

MEET THE BETRAYERS



Redemption Smiles

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Toshusai ducked underneath the flail as it swung past, then callously thrust his katana into the nezumi's furry chest. He spun, bringing up his smaller wakizashi blade and skillfully blocking the long curved knife wielded by another of the swarming vermin. He twisted, wrenching his katana free from the body of the first before it had even fallen, whirled in a complete circle and sliced easily through the nezumi's rusted do-maru, cutting deeply into his flesh. The rat man hissed, its yellow eyes rolled into its head and it fell over sideways, landing in the muck with a muffled gurgle.

Toshusai completed his turn and paused to survey the damage. He stood alone in the center of a muddy clearing among the bodies of seven nezumi. The dead lay strewn like broken twigs around several large stone blocks that had fallen from the crumbling wall to his right. The structure, once a border outpost for Numai, the long forgotten human city in the heart of Takenuma Swamp, had mostly collapsed. To either side of the ruins, the dark stalks of the bamboo forest cast claw-like shadows over Toshusai and the clearing, despite the light from the full moon wheeling overhead.



These nezumi would never complete their dishonorable task. By slaying them, Toshusai had saved lives that night, but this noble deed did little to stir his dead heart. He was *ochimusha*, dishonored by a single choice on a night so long ago, banished by his daimyo to wander the swamp. Once, anger would have pounded through him at the mere thought of the man, but nothing could penetrate the numbness that had settled into his soul.

He looked at the nearest corpse and something strange caught his eye. A feathered arrow stuck out of the creature's neck. At the site of it, the distant memory of an emotion awoke within him. He did not own a hankyu. Someone had aided him in his fight; someone with the bow of a samurai. He backed slowly against the wall, his weapons held at ready, and stared dispassionately into the dense underbrush beneath the bamboo canopy. There was no sign of the warrior who was surely watching him.

He sniffed the air, but the aroma of damp earth mixed with the rotten stink of swamp gas made it impossible to smell anything else. He closed his eyes and waited.

Toshusai's right boot slipped against a root and he nearly went down. He deftly caught himself on the trunk of a sickly thin bamboo tree. He looked down the dark, narrow trail at the armored forms of his three samurai brothers, Yoshinobu, Sakoda, and Muro, and the black clad form of his sensei, Kentaro. He was relieved that none of them had noticed his near fall. The last thing he wanted was to appear clumsy in front of them. He paused for a moment to marvel at all that had happened in the week since he had spied Kentaro's arrow. At the time, he had been a pale shadow of himself, staggering through the swamp as if in a dream.

Kentaro had changed all that.

As Toshusai watched, his master vanished into the swamp mist. The others soon followed. Finding himself suddenly alone jarred him from his reverie. He risked a nervous glance over his shoulder and then hurried after them.

The mist closed around him heavy and foreboding. It caressed his flesh with icy fingers, but it could not crush his newfound sense of purpose. The funeral shroud of numbness that had enveloped him for so long had been lifted. As he ran, he allowed himself to revisit the memories of his redemption....

Toshusai heard the stone shifting on the wall above him when it was almost too late. Given the condition of the structure, he had not considered that someone might be fleet of foot enough to perch there. He would pay for that mistake, perhaps with his pathetic life.

A black shadow spun overhead as someone somersaulted through the air in a high arc. Toshusai reflexively dropped into a fighting crouch.

The man landed a good dozen feet away in a similar stance. A hankyu was slung over his left shoulder marking him as the owner of the arrow. The silver blades of his katana and wakizashi gleamed even in the near darkness. His black and crimson do-maru appeared unmarked by either combat or by the ravages of the swamp. This was no mere swamp bushi.

The stranger stood there watching, but made no move to advance.

Toshusai interpreted his intense brown-eyed gaze as a challenge, but held steady.

“What do you want?” His voice fell flat against the cool swamp air. There was only one thing anyone here would want from him: his life. Toshusai had killed everyone who had tried taking it from him, fighting with a vengeance at first, and later with cold detachment.

“Do you recognize me?” The man straightened and grinned like a cat.



