

Collapse

By Robert Denton III

It was the third goblin, lifeless and half-buried in the chalky dirt, that caught Hida O-Ushi's eye. She could just make out the acorn hue and the glint of gold thread on its patchwork armor, and several grooves clawed into the faded heraldry of the Lion Clan. Another trisected diamond. The same symbol mentioned in the report. She didn't even want to consider what it meant.

"Did you see that?" she asked.

Hida Shizuko nodded as her own pony swayed to avoid the corpse. "Heraldry, perhaps?"

"Goblins don't use heraldry." At least, they never had before. The Shadowlands was the antithesis of order; organized tactics wasn't in its nature.

But Oguri's report had been explicit about the coordination of the goblin attacks on the Watchtower of Sun's Shadow. And while the Yasuki family heir was prone to exaggeration, the Mantis *shugenja* had backed up his words. History recalled numerous failed attempts to organize the goblins of the Shadowlands. Had someone, against all odds, finally succeeded?

"*Etsuji has forced our hand,*" her father had said. "*Reinforce his position until we can muster a permanent replacement. I will have words with my cousin about his...impetuosity later.*" She remembered his grim features as he met her eyes. "*Do not let the tower fall.*"

Laughter. O-Ushi followed Shizuko's eyes to the riding ponies behind them, two dozen Crab samurai whose voices tangled like spider threads in the wind. Behind each sat an attentive but empty suit of armor. A wordless declaration of war in the Empire, but out here, it was a survival tactic. It doubled their numbers to the eyes of mindless predators, a deterrent that had worked so far.

They must have noticed, as she did, the increasing number of goblin bodies and the scarred land as they traveled. That was why they joked atop their riding ponies, their laughter like weak pinpricks of light in the dark. Maybe she should bark them into silence, as her brother Yakamo



would have done, lest they attract undue attention. But truthfully, she was grateful for their chatter.

O-Ushi's vision glided from one familiar face to the next. That Yasuki Nogami was the loudest did not surprise her. A childhood spent in stables and marketplaces left him with an eternally raised voice, and time spent in Hida dōjōs had done little to correct this. Riding beside him, Hiruma Kyokai, her childhood rival turned drinking buddy, was the opposite. He smirked quietly, eyes raking the horizon, his scout's instincts forbidding even a moment of lowered guard. If their joviality attracted attention, surely he would spot it.

Eager to keep up was the rookie, Kaiu Fusao, baby-faced, mop-topped, and failing to hide his nervousness behind a lopsided smile. He swayed in his seat, gripping the bridle with his lone hand. His heavy saddlebag, an inventor's cache, jingled as he bounced. The thought of the boy joining them at the watchtower made her stomach ball up like crushed paper. But Shizuko had vouched for him, so she set her anxieties aside.

Had it been up to her, she would have undertaken this journey by herself. But it was foolish to enter the Shadowlands alone, and she could not accomplish this mission without help. So she had not argued when her friends formed a squad around her, falling automatically into their roles. She hadn't even needed to ask.

She was glad they had come. But seeing them now only made her stomach churn. She had to bring every one of them back home. This couldn't be like the last time...

Yasuki Nogami's words rose above the muddled debate. "The West Sumo Champion this year will be none other than Kakutarō-zeki. Mark my words."

"Perhaps three years ago," Kyokai softly countered. "Kakutarō achieved many victories, true. But he is too old now, far past his prime. No, the smart bet is on Mitsuteru-zeki. His star is on the rise."

Shizuko turned in her saddle. "That's a bet I would take. Mitsuteru lost to the Champion of the East last year, and I heard he's been slow to recover from his shoulder injury."

"I'll take experience above confidence," Nogami agreed. He raised his blaring voice to O-Ushi's back. "And surely the Little Bear agrees."

O-Ushi looked over her shoulder. Two dozen pairs of eyes looked back, eyes cradled in the dark rings of poor sleep, eyes longing to see anything that reminded them of home, not an endless blasted terrain they couldn't trust. Collectively gazing on the illusion of normalcy, and the hope that she would maintain it.

"Call me 'Little Bear' again, and your backside will take the hard ground!"

The line erupted into laughter. Nogami grinned with a red face while others slapped his back. Shizuko snickered by her side.

"Besides," she added, "You're both wrong. Banzo is going to win."

Her comment summoned incredulous scoffs. Even Shizuko looked at her sideways.

