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MEET THE SAVIORS

lizuka the Ruthless

Gwendolyn Kestrel

Burned villages, unburied corpses, and the metallic stink of forges: the scents of war perfumed the air. Nezumi had been raiding human lands that had sworn fealty to several noble houses. Samurai led by the great General Takeshi massed at the border of the nezumi lands. They planned to invade nezumi territory and repay the affronts their people had suffered a hundredfold.

Numerous small squads of guerilla nezumi fighters attacked the samurai scouting parties, the army's advance units. One, then another, then another samurai boasted, confessed, or swore to their nezumi captors that the human army was coming. Word spread throughout the nezumi lands of General Takeshi's grand plan: extermination of all the nezumi. It mattered not to the samurai general which nezumi tribe had invaded the human lands and burned the villages. The recent raids were merely the excuse.



Normally very independent and disorganized, the nezumi could not deny the threat the mighty samurai troops posed and they formed an army of their own. Their keen sense of self-preservation showed them the logic of banding together. As small, separate units, they would fail. A large, unified nezumi army marshaled in opposition.

Darkness. Thousands of small campfires light the night. Soldiers play cards, pretend to sleep, or pray. Dawn would bring battle. The two armies would clash in mere hours. The battle and its potential outcomes were on the minds of almost everyone on the border.

Almost everyone. Not lizuka the Restless.

* * *

While captain of the guard to Lord Kensai, lizuka served proudly and with honor. His master was powerful and all those in his service enjoyed prestige.

Lord Kensai used a variety of means to promote his agendas and eliminate his rivals. Yet, all it took was one misstep and Lord Kensai fell from his exalted position. Now, lizuka was a discredited samurai without status. Because of his former master's failed political machinations, lizuka was now a landless ronin. His lack of status galled him. He saw lesser men rise in society while he stood outside it.

A man with intelligence, ambition, and ability, he would earn respect his own way. lizuka trained his body so that his swords moved like extensions of his soul. His soul he committed to darkness, learning blood magic from an ogre mage. He learned dark sorceries that granted

him even more power. He gathered together men loyal, not to ideals, but to lizuka alone. He laid plans to make his ambitions realities.

* * *

“Ready, sir!” Ryota said, his stout body held deferentially in a deep bow.

“Report,” lizuka commanded.

“The nezumi we captured confirmed our earlier reports. Forked Tongue has pledged 300 warriors to the war captain. She will have only a handful of retainers at her stronghold.”

lizuka nodded his approval and gestured for his lieutenant to rise. Although a ronin, he still commanded men devoted to him: Ryota, Kenshin, Hideaki, and Nanashi, a core of competent, seasoned veterans that had served well under his command in happier days and remained loyal to him. He knew them and their abilities. He could rely on them for the task ahead. He looked at them with both of his eyes, his normal one that saw with normal sight, and his seemingly-blind eye that his blood magic had taken over to let him look more deeply. He knew them and their souls. They would be loyal to him until death.

lizuka was a man with great ambition. With the pending clash between humans and nezumi, he detected a great opportunity. Not on the battlefield, but behind it.

Tales and rumors of the treasure accumulated by a nezumi named Forked Tongue abounded. Her stronghold lay only a few hours of hard travel through the nezumi swamps away from the battle site. She had a reputation for caution that equaled her reputation for wealth. The massing of the nezumi army provided a rare opportunity: her stronghold would be depleted of its guards.

lizuka turned his gaze toward the last member of the group, Ken'Ichi, his only son and heir. The boy was scarcely a man but had acquitted himself well thus far. He had not flinched from the need to torture the captured nezumi warriors for information. Like his father, it seemed he could do what needed to be done. A rare twinge of paternal pride made lizuka smile at his son's bowed head. His sight-beyond-sight showed him a crimson aura around the young man. He would be no stranger to death after this day. lizuka foresaw that Ken'Ichi would kill many nezumi in the upcoming encounter. Once again, he nodded his approval.