“Kentaro,” Toshusai breathed the name. “The slayer of the dishonored.” Kentaro’s skill as a warrior was legendary. He roamed the land slaying ochimusha and any others he felt unworthy of life. Neither man nor beast had ever defeated him in combat. It was whispered that he had once killed a powerful kami of fire single-handedly.

“Yes.” Kentaro crossed his blades and bowed as one facing an opponent.

A wisp of relief blossomed within Toshusai. He examined the feeling and then let it fade. If Kentaro had come to offer redemption, he was two years too late. He returned the bow. Death fighting against an honorable opponent, hard fought, would restore his

honor and his family name. It was finally over. But what once would have offered him sweet relief now tasted like ashes in his mouth.

“If you can find the will, step forward and fight.” With a trace of a smile, Kentaro swiped each blade through the air.

Toshusai had nothing to lose. He advanced.

Kentaro made no move to attack, instead simply watching him.

Toshusai circled reluctantly to the left, closing the distance, and was mildly surprised when the samurai did not turn to keep him in view as he passed behind him. It was true that a samurai engaged in single combat would never attack from behind, but an ochimusha might. Toshusai completed his circle and paused to make eye contact with the man.

Kentaro nodded as if he had passed some test and then leapt forward, blades spinning. He moved so fast that even standing at ready, it was all Toshusai could do to parry. Steel clanged against steel as their blades slid against one another. In the space of a breath Kentaro somehow knocked Toshusai’s weapons aside and brought the tip of his katana to his throat.

Toshusai froze and the world went deathly silent. He looked into Kentaro’s dark eyes and then lowered himself slowly to his knees. A feeling of calm acceptance settled over him. It was finally over.

“I am prepared to die.” Here at the end, his honor and his name would be restored. A pang of sadness swirled in the depths of his numb soul.

“But I am not prepared to kill you.” Kentaro withdrew his blade and. “You are ochimusha.”

Toshusai’s sadness turned to dull anger. “Why would you deny me an honorable death?”

“There is no honor in a senseless death. I am not your enemy.” He turned and walked towards the gaping hole in the ancient wall.

* * *

Toshusai’s face reddened as he thought about the ease with which Kentaro had disarmed him. When it became apparent that Kentaro did not intend to kill him, the seeds of an anger that eventually brought Toshusai back to himself had been planted. At the time, he had not understood Kentaro’s motives or just how clever the smiling cat really was.

“Have some.” Sitting next to him on the mossy log, the stern-faced Yoshinobu handed him a piece of bread.

Toshusai looked at him.

Yoshinobu had been recruited by Kentaro just prior to him. He, like Sakoda and Muro, had been redeemed by the smiling cat just as Toshusai had. It had created a feeling of brotherhood among them.

Toshusai nodded his thanks and glanced at each of them in turn. Five men did not seem like enough to take on an oni, despite the rumors surrounding their master's abilities. Everyone in Kamigawa had heard the stories of such beasts crushing entire armies of men, yet Kentaro sat at the head of the line, his legs crossed and his eyes closed in meditation. He did not appear concerned. Toshusai envied his internal balance.

A breeze stirred around him. Toshusai coughed as it scratched the inside of his lungs. As they had traveled, the air had grown fouler, as if it were influenced by the filth of the oni's dark soul.

Yesssss.

Toshusai blinked at the serpentine voice. The others did not seem to notice.

They cannot hear me. They are too strong. But you...

Toshusai's hand dropped to his katana and he scanned the forest around him.

No, I am not there, but you will see me soon enough. The others cannot save you, Toshusai.

He gasped, his fears taking his breath from him.

Yoshinobu glanced at him, eyes narrowing.

"I'm fine." Toshusai waved dismissively. He could not tell the others. If they sensed weakness in him, they would not trust him in battle. He would bear his secret in silence. He forced himself to take in a long slow breath, steeling himself against the heavy foreboding that threatened to pull him down.

Not for long...

You do not frighten me, oni. Toshusai lied.

The oni did not answer.

Toshusai forced the creature from his thoughts and sought solace in the events of the past...

* * *

Kentaro waited for him atop a dirt mound in the middle of a small clearing. Three other samurai, each in battle-scarred do-maru and dented kabuto, stood off to the left at the forest's edge. They stood with their hands folded in front of them and stared straight ahead.

