

Better To Be Certain

By Robert Denton III

Hiruma Shizuyo didn't set her camp until the shadows of the parched landscape no longer matched whatever cast them. Even her own shadow was tall and branched, like a flawed oak stripped to the bark.

This was the game the Shadowlands played.

She sorted her supplies and numbered her cache of arrows with paper blessings tied to their shafts. She left everything on the cart and released the ox to return to the Wall without her. As she watched it go, her fingers brushed the smooth jade pendant hanging from her neck—the one thing that wasn't expendable.

She spent the day setting bell-adorned tripwires and driving standing torches into the cracked ground around the camp. Memorizing the terrain would be futile; it would just shift when she looked away. Only the landmarks she left would remain consistent.

When the sun touched the west horizon, she lit the torches, nose wrinkling at the scent of fish oil and pine. Aching from a day spent in armor, she started a campfire by her tent and planted her *tetsubō* like a banner. Fair warning. Then, facing the south, she sat and waited.

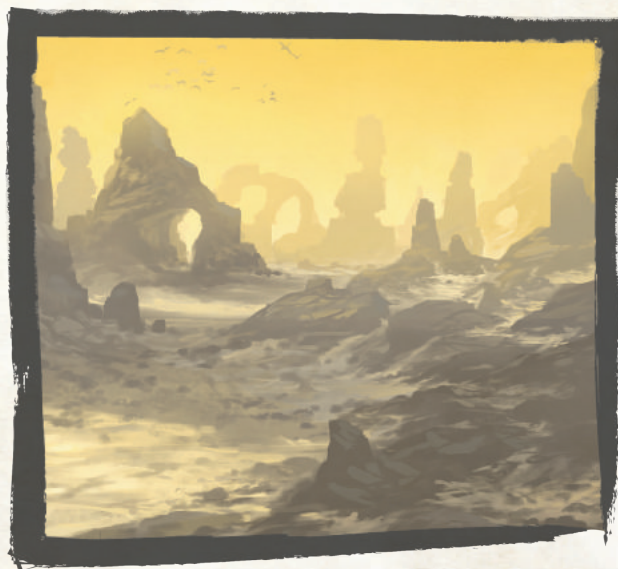
The wind was barely audible beneath the sliver of pale indigo moon. Nothing stirred beyond her bubble of campfire light, not even the sparse patches of dead grass. After a time, she pulled a stack of cards from her satchel and shuffled them. She dealt herself a single card from the bottom of the deck. An ink-wash depiction of a barbed tapeworm, a diamond of white space forming an inhuman mouth, leered at her from the card.

"*Tsumunagi*," she said. "Hides in supplies. Kill with fire or smother with jade oil."

The next card off the bottom revealed a hulking creature of muscle and sinew, a yawning toothy mouth where its head should have been.

"Kanu's Oni. Engage from afar. Use jade arrows, or exploit the narrow windpipe."

Another card. A segmented shell and a mass of cockroach limbs capped with human hands.



“*Gokimono*. Once human. Compelled to extinguish lights. Kill with—”

A bush warbler’s whistle rose from beyond her camp. By the end of the trill, it was a human voice, mournful in its wordless cry. Shizuyo raised her eyes. No movement except the flickering shadow of her tetsubō. She inched closer.

Another card. A splotchy human walking in splintered armor, one eye just an empty socket.

“*Hyakuhei*. Animated corpse.” She stared into the dancing flames. “Kill as you would a man.”

Shizuyo ignored her spine’s dull ache and the burn beneath her eyelids as she prodded the traps beneath a morning sun painted a sick shade of purple. An uneventful night spent in her armor left her limbs heavy and stiff. Her body cried for sleep, but it wouldn’t be safe until the hour furthest from the Hour of Ox—the hour sometimes written as the Hour of Fu Leng.

Only one trap had caught something: a trembling white and tan fluff with slender ears. The rabbit was tangled in the sling, helpless. It cast Shizuyo a pleading look.

She narrowed her eyes.

The hare twitched, as if trying one last time to wrench free. She slammed her tetsubō down. There was a wet crunch, like a stomped *kabocha* squash. She exhaled until any remorse was gone.

It was better to be certain.

The campfire had seen Shizuyo identify thirty-five creatures in her demon deck before a tinny bell clatter broke the silence. In the night beyond, one of the pin-prick torches blinked out.

She strung her bow and collected her arrows. In the distance, something skittered into the light of the next torch. Before the light was extinguished, she barely caught sight of spindly cockroach limbs and human hands.

A cold gasp froze her. The creature had come from the south, the direction of the caravan.

Her fingers found her pendant. The jade would kill it. Just one touch...


No. Not if this was it.

Shizuyo readied an arrow and pointed at the next-closest torch. She counted to five, then released. The torch went dark. Something screamed.

Another arrow found it at the next-nearest torch. In the one after, she saw the arrow shafts protruding from its glossy plates. Five torches yet to go. Then would be the campfire. And then...

Another arrow. Then another. Again and again. Now it scrambled, faster, closer. Its outline grew against the night sky, blotting out the stars with its darkness. Her racing heart tightened as she launched the last arrow as the final torch, a mere hundred feet away, went suddenly dark.

A shriek. A dull thud. Silence.



Shizuyo carried a piece of the campfire to the horror's motionless body. The arrows were deeply embedded, their written blessings now blank scraps. She could recover none.

She held her breath as she finally brought her makeshift torch to where the killing arrow protruded from the eye of its human face.

It wasn't him.

She tossed the torch onto the body and returned to camp.

