if most samurai were thirty feet tall. Massive claws, made up of hundreds upon hundreds of katana, raked the upper reaches of the trees, cutting a swath of broken branches and ripped-apart leaves. From its head (or where a head would be, were it human), a kabuto's mask glared hatefully. Iwamori did not know why Eiyō was passing through Jukai, nor did he care.

"Lord Kami!" he roared in a voice that shook the sky. The massive kami slowed to an aching crawl, and turned, the kabuto mask staring down at him like the face of a judging god. "For the good of Jukai, I challenge you in single combat! Face me, if you are not afraid of a mere human!"

The kami's pace stopped utterly. It stood, frozen, staring down at the small monk before it. A rattle passed through its form, the sound of a hundred thousand pieces of plated mail clattering against each other. But the sound was not careless; it rose and lowered, like the rhythm of a human voice. If that was indeed what it was, the human couldn't understand a word of it.

After what seemed to be hours, the Kami of Honored Fallen raised one of its massive hands, and it swept towards Iwamori. He leaped out of the way, his body still battered by the winds that its passing kicked up. Without pausing, he leapt again and again, luring the kami away from the monastery. Fortunately, the kami seemed content to try and eliminate this blasphemous upstart, the empty helmets that surrounded it glowing an angry, intense white.

A mighty gauntlet batted Iwamori out of the tree before he could react. His hands flailed for a hold, barely managing to grab a branch before he could fall uncontrollably to the forest floor below. He looked up, and was immediately blinded by a massive flash of pure white light. The kami's magic sent daggers of fire throughout his body, and his grip slackened. He fell into a cradle of branches, which groaned underneath him from the impact. Iwamori blinked the flashes from his vision in time to see fingernails of bloodstained spears lash out towards him.

He swung himself out of their path, but one of the blades slashed at his left shoulder. The monk winced as he tugged himself back to his feet on a neighboring branch, his blood oozing hot over his wound. Eiyō's mask brightened with a dazzling flash that washed Jukai in glare. Iwamori leaped instinctively. The blast barely missed his legs, but shattered the upper reaches of the tree; he realized as he fell that he would find no more foothold here. He hit the canopy, feeling the scratches of leaves and bark as branches broke underneath his massive weight. He reached out, and grabbed one of the thicker branches as he passed. The swing rocketed him forward, easing his momentum enough for him to bounce off two more branches before landing neatly on the ground.

"Enough of this," he muttered under his breath. Ignoring the pain still stinging his shoulder, Iwamori charged towards another mighty tree, facing Eiyō once more eye to eye.

Again, spear claws hurtled towards Iwamori, but this time, his dodging leap landed him right atop one of the kami's plated arms. The monk's joints and muscles ached as he jumped and climbed his way up the gigantic arm. He glanced to his left; the other arm's deadly swipe hadn't yet finished. He had a little time. But only a little.

Finally alighting atop the kami's shoulder, Iwamori reached down and grabbed one of the massive metal plates that formed Eiyō's corporeal shell of armor. Sweat streamed down his face and veins popped out of his arms as his grip strained at the metal. Finally, with a bestial roar, the plate wrenched itself loose. "Not the most fashionable of weapons, but it must do."

By now, the kami's baleful stare had turned towards him, the empty eyes of the kabuto mask screeching with indignity. "I assume you wish me to replace this slab of armor," Iwamori muttered. "Very well, then. You shall have it." Screaming a *kiai* that had always echoed through his soul, ever since his earliest years, Iwamori threw the brass plate. The chunk of metal slammed into the kabuto mask, which shattered under the speeding projectile.

The kami shrieked, a high-pitched, aching sound that rasped on the monk's brain. Rivulets of some glittering liquid flowed from Eiyō's shattered visage like tears. Iwamori quickly snatched up another metal plate, throwing it again towards the kami's head. This time, the piece of armor slammed through Eiyō's ruined face and hurtled out the other side, shattering one of its surrounding helmets. Another scream erupted, and Iwamori could see the broken helm dissolve into tiny yellow sparks that rained down on the forest below. His fingers gripped another plate.