Kaiu Fusao shook his dandelion-fluff head. "Has anyone 'below the curtain' ever become



Champion of the West? What is he, second year? First?"

O-Ushi turned away. Another goblin body, half-buried in the dirt. The trisected diamond carved into its broken armor. Something goblins never did. Or so she had believed.

"That fact is precisely his advantage. No one knows his strategy. No one is prepared for him. In my experience, that is the greatest advantage of all."

Hiruma Kyokai's voice cut above the others. "My lady." He pointed beyond a jagged tear in the crimson fog, where they could barely make out the crumbling skeleton of the Kaiu Wall, desiccated and unmanned, and beyond, the tower. She frowned. It may have been a remote part of the wall, difficult to reach, and resources spread too thin. But even so, how had the Crab let this section fall into such disrepair?

And what was Kyokai pointing at? "What do you see?"

"Not see, my lady. Smell." He tapped his nose. "Can't you smell it, too?"

O-Ushi tilted her head, inhaling the red fog.

Shizuko grimaced. "Smoke."

And it was. Smoke, carried on the breeze, coming from the direction of the tower.



"Perhaps it is a signal fire," Nogami remarked. "That is the purpose of the watchtowers, after all."

O-Ushi had vivid memories of Hida Etsuji, a man she'd long ago been instructed to call "uncle." In two years commanding the Watchtower of the Iron Hammer, he'd never once lit the bonfire signals. It had been his biggest point of pride. Not once.

This was not signal fire smoke. Whatever was awaiting them had already begun.

"There is some high ground nearby," Kyokai chimed in. "I will scout ahead."

"No," O-Ushi commanded. "We stick together." She raised her voice to the others. "Everyone fall behind Kyokai. Let's see what we're up against."

"That will slow things down," Kyokai remarked, but did not press. He knew better.

They fell in line. Shizuko met her gaze for a moment, then looked away. She didn't need to say that O-Ushi was being overly cautious. That glance spoke volumes for her. Neither was it necessary for O-Ushi to explain herself. Shizuko knew, better perhaps than any other here, that she wasn't about to leave anyone on their own in the Shadowlands.

Not after last time. Not ever again.



The fog thinned and then broke at the top of the rocky hill. The River of the Last Stand, like a cloudy undulating serpent, wound around the embankments of the crumbling Kaiu Wall. The Watchtower of Sun's Shadow rose high on the other side of the river, just above a staging ground used for Crab offenses.

Shizuko whistled. "This is a trick."

It wasn't.

A tide of armored goblins camped just beyond the collapsed watchtower gates. At least a thousand, divided into sheets, various formations. No mindless charges, they maneuvered in an



orderly manner, awaiting signals. A trisected diamond fluttered on each monster's personal banner.

Oguri hadn't exaggerated. Someone had organized Shadowlands forces. Trained them. Led them. But who?

"Whoever is left will need more relief than we can offer," Shizuko whispered.

O-Ushi turned to the engineer. "Kaiu-san, your assessment?"

She knew it was bad because Fusao was carefully considering

his words. "One more major offensive, and the tower will fall." He took a breath. "I mean, literally. The stronghold is going to collapse."

She swallowed a lump.

He gestured toward the broken structure. "They breached the curtain wall and hit the weight-bearing columns. I'm not sure what weapons they were using, but they knew exactly where to strike. It's put additional stress on the foundation...those are the cracks you see there. And they've taken the front gate and knocked down the walls of the *masugata*. There is no choke point anymore. Even if the keep stood, full breach is inevitable."

O-Ushi closed her eyes. A crab needed both pincer *and* shell to hold its ground. They had neither. Like sand through her fingers, any chance at victory had slipped away.

Fusao immediately began yammering about backup plans: fast-hardening mortar, repurposing debris, and weight redistribution. He was so young, and hated displeasing his superiors. He wanted to give good news, not bad. He proposed farfetched solutions, spoke of traps.

Centuries ago, these walls stood defiant and ready for any onslaught. Now, years of



unmoving stone crumbled beneath the weight of time, just like relentless waves had eroded the stone cliffs of Earthquake Fish Bay. Gazing upon the ruins, she could almost hear her brother Sukune as he'd told her in the depths of the Shinomen: "*The Crab are the Wall, and that is the problem. If we remain unyielding, unwilling to change, then we will crumble.*"

He was right. This was a fool's errand. There was nothing to gain now. Only lives to be saved. It's what he would do if he were here.