Toshusai paused, resisting the urge to draw his weapons. He did not know what Kentaro's goal was, but to shame him in battle and then mockingly deny him a chance at redemption was not the act of an honorable man. Despite his anxiety, Toshusai acknowledged a small but growing spark of curiosity.

"Come." Kentaro beckoned him with one hand.

Toshusai strode into the clearing, watching the other samurai out of his peripheral vision, and stopped several paces from the man.

"These men around you are samurai," Kentaro motioned with a wave of one arm. "But it was not always so. They were once as you, ochimusha. I offer you the same chance I offered them; the chance to reclaim your honor."

Toshusai glanced at the others, but they remained stationary and unblinking. As he studied them closer, he noticed that their battle worn armor was covered in mud and filth from the swamp. They had clearly been there a long time; perhaps as long as he. Yet now they stood together and carried themselves like samurai.

Toshusai returned his attention to Kentaro.

"How?" He was certain that the man spoke the truth, but that there was more to it than that.

"Remove your armor and weapons and stand in the center of this mound." Kentaro stepped back revealing a small square stone. He pointed to it.

"Why?" Toshusai had worn his do-maru unceasingly for months.

Kentaro said nothing.

A small part of Toshusai's soul screamed at him to obey, to do anything to end his pointless wandering and soulless existence. The rest of him was indifferent. He shrugged, and removed his daisho and his do-maru and let them fall to the ground. He walked onto the stone.

A pulse of energy shot through him and he found his feet rooted to the rock. His arms froze against his torso and he realized he was completely paralyzed and vulnerable.

Kentaro drew his wakizashi.

"If you just planned on killing me, why didn't you do it before?" Toshusai demanded. How dare he lead him around by a thin leash of hope only to slay him there.

"I did not bring you here to kill you."

"Then why?" Toshusai stopped struggling.

"I brought you here to help you." Kentaro paused. "You must answer one simple question."

"What question?"

"Why have you no honor?"

Toshusai bristled, but was in no position to do anything about it. The question brought a stream of memories to the forefront of his mind. A ball of anger swelled within him.

"Because I chose my family before my daimyo."

Kentaro's eyes darkened. "Wrong." He slashed Toshusai across the chest. His blade bit through clothing and flesh.

Blood flowed from the wound soaking into Toshusai's forest green tunic. He winced.

"What in the sun's name are you doing!" His anger roiled beneath the protective wall of his numbness.

"Why have you no honor?" Kentaro ignored his question.

"I disobeyed the decree of my daimyo!" A maelstrom of anger opened a crack in the wall that had protected him from feeling anything for so long.

"Wrong." Kentaro slashed again, crisscrossing the first wound.

Toshusai gritted his teeth as pain and his desire to attack the samurai pushed through the fissure transforming numbness to raw emotion.

"Why have you no honor?"

"I violated the way of the samurai!" The fissure widened and rage tore through him.

"Wrong." Kentaro jabbed the blade into his side.

Toshusai cried out and the wall shattered completely. The numbness fell away as his anger at Kentaro's actions burned through him, singeing his veins. His opened his eyes wide as the years of hatred and self-loathing flooded into every part of him. His soul screamed for vengeance.

The first drops of his blood hit the ground causing the earth to tremble. He shook with it and would surely have fallen if not for the magic holding him in place. The mound collapsed inward on itself, pulling Toshusai downwards and surging up around his legs. His liquid anger turned to panic as he struggled to move lest he be swallowed whole.

His descent slowed as the damp soil reached his knees.

Kentaro nodded grimly.

"What have you done?!" Toshusai's chest tightened making it difficult to draw breath. "You will pay for this act of betrayal!"

"Your blood has awakened the swamp's hunger." Kentaro's eyes challenged him.

"You brought me here as a sacrifice!" Toshusai imagined throttling the smiling cat with his bare hands.

"Why have you no honor?"

"You ask me why I have no honor, yet you give me up to the black heart of this swamp!" He roared.

Kentaro's smile slipped into a frown. "I merely ask the question. It is you who give yourself up to the swamp."

Sweat dripped from Toshusai's forehead into his eyes as he fought against the invisible bonds that held him. It was no use. He could not break the spell. His salvation, if any existed, lay in the correct answer to the treacherous man's question. And time was running out. The dirt now reached nearly halfway up his thigh. He shook with effort as he focused through the red flames in his mind and pondered his dishonor.

