

FOR A BOWL OF RICE ~飯一杯のために~
by Rawle Nyanzi

On a grassy knoll obscured by trees, the peasant Ikki lay in wait with his fellow villagers. In their hands, they held tubes of wood and steel, with a small quantity of black powder in a pan at the back, a piece of flint to ignite the pan, and a lead ball to launch out of the tube at terrifying speeds. These weapons, which the peasants called "fire tubes," gave common men the strength to fell the haughty samurai.

And today, Ikki would test the weapons in real battle.

Ikki watched as a retinue of samurai rode into the village, backed up by archers on horseback -- themselves samurai -- and ashigaru footsoldiers of common stock. Their gleaming weapons in hand, they had come to collect the rice tax.

"One bowl of rice says I can take down their general," Ikki said, pointing to a mounted samurai with an elaborate suit of armor and large horns on his helmet.

"But I have heard it said that those who wield tubes of fire are doomed," one of Ikki's men said.

"No one has spoken of our plan. The village stands together," Ikki answered.

"How can you be sure?" the peasant asked.

"Because we're not dead. Wait for the signal," Ikki answered. Ikki watched the villagers up ahead place sack after sack of rice into a wheeled cart held balanced by two strong porters. The samurai demanded more, far more than even last year's taxes, and Ikki watched the villagers scramble to fill sacks with rice right then and there, and two of the samurai drew their swords in case a peasant thought to refuse the orders.

Then one of the peasants pointed straight at the sky.

"Now!" Ikki shouted. He and his comrades-in-arms took aim, then

pulled the triggers of their fire tubes. A deafening roar emerged from Ikki's ranks as the tubes launched great volumes of shot at the greedy samurai. Three ashigaru fell, and the samurai turned their attention to the trees.

"It's an ambush! Slaughter them!" the general shouted. A samurai dismounted and, spear in hand, led several of the ashigaru toward the peasants' hiding place. Ikki moved aside and allowed another line of peasants to take their place and rain fire upon the charging enemy as he reloaded. When Ikki's line finished reloading, they left the grassy knoll and emerged out in the open, arrayed in a line and standing strong. Only twenty men remained, including the porters.

"Cut them down!" the general shouted. He and two other samurai tried to rush the peasants' firing line, only to get shot down. The wounded general was thrown from his horse, and he broke his neck just before his mortally wounded mount fell on him. The samurai beside him did not fare much better, having taken two shots directly to the head. The archers readied a volley, but the peasants' second line wiped them out before the first arrow flew. The porters fled for their lives.

As the cart containing the rice fell on its handles, the villagers emerged from their homes and gave a mighty cheer. Ikki raised his fire tube in triumph, yowling with glee as the blood of samurai seeped into the soil.

"Never again shall we be taxed!" Ikki shouted. All of the armed peasants raised their weapons with him, for the peasants had never felt as powerful as they did today.

"Cease your celebration now."

Ikki's blood ran cold when he heard the stern female voice in the distance. Everyone in the village turned to face the tree-covered knoll where the voice had come from. When Ikki saw who issued the command, he dropped his fire tube.

Thirty women in white kimono emerged from the woods, their faces obscured by demonic masks brimming with sharp teeth and frightening horns. Their black hair fell about their shoulders,

and tanto daggers made of a glowing red metal rested in their hands. As the tall, otherworldly women approached, the villagers got on their knees and pressed their heads to the ground, but Ikki's group reloaded their weapons.

"We didn't come this far to surrender to demons," Ikki said, his weapon leveled at the advancing women. He and his comrades unleashed a storm of shot upon the intruders, but the shots hadn't so much as scratched a single one of the women. Before Ikki could reload, the women fell upon his men. They drove their red tanto into the men's bodies, and the men screamed as their flesh burnt and their blood evaporated. Some of the men tried to strike or grapple the women, only to succumb to the searing blades of their targets. Ikki found himself face-to-face with three of them, and he swung his fire tube like a club, striking one of them in the side of the head.

The wood cracked, but the woman was unharmed.

After Ikki's men were all killed, Ikki himself stood before the strange women, surrounded on all sides by them.

"Our laws are clear. Any use of forbidden weapons is punishable by death," the woman with the most colorful mask said; Ikki took her to be the leader.

Ikki dropped to his knees. "Will you let me explain myself?" he asked.

"I will allow you to plead your case," the leader of the women said. Ikki's palms sweated, but he remained calm.

"We used forbidden weaponry because we wanted to stop the daimyo from taxing us so much. We didn't want to starve," Ikki said.

The demonic woman nodded. "We too know what it is to be hungry. But just as the thief is punished regardless of motive, so too will this village suffer for its transgressions," she said.

"Punished...so you'll kill us all?"

"All of you are complicit, so all of you must face our justice."

"Please, don't! They don't deserve to be punished for my crime!"

"Then what do you propose we do with you? If I find it acceptable, I will do that instead."

Ikki knew just the thing that would work. "Make us your eternal servants so we can atone for our actions," he said.

The woman thought on it for a moment, then she spoke. "A satisfactory solution. We shall take the entire village to our home, away from the eyes of men," she said. The woman then used her booming voice to announce her decision to the entire village.

Ikki had once again saved them.

The villagers left their homes and rice paddies behind to follow the mysterious women into the forest. Only empty huts remained as a reminder that anyone had ever lived in that place.