Shizuyo startled awake. Ashes floated against a midday sky. She spat a curse. An entire morning wasted, no time to replace the used traps. She cannibalized the cart for firewood as the sun dragged a crimson path into the western ridge. Then she lit the remaining torches. Even with the soreness in her bones, it didn't take long.

Hours dragged in silence, and the campfire slowly ate away at itself. Firelight glinted along the jade pendant as she turned it over. The dreamlike image of the hare slipped into her mind—its prone body and desperate eyes. She shook her head and the vision tumbled away. Maybe it had really been a hare. Maybe it hadn't. The only way to be sure was to use her jade.

A faint bell. One of her surviving traps, far from the remaining torches. Again. She frowned. She took her tetsubō and stepped into the dark.



The trap was triggered, but there was nothing there. Her fingers brushed clawed grooves in the dirt, numbing with slow realization.

She spun around and sprinted back to the campfire, but she was too late. Her tent blackened in the fiery column, her supplies crackling in the heat. She gritted her teeth at the high-pitched laughter. Goblinoid forms dancing around the flames, their spindly shadows entwined.

Bakemono. Three of them. One tossed her cards into the fire with her remaining torches. It laughed again.

She caught up to it and smashed it with her tetsubō. It went silent.

The remaining two turned, wide-eyed gazes flicking from Shizuyo to their dead comrade.

They shrieked.

Her fingers slipped from the tetsubō handle as one charged into her, knocking her backward. Her armor cracked and the wind was pushed from her lungs. Claws raked her cheek as the thing shrieked, again and again. Her hand darted to her hip, but her *wakizashi's* sheath was empty. She grit her teeth and tore the frenzied thing away, hurling it into the bonfire. Screams pierced the night.

She started to roll to her feet, but the last goblin leapt into her chest. Her blade flashed in the creature's hands, slicing through her armor swing by swing. She reached for her tetsubō, but she could only graze the handle. The goblin arched its back, mangled blade above its head, readying a death blow. It roared in triumph.

The jade pendant. She had no choice. She tore it free and crammed it into the creature's maw.

The goblin flailed, shrieking, clawing its face, as if a burning coal were in its mouth. With new energy, Shizuyo lunged for her tetsubō. Spinning, she brought it down. The goblin's head broke like an egg.

Ragged breaths shook her. The pendant was now black, oozing in its ruined jaw.

She smashed its face again. And again. Over and over, until she had only the strength to curse the Fortunes.

It wasn't until dusk that movement on the southern horizon caught Shizuyo's gaze: a thin silhouette limping slowly toward her camp's charred remains, its navy blue cloak tattered and stained. Human.

She rose, watching his slow progress, her heart beating in tandem with his heavy steps.

He didn't look up until the sun was nearly gone, twilight painting the landscape in purple hues. He froze, spotting her, just a short distance away. His cracked lips parted.

"Mother?"

His eyes, amber like his father's, lit up. The tattered cloak fell as he ran. "Mother! Thank the gods! I thought I would never see you again!"



She narrowed her eyes.

He slowed to a stop, confusion flickering across his face. The tetsubō handle pressed against her palm.

“Mother? What are you...?” He shook his head. “It’s me, Mother! Hiruma Kenjirō. Your son!”

She did not react.

His amber eyes searched the ground. “We never reached Hiruma Castle. I’m the only one left. I was determined to survive, to see Yukino again. She is well, yes?” He smiled weakly. “We’re getting married in spring. Remember? You insisted on spring...”

Her chest was like a rope twisted too tight. Insects were screaming. The sun bled over the peaks. She didn’t recognize his shadow. She didn’t recognize hers.

His smile faded. “T-take me to the Kuni *shugenja*,” he stammered. “I am well! I can prove it.” He reached for her with pleading eyes. “Mother—”

She slammed the tetsubō into his face. His skull crumpled like a hollow shell. He fell.



Her shadow blanketed his prone body. He jerked, as if trying to see from his now-empty socket. His wet scream broke the night.

The tetsubō came down. Then, only her shuddering heart made any sound.

Shizuyo cradled jade beads as the Kuni shugenja with red and white face paint plucked a black thread from her hair and held it taut beneath his flaring nostrils. Cavalry Master Hida Tsuru sat before her with crossed arms. She lingered on the courtyard gates, lungs nearly bursting from her held breath.

“Is it done?”

She nodded.

“Are you sure?”

She raised her expressionless gaze. “I made certain.” The wind carried specks of ash across the red sky. Somewhere, a bonfire was burning.

The Kuni snatched the beads and raked a prolonged look over her palms. She didn’t flinch. At last, he let her go. “No sign of the taint, Tsuru-sama. Even so, she should be quarantined at the shrine for seven days of cleansing.”

“Make the arrangements.”

After the shugenja left, Tsuru offered Shizuyo a thin scroll. She accepted it with limp fingers. Inside was her son’s new name, the name they would use whenever they remembered him. His old name was tainted now.

“My condolences,” he said. “We will erect a marker in his memory. Although the caravan never reached its destination, you should be proud. He died serving the Crab Clan.” He rose to leave.

“It looked just like him.”

He paused.

She wavered. “It had his voice. It...knew things.” Again, she met his gaze. “It even called me ‘mother.’”

“That is the game the Shadowlands plays. It wears the faces of our loved ones to sow our hearts with doubt. But that thing was a pretender. It could not have been human.” Kneeling again, Tsuru laid his hand on her shoulder. “After all, if it was repelled by the burning pine inside the torches, recoiled from your arrows, and burned at the touch of your jade, then it could not have been your son.” Before her paling face, he gave a reassuring smile. “At least of that, you can be certain.”