"Why have you no honor?"

"Because my daimyo unjustly took it from me, just as you seek to rob me of my redemption now!" His soul demanded he find a way to make Kentaro pay for this crime.

Kentaro's face clouded over. "Wrong." He slashed at him again, this time opening up a gaping wound in his left side.

Blood flowed from this deeper wound, dripping to the damp earth around him. The mound shook again. Toshusai could feel its hunger pulling against his feet as if a great earthen tongue had latched onto his ankles. He sank up to his shoulders. The pressure of the dirt around him made breathing nearly impossible.

"Your time grows short." Kentaro knelt down.

"I told you the truth!" Toshusai's voice was a pathetic croak now.

"But you have not told yourself the truth."

Desperation filled Toshusai. He had to figure out the answer now! He closed his eyes and pushed the chaos from his mind.

The earth flowed over his shoulders. Each breath was a nearly impossible task now.

"Why have you no honor?" Sorrow was etched in Kentaro's features.

His daimyo had stripped him of his honor, reducing him to ochimusha for saving his family. They had been innocent of any wrongdoing and yet his daimyo had demanded their lives. It was he who had no honor.

The soil touched the bottom of his chin.

"Why have you no honor?!"

Toshusai clenched his teeth in utter frustration. He had never committed a dishonorable act in his life. It was not right that the petty whims of a pathetic man could so destroy him. He opened his eyes and met Kentaro's gaze one last time.

"I have always had my honor!" The truth shined through him, piercing all of the dark recesses where his anguish had hidden for so long and purging them from his soul. Tears flowed freely as he struggled to dig himself out so that he might live again.

Kentaro smiled and straightened.

The soil tickled Toshusai's face. He inhaled and held his breath as the ground covered his nose. Whatever happened now, the prison of his creation had been destroyed. His honor had not restored—it had been remembered. Somehow, the smiling cat had known this truth all along.

Kentaro took his katana in both hands and thrust downward into the earth. The mound rumbled and the sounds of stone scraping against stone tore through the silence. Kentaro pushed the blade downward until only the hilt remained visible.

Toshusai's vision dimmed as blackness closed in on him.

"Release him!" Kentaro twisted his blade.

The ground shuddered and then hurled Toshusai upwards with great force. He soared over the mound and hit the ground with a jarring thud. He blinked and realized that Kentaro stood over him, his catlike smile betraying a surprising pride.

"You are redeemed... samurai." He held a hand out.

Toshusai sucked in several lungs full of air and only as the darkness receded did he realize that his wounds had healed completely. He took Kentaro's hand and let the man haul him to his feet. Kentaro's smile broadened.

Toshusai's face flushed with shame at his earlier behavior.

"I owe you my life." He bowed deeply.

"Then I offer you a way to repay that debt." Kentaro motioned to the other samurai. "We would have you join us, if you are willing."

"What must I do, sensei?," sensei Toshusai's.

Kentaro's smile faded, but he accepted Toshusai's use of the honorific. "At the edge of the swamp lies an ancient shrine to Terashi, the great kami of the sun. Decades ago, a powerful oni killed the hoto who guarded it and cursed the land upon which it stood. His corruption and darkness were so great that it pulled the swamp with him and thus the Takenuma swallowed the lands around it. We are going to smite this oni and restore the shrine. We will push back this dark stain on the land."

* * *

Toshusai had pledged his life and his service in that moment, and in their eight-day march he had not once regretted his decision. The smiling cat had given him purpose again, allowing him to live with honor instead of dying with it. These thoughts helped him to remain steadfast in his resolve and to keep his fear of the oni at bay.

It had been hours since the oni's thoughts had disturbed him, but the palpable feeling of dread made it clear that the creature was getting closer. As they traveled, the trees became twisted and misshapen, their leaves dripping with ichor as if they bled. The mud grew deeper and soon the path led them into shallow water.

Kentaro held up his hand, bringing the group to a halt. He listened in silence for a moment.

Yoshinobu and Sakoda, took up positions to their leader's right, Muro moved to the left where Toshusai quickly joined him.

"Be ready," Kentaro said quietly.