But before he could rip this one out too, the kami's form began to shimmer and waver. Iwamori found the terrain beneath his feet grow misty and soft. Within seconds, the kami was gone utterly.

Iwamori fell once more, but on his own terms now. He grunted as he landed, wiping the sweat off his brow. When he returned to the monastery, cheers and accolades rained down on him the instant he appeared into view. Master Ansho was still standing in the same spot as when he left, looking over Iwamori with appraising eye.

"A hundred of Lord Konda's best men couldn't beat it. And you did!"

"You saved us!"

Iwamori shook his head, his face grim. "No, I failed. I could have rid this world of a major kami, kept it from harming other innocent mortals."

Ansho finally spoke. "But you hurt it, enough for it to retreat to the *kakuriyo*, something no one man has ever succeeded in doing. And you speak of failure?"

"I do not speak of it. My actions shout it loudly enough." Heedless of the stares and continuing cheers, Iwamori departed. Ansho later found him in the training yard, punching wooden posts and kicking bags stuffed with leaves until his entire body was strained and reddened with exertion.

"We are having a celebratory feast in honor of your accomplishment. Aren't you joining us?"

"No," came the solitary grunt. And that was it. Back to the punching, kicking, lifting, chopping. Ansho quietly withdrew and returned to the roaring fires and cheery laughter of the dining quarters.

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Morning broke over the Jukai Forest clear and warm. Though none of the pampered and perfumed nobles at Eiganjo Castle had yet lifted an eyelid, the monks followed the course of nature, and were already deep into their day. There was training to do, koans to write, food to grow, and repairs to be made. They scurried like ants, carrying their parcels and lumber and problems around in a flurry of activity.

In the center of it all, as it often was, were two unmoving men. Ansho sat in his chambers, and Iwamori bowed before him. The elder's face was etched with concern. "I will not attempt to stop you. But I strongly urge you to reconsider."

"No." The massive monk rose. "My failures of the past few days will not stop haunting me until I act. I will not return until Shisato is either a prisoner of her own people, or dead at my hand."

"You would do this, even if it means leaving us without our strongest defender?"

"I do not plan to be away that long. But my actions are for the good of all, and I must follow through if my honor is to remain intact."

"Ah, honor," Ansho sighed. "Such a noble concept. Yet the daimyo's men also die needlessly because of it."

"Master?"

"You've always been one of my most frustrating students." Ansho said this with a smile that held not the least bit of malice. "And so much potential, too..."

Iwamori blinked. "Master?" he repeated tentatively.

"Have you found an answer to the question I asked you yet?" came the casual question, tossed out as if they had just started conversing.

"Question?" Iwamori's face scrunched in puzzlement for a moment. "Oh, that! Not beyond the one I already gave. Why do you ask?"

"If you have to ask, you wouldn't understand my reason." Ansho paused. "Think of it on your travels, Iwamori. And consider why you came here in the first place." Then he closed his eyes.

"Why I...? What do you...?" But the elder's shallow breathing and ramrod stillness told Iwamori that Ansho was not truly present anymore, at least in the spiritual sense. He quietly got up, slung his meager cloth pack over his shoulder, and left the monastery. He said goodbye to no one; there was no one he wanted to say goodbye to. A few monks saw him, and wanted to question him, bid him good journey, but they knew better than to try. Thus the departure of one of the strongest fighters in Jukai, perhaps in all of Kamigawa, came and went without a word.

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Iwamori's fingers caressed the ground, running riverbeds around the footprint stamped in the bare dirt. Tracking was never one of his greatest suits; Azusa could always surpass his meager skills. But he knew the track of an orochi when he saw it, and it was relatively fresh. The pace was of someone in a hurry, and the direction took the path far away from any region the orochi deemed safe. That meant Shisato.