“Now, to business,” lizuka said. “We have miles to cover with speed and stealth.” His fingers traced their route on the finely detailed map. He laid out another map, this one on rough paper and crudely drawn. Blood and other, less-definable liquids spotted and stained the drawing. “Once at Forked Tongue's enclave, we head for her treasury. You and the others may take what you can carry, but not until we have found what we are looking for. At my signal, we return via the same route.”

* * *

lizuka knew the stories were more than mere rumors. His former master, Lord Kensai, had paid Forked-Tongue well to perform a small service for him.

Blackwhisker, the nezumi messenger, kept his forehead bowed to the floor. His body trembled slightly with the effort of holding the subservient poses for so long.

Lord Kensai took his time reviewing the scrolls and making notes upon them. As if he had just noticed the ratling that had been kneeling before him for the last hour, he looked up. “Render unto me your message.”

“My lord,” Blackwhisker said, straightening up, but keeping his head bowed and his eyes respectfully averted. The nezumi's voice was breathy and almost gleeful with the plan he related. “My mistress, Forked-Tongue, seeks to assure you that all will be done as you have requested. She will send a strong troop of the finest assassins to desecrate the sacred shrine of the Tsuki Clan and plant shreds of Miko House uniforms on the shrubs nearby to implicate your rival. My mistress agrees to all your terms.”

“Foul creature. How dare you speak of these things! The business I have with your mistress is of a most private nature,” Lord Kensai rebuked the nezumi. He gestured at one of the guards. “Perhaps 20 lashes will teach you to be more circumspect. Take him away.”

The guard dragged the mewling nezumi from the room. Lord Kensai turned to lizuka. He looked to his captain for the small blink that would indicate that lizuka had read the nezumi's soul and saw that his words were sincere. lizuka half-closed his clouded eye, indicating that he had looked deeply and not seen deception. "Have the ratling take this to Forked-Tongue," he said, holding a black lacquer box decorated with red gems.

* * *

lizuka sought out Forked-Tongue's stronghold not only for her treasury, but also for revenge. He knew that the greatest pain he could inflict upon her would be to deprive her of her wealth.

* * *

The best laid plans of nezumi and humans often go astray.

At Forked Tongue's stronghold, a few guards patrolled the perimeter. Timing their rounds to slip unnoticed into the compound proved a simple matter. That was the last thing that went as planned.

* * *

As Hideaki step forward to scout the last corridor before the treasury, a great cacophony of sound erupted from the beneath his feet. The unwilling nezumi informant neglected to mention the nightingale floor outside the treasury. The cleverly designed floor served its purpose and alerted the entire enclave to the presence of intruders.

Rage suffused lizuka. To be so close! Fighting was unavoidable. His men arranged themselves defensively around him. They would rather die than let their master fall. His two blades cleared their lacquered sheathes. The stronghold's guards rushed into the corridor. lizuka's blades began a song of blood.

* * *

The nezumi had many advantages. They were fighting in a familiar setting, and fighting to defend their homes and their master. Nevertheless, individually as fighters, they proved little match for lizuka and his hardened veterans. Usually, the nezumi's main strength against the samurai lay in sheer numbers. With the upcoming battle and Forked Tongue's pledge of 300 of her warriors, lizuka felt confident. That confidence quickly eroded as more and more nezumi poured into the confined area. Flashes of whiskers, fur, and steel through the open doorways showed that many more reinforcement awaited their turn.

"Herd them this way into the larger chamber!" a clear voice commanded the nezumi. lizuka looked for the speaker. Well-armed and armored, she focused her efforts on commanding the other nezumi and directing their efforts. So, this was Aya, the captain of Forked Tongue's guards. lizuka's field intelligence had indicated that she would be commanding Forked Tongue's elite warriors. lizuka now understood. Forked Tongue had indeed pledged almost all her warriors to the nezumi effort. She just had never intended to follow through on her promise; she cared more about herself and her treasures than she did the rest of the world.

The nezumi soldiers were reluctant to engage the samurai.

"A silver coin for every nezumi who gets between the samurai and the treasury! A gold for each dead samurai!" Aya provided additional incentive. As she well knew, greed motivated the cowardly creatures. The ratlings wedged their bodies between the samurai and the treasury, forcing them into a larger, open room where more nezumi could attack.

lizuka drew his blood red fingernail across his palm. Five beads of blood formed. He flung his hand wide and the blood darts flew, each unerringly struck a nezumi who screamed and died.