I'm ready. The oni whispered from the dark corners of his mind.

Harsh laughter echoed through the swamp.

The other samurai drew weapons instantly and peered into the murky woods.

Toshusai unsheathed his own daisho, relieved that the others had heard it as well.

A special death waits for you, it mocked.

Our honor shall lead us to victory! Toshusai challenged, but the doubts the oni had placed in his mind hatched like maggots to gnaw within him.

"There." Kentaro pushed back a branch and pointed.

Toshusai followed the samurai master's gaze.

A small stone shrine rose up out of the swamp. Half-rotted bamboo had grown up from the inky water, its roots snaking into the windows and forcing their way through cracks in the walls. A latticework of tree limbs blocked the main entrance.

"The evil of this place is thick," Yoshinobu muttered. He blinked behind his green kabuto.

Muro grunted in what Toshusai took to be agreement. Sakoda merely nodded.

Kentaro looked at them and grinned. He studied each of them, his gaze falling lastly on Toshusai. "Regardless of what we are about to face, I want each of you to know that I am proud to fight with you."

A sense of profound purpose radiated through Toshusai, warding off the oppressive dread that permeated the place. He was ready.

"All right." Kentaro's grin faded. "We have waited long enough." He nodded to them.

Sakoda and Muro drew their hankyu and disappeared into the underbrush. Toshusai readied his blades.

Kentaro drew his weapons and stepped through the thick underbrush into the brackish, knee-deep water. His boots created ripples that expanded until they lapped at the walls of the shrine.

Toshusai followed, remaining in position on his left flank while Yoshinobu held the right. The muck pulled at his boots, sucking him down and making it difficult to maneuver.

Kentaro paused near the doorway.

Toshusai took a deep breath and waited next to him.

A shrill scream, like cry of a dozen wailing children, echoed through the swamp. It raked through him, shaking his center and chilling him so deeply that he thought his own scream would soon join it. Somehow, he remained silent. He would not let the oni ruin him.

"You walk as dead men." It cackled. *Your death will be the most painful, Toshusai!*

Toshusai froze as the creature's promise pierced his mind. He shivered despite his desire to remain steady and felt his palms sweating. He tightened his grip on his weapons.

"We gladly offer our lives to our Kami!" Kentaro called boldly. "But it is you who will die!"

"I will paint the walls of my shrine with your blood!" Its hatred washed over them.

The bamboo lattice writhed like waking snakes and slowly parted to reveal a dark entryway. From within, a nightmare emerged from the darkness. Shadows clung to it as appeared in the doorway to tower over them from a frightening height. Its skinless face was raw bone and sharp, pointy teeth. Its broad shoulders were bound with roping muscles that brushed the walls to either side while its long horns scraped against the ceiling as it advanced. It swiveled its dreadful skull back and forth, the empty eye sockets finally settling on Toshusai. From within those empty holes, the flames of a frightening intelligence and intense hatred burned directly at him.

Aid me, Toshusai. It is your only chance to avoid the horrors I have planned for you.

Toshusai's legs threatened to buckle. Why had it singled him out?

"Leave this place!" Kentaro dropped into a fighting stance.

Drawing strength from Kentaro's resolve, Toshusai sank into a ready position. The rattling of armor told him that Yoshinobu had assumed a similar pose.



"I will gorge myself on your flesh!" The oni gnashed its gleaming fangs and clawed angrily at the air, eager to rip at them.

Yoshinobu screamed, broke formation and ran towards the woods.

"Yoshinobu!" Kentaro roared.

The fleeing samurai stopped abruptly. He made no move to return, but neither did he flee farther into the swamp.

He dies first, the oni's thoughts reached Toshusai. The beast cried out, its voice shattering the quiet around them as it launched from the shrine. It soared over them in a smooth, strong arc.

No! Toshusai reacted quickly, thrusting his katana upwards, but the oni was too high.

Sakoda and Muro stepped from concealment. Bows twanged. Their arrows hummed as they flew towards their target. Several of the long wooden shafts bounced off the oni's thick hide, one buried itself into the creature's massive right leg. Thick, black ichor bubbled from the wound, but the oni's speed was not hindered. It landed in front of Yoshinobu.