He followed the trail as best he could. Though the tracks soon vanished, he thought he could see signs here and there of someone passing: a broken branch or stamped grass. The sound of crunching leaves

brought him to attention. Someone was stumbling about in the underbrush, and not taking very much care to hide the fact. Shisato wouldn't be that carefree. Or perhaps it was a trick, to get him to rush into a trap. This was certainly no region for the casual traveler... at least none without a hidden agenda. Iwamori crouched behind a tree. The crunching sound grew nearer, until the footfalls were almost upon him. Climbing to his feet, Iwamori took a deep breath, waited for one more footstep, then swung out from behind the tree, bringing his fist forward in a powerful sweep.

His clenched fist met empty air. The monk blinked, looking about. He could see no one. But how? He knew human footsteps when he heard them, and he was so sure that they were right there...

"Hmm. I guess that *kanji* was worthwhile after all." The smooth voice sprang up from behind him. Iwamori spun around to find a tall, thin man in black robes. He was leaning casually against a tree, his arms crossed, and his mouth crooked in a small smile. "You never know when you'll face the unexpected. Which is what being unexpected means, of course."



Iwamori's fists squeezed into boulders. "Who are you?"

"Does it matter? Just a normal traveler taking a little shortcut through Jukai." A sword and scabbard hung at his belt swayed gently in the wind as the man looked Iwamori up and down. "You're one of Dosan's monks, aren't you? Kind of far from home, isn't it? I didn't know the old man taught his students to attack strangers without reason."

Iwamori's senses were reeling. Something was not right about this man. His attitude, his stature, his aura... Whatever it was, it screamed of wrongness, of something that it was his responsibility to destroy. "You are a samurai," he returned. "But you aren't dressed like one of the daimyo's men."

"That's because I'm not. And you are...?"

"Someone who knows that you are up to no good. You are not welcome in Jukai."

The samurai chuckled. "And you're the sole titan, the lone defender of the forest? Your patrol days must be rough indeed."

"Shut up and fight me!" Iwamori rushed forward, his arm swinging in a great chop that could crack boulders. His opponent simply responded by leaping over his head and landing behind him with feline grace. He drew his sword, sending flashes of reflected sun across his eyes.

"I can't waste time sparring with some strange monk I've just met. I'll have you know that I'm a close personal friend of Daimyo Konda's daugh..."

"Be quiet!" Iwamori brought forth another blow, only to see the samurai duck it. Another punch, another, a vicious sweeping kick. All were avoided with ease.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" The samurai calmly regarded Iwamori with eyes that bored into his skin, into his mind, heart, and soul. "Short-tempered, eh? I've seen your type before. Big, strong, stupidly brave, filled with honor and duty. You know what always happens to them?"

"What?"

"They die. Which is usually what they want." The samurai's face cocked into a questioning half-grin. "Why do you want to die, monk?"

A deathly silence whistled across the forest for a moment, as the two men locked eyes. Iwamori shattered that silence with a bestial roar, like a wounded animal. He charged the samurai with arms extended, fingers curled as if already preparing to grasp and crush the other man's throat.

"Hit a nerve, did I?" The samurai dodged Iwamori's rush with a casual roll. The monk only bellowed in reply, picking up a fallen tree trunk and hurling it towards his foe. Two swipes of the samurai's sword sent the trunk clattering to the ground in pieces. "I guess so. You seem to have lost the capacity for rational thought."

"I'll kill..." The words were more growls than speech. Iwamori jumped forward, sending meaty fist after meaty fist towards the samurai's face, each swing whistling through the air with the force of a smith's hammer. The monk struck out with a fierce chop that would immediately kill normal men, and cripple even minor kami. None of the blows landed. By the time the red-faced Iwamori swung about, his teeth clenched, the samurai was behind him, his bones whole and his flesh unbroken. With another animal cry, Iwamori charged, not feeling the warning swipe of the samurai's sword that scratched his chest. His mind barely registered the fact that his opponent was drawing back his *jitte*, as if preparing a stabbing blow that Iwamori couldn't possibly stop or dodge. But instead, the samurai seemed to change his mind at the last moment, simply avoiding Iwamori's mindless assault.