Now in the larger room, the nezumi did not crowd closely. Samurai steel and lizuka's magic earned them a respectful space.

The experienced samurai formed a circle, blades out. The nezumi would pay dearly. Periodically, one would venture too close and be cut to a blood-soaked fur corpse.

Aya herself moved in as if to attack. While the veteran soldiers knew it was just a probe, Ken'ichi fell for her feint and lunged out of their tight formation.

At that moment, lizuka cried out a warning, but in one fluid motion Aya had the boy disarmed and her sword at his throat.

Ken'Ichi looked toward lizuka and called out, "Father!"

Aya instantly halted her movement and instead of decapitating the boy, she grabbed him and drew him close against her, her left arm in a choke hold around his neck, her right hand holding her sword to his throat.

* * *

"Halt!" Aya shouted. She stood with the point of her sword against Ken'Ichi's throat. "Drop your swords and we call it a truce. You leave. No more killing." Aya pressed the point of her sword more firmly against Ken'Ichi's throat. A fat bead of blood welled up on the tip of her blade. "Drop your swords or the boy dies."

lizuka looked at his son. The boy stood still, showing no outward sign of fear. He looked at his father, calm, prepared to live or die as lizuka wished. Flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood. But now, the boy was a helpless victim in his enemy's hands. The son a tool to be used against the father. How humiliating. Rage filled the void that paternal pride had vacated.

Forked Tongue's captain of the guard held the boy as a shield, completely protecting her from attack.

lizuka spread his arms wider, into an unguarded position. Moving slowly, he shifted his weight to his right leg, and bending down toward the right, he placed the tip of his katana on the ground. Every eye in the room focused on the tip of that blade. lizuka released his grip on the hilt so that the sword clattered to the floor. The blade bounced against the floor, steel meeting wood with an audible twang.

lizuka lunged forward, thrusting his left blade forward with a sharp stabbing motion. A flash of steel, two sprays of blood. Aya reacted as lizuka attacked, cutting Ken'Ichi's throat. She felt the cold fire of a sword wound deep in her stomach. As the darkness of death began to claim her, she looked down in surprise at the lizuka's left blade. lizuka had thrust it straight through Ken'Ichi to deal her a killing blow.

"Attack!" lizuka shouted. His men rallied to his cry. They had seen the sacrifice, they knew the cost. The fought with maniacal vigor.

The renewed attacked by the humans and their leader's ruthlessness frightened the remaining nezumi guards. Seeing their captain dead, pinned to lizuka's son unnerved them. Most fled. The few who remained died quickly.

lizuka knelt down beside the bodies of Ken'Ichi and Aya. His son's eyes were wide and surprised in death. He gently closed them. Pulling his blade free of the mingled human and nezumi flesh, blood, and bone, he saw that Aya still clung tenaciously to life. Blood welling from her mouth and speckling her whiskers, she tried to speak. lizuka leaned forward, curious to hear the last words of this worthy opponent.

"Www...why?" Aya gasped. "Your own son..."

lizuka sighed, "I can always have more children." His blade flashed, decapitating her.

* * *

At last, lizuka entered the treasure, victorious and content, until he saw the disorganized state: open chests, overturned boxes, and lacquered cabinets gaping with empty drawers stuck out like mocking tongues mocked. Valuables still abound, a silver ewer ornamented with gems and gold filigree and a gold necklace set with opals peeped out from a bag that had been hastily packed and then abandoned, but it was obvious that the choicest pieces had been taken. During the fight, Forked Tongue gathered up the most valuable articles and fled.

lizuka searched the remains carefully, finding at last a black lacquered casket. Lord Kensai's crest in blood red garnets decorated the lid. The box was empty, discarded. lizuka methodically counted out 100 gold coins to fill the casket. This treasure, he carefully stowed in his own pack.

"Take what you can carry. Burn the rest."

For more information on Forked Tongue, see the Champions of Kamigawa story, "[Security](#)."

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