Yoshinobu raised his blades in a vain attempt to parry as the oni brought its arms together, one to either side of his chest. There was a sickening crack as his armor crumpled and his ribs snapped. The hapless samurai coughed, spattering blood on the oni's broad muscled chest, and then crumpled into the water.

Toshusai's anger seared his insides. He sloshed through the water toward the oni, intent on gutting the fiend.

"Your deaths are sweet nectar!" The oni whirled towards him. *Help me kill the rest, Toshusai.* It's voice slithered through his mind.

"Don't listen to it!" Kentaro scored a deep gash in the oni's right arm releasing a spray of the thick blood.

"If you kill me, I die with my honor!" Toshusai's faith was strengthened by the oni's wound. He circled to the right and stabbed upwards, spearing the creature through the left bicep.

"Traacherous Toshusai!" It flexed its arm and tore Toshusai's katana from his grasp. It kicked at him with one claw toed foot.

Toshusai launched himself backwards and the creature's giant foot flew over him. He fell into the water, the oily liquid invading his mouth as he sank beneath the surface. He gagged, pushed himself back up and spit out the nasty fluid. He wiped the slime from his face and blinked to clear his vision. As his eyes refocused, he saw that Sakoda and Muro had dropped their hankyu and joined the fray. They circled the oni with Kentaro, dancing in and slashing at it with impressive speed.

Now was his chance. The oni was occupied. He searched the water and spied the still form of Yoshinobu floating just beneath the surface. He sprang up and ran to his comrade's side, desperation pulling him along. He hauled Yoshinobu up through the water's surface. His eyes had rolled up into his head. Blood smeared ribs stuck up from his chest, through his clothing and armor. There was little doubt that he was dead.

Toshusai pried his friend's katana from his hands and then allowed him to gently sink to the bottom. Righteous hatred exploded within him, scorching his insides. He stood up just in time to see Muro fly through the air. The samurai smacked into a tree with an audible crack and slid into the underbrush and out of sight.

"No more fear, no more doubts." Toshusai gripped Yoshinobu's blade so tightly that his hands ached.

The oni dodged Kentaro's katana and batted aside Sakoda's wakizashi. Toshusai's fierce anger propelled him forward.

The oni struck Sakoda in the shoulder. There was the crunching of breaking bones and the samurai dropped to his knees. The oni pulled back one mighty fist above him.

Kentaro pushed Sakoda out of the way and thrust his katana into the oni's side.

Toshusai was relieved as Sakoda managed to back away from the raging battle.

The oni staggered. *Toshusai, you must help me!*

Does this help? Toshusai threw his wakizashi. It struck the oni's chest, sinking in up to its hilt.

Kentaro twisted his blade.

The oni vomited black liquid, coating them with its vile blood, and then dropped to its knees.

"For the honored dead!" Toshusai lunged forward and struck the oni's thick chest. His katana slipped between its ribs. A jolt of vile energy burst from the creature, surging up the blade and burning Toshusai's hand. He released the weapon and staggered back.

The oni looked down at him through those dark eye sockets. It shuddered and its muscles suddenly writhed beneath its skin. Cracks opened in its body as if it were made of stone, spreading outward in a web

of fissures that rapidly covered its body. Finally, it slid apart into pieces, each of them falling beneath the surface of the water and disappearing from sight until nothing remained.

Toshusai gasped and then steadied himself as the heavy weight of his hatred for the creature faded and his pain eased.

The ground shuddered and a beam of pure sunlight broke through the pall of darkness that hung over the shrine. It grew brighter with each passing second. The bamboo shrunk back and retreated towards the heart of the swamp taking the water, the mud, and the underbrush with it. The warmth washed over Toshusai filling him inner peace even as it healed his wounds.

Slowly, the brightness faded leaving them in the normal light of day. When it finished, the shrine bore little resemblance to the one they had first entered. It stood in the middle of a broad plaza of polished cobbled stones. Toshusai found himself standing between Kentaro and Sakoda before it.

Kentaro turned and grinned at each of them in turn, then slowly became solemn. Without words, the three samurai knew it was time to put Muro and Yoshinobu to rest, and to honor their sacrifice. Kentaro moved toward their fallen forms, and without hesitation, Toshusai followed.

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