"Still at it? You know, I kind of like you. You're simple and direct." The half-grin curled up again. The samurai dropped to one knee and traced a *kanji* symbol in the dirt. Stone spines erupted from the ground, encircling Iwamori in an earthen cage.

Iwamori's fists pounded at his stone prison. The spines groaned and cracked, but only barely, not nearly enough to free him before the samurai could run him through. "What are you waiting for?" he roared.

“Finish what you started!”

“I bet you’d like that, wouldn’t you? And if I remember correctly, it’s you who started this.” He regarded the monk with an air of mild interest, as if examining an exotic animal at a zoo. “A little advice. You can take it or leave it - it doesn’t matter to me. But you might want to think about just why it is you’re so determined to defend Jukai alone.” With that, the samurai vanished into the trees. Stillness once again blanketed the clearing, leaving a stone cage and a monk, his shoulders sagged, his knees weak, and his head dizzied in thought.

An hour later, as Iwamori finally shattered one of the stone spires, he was still thinking, thinking of things that hadn’t entered his mind in years.

He woke up to shouting, screams, and the pattering of running feet. He blinked the sleep from his eyes just as his father burst into the room. “Iwamori! You must run!”

He was just eight years old, but even he knew that the terror in his father’s normally stern eyes could only mean one thing. “I want to help!”

The monk stepped over the broken stone. There was no sign of the samurai or his path. Even if he could pick it up, he had too much of a head start.

Not that the man was worth following. He must be demented. What ridiculous notions!

“Your brothers are already at the town gates,” came the oddly calm reply. “You are needed on the road. Help your mother and sister escape to Jukai.”

“No! I want to stay here and fight with you!”

Iwamori didn’t think about Shisato; the orochi had totally escaped his mind. Nor did he think of the rumbling of his stomach or the sweat pooling under his eye. He started walking.

After that, he only remembered bits and pieces: his father’s arm wrapped tightly around his waist, his screaming as he was carried into the cold night air. He remembered being almost thrown into his mother’s arms, and a glint of light running down his father’s face, just before he turned and rushed back to the town gates, spear tightly in hand. The glare of the burning homes around them danced on his quickly vanishing shape. Then it was swallowed up in the flames.

Iwamori looked about. He was already at the gates of the monastery. Slowly, one beefy hand reached out and pushed them open. The monks were still on their daily business, much as they had been when he left. None bothered to look up as he passed among them, entering Ansho’s chambers.

The master was expecting him, of course.

He remembered his lungs burning and aching, gulping barely enough air to keep his small legs pumping. Then came the screams behind him. “Don’t look back, Iwamori!” his mother shrieked. “Run!” Snaps, tears, howls, hot breath on the back of his neck, the heavy footfalls that rang in his ears and shook his body. He could still feel the cold moss under his feet as he sprang into the confines of Jukai, hear the yells of the monks who engaged his pursuer, feel the splinters of wood that stuck in his hands as he collapsed against the walls of the monastery. Alone.

“Welcome home, Iwamori.”

He bowed low. “Thank you.”

“I take it you have considered my question?”

“Yes.”

Ansho raised an eyebrow. “And what is your answer?”

He paused, the words still forming in his head. “I’ve done much for the monks here in the name of my family. I want... wanted... more than anything to join my parents and siblings, having honored their name dying for a cause I could not protect as a child.”

“And now?”

“And now... I don’t know what my purpose is anymore.”

The elder nodded. Iwamori got up and turned to leave. “Wait.” The massive monk turned. “Do not think that I do not appreciate all you’ve done for us all these years. But the important battles are fought not just on vast fields. Nor are they fought merely to save mortal lives. Meditate on that today.”

Iwamori nodded. He left for the meditation fields, in order to think about all that had happened today.

Training could wait.