"Enough. Spilled sake won't return to the bottle. I won't try to hold a tower that has already fallen." Her father would understand. He'd have to. "New plan. Evacuate and withdraw. Feasibility?"

"Can't use the horses," Nogami said. "They'll panic at the sight of undead. You'd have to wade the river on foot and push through. I don't see how it can be done."

Shizuko's eyes flashed. "The escape tunnels Oguri used would be just as effective an entry point. We could bypass the attackers entirely."

"Assuming they haven't caved in," Kyokai remarked.

"They haven't," said Fusao. His confidence made O-Ushi smile. "I know where to find the entrance. It's against the embankment."

"Where do the tunnels lead?" she asked.

"The courtyard," Shizuko replied. "We'll be unexpected, of course. But that might work to our favor." She gestured to the river. "The Mantis's boat, the *Poison Tide*, will still be at the docks. We can take it back down the river. It'll be faster, especially with survivors."

"And they won't be able to follow." O-Ushi nodded. It could work. She looked to the others. "Objections?"

Two dozen steeled gazes looked back, determined and ready.

Her heart swelled. To retreat, to abandon the wall, was not the instinct of any Crab. But these samurai trusted her. They believed in her. By Osano-wo's thunder, she wouldn't let them down.

She sent Yasuki Nogami back with an escort of four. If something went wrong, at least they would return with news of the tower's collapse. The rest dismounted and worked through the ritual of donning their armor. Normally, heavy armor was reserved for warring against samurai. In the Shadowlands, mobility and field of vision were better than layered protection. The Kaiu armorers would never admit it, but against *oni*, with their giant's strength and otherworldly weapons, it was not as if armor could protect against being crushed, or swallowed whole, or burned alive, or torn limb from limb. But there were goblin archers among the throng pressed against the side of the watchtower, so armor was mandatory.

The tunnel entrance was disguised well. As the vertex for many escape tunnels and sewers, it had to be. But Fusao found it readily enough, and he and Shizuko forced it open.

Moments stretched into immeasurable time in the pitch dark of the tunnels. Only their lanterns, and the muted sounds of battle above, suggested that a world existed beyond their noses. O-Ushi held her breath, willing the thundering earth not to collapse, just a little longer.



But the others weren't flinching, especially not little Fusao, so she kept her worries buried beneath a stone face.

The door appeared abruptly. O-Ushi slammed into it. It stuck fast. Jammed. Beyond, steel clashed above human shouting. And something else, something high-pitched, something shrieking and gurgling...

"Fusao!" she barked.

The Kaiu scrambled to the front. He procured a wedge-shaped iron device, two paddles pressed together, which he jammed into the crack of the door. Digging out a lever, he hooked it into the prong protruding from the side and began to crank. Wood groaned as the paddles separated, until the planks splintered and finally gave way.

A screaming shark's mouth bolted across the threshold.

O-Ushi smashed her warhammer against it. It crumpled. She leapt over the body, her unit right behind, pouring into the open courtyard of the tower keep.

Crab and goblin soldiers clashed throughout the open courtyard. Bodies baked in the sun. Blades flashed crimson and black, entangled with the screams of human and monster.

O-Ushi unleashed her battle cry, throwing herself at the closest horror. Bones snapped beneath the force of her warhammer. She carved a trench through the box-shaped courtyard, finding herself shoulder to shoulder with unfamiliar faces, Etsuji's samurai and Mantis sailors. The defenders found new energy as her unit joined the fray. She lost herself in the violence, her only thought to push them back, clear the courtyard, buy some time...

The goblins had not anticipated reinforcements. As one, the Crab forced the creatures back into the narrow corridor from which they'd invaded.

Large shapes loomed beyond the retreating rabble. Fresh goblins rushed to reclaim the corridor, to flood the courtyard with new fighters. The Crab grimly readied for another wave.

Not while I breathe. O-Ushi drew all of her strength into her belly, then roared as she swung her warhammer, smashing it into the stone wall. The archway collapsed like the sternum of the goblin trapped beneath it, filling the gap like the streams of viscera leaking between the cracks.



Her muscles burned, but she'd bought them some time. She turned to the reclaimed courtyard and found a sea of dirty faces staring back.

Etsuji's defenders had not fared well. Fewer in number than she'd hoped, eyes pink and sullen from lack of sleep, they stoically stepped over fallen bodies, severing the heads of the dead so they would not stand again. The Mantis sailors looked especially bedraggled; open disdain dripped from their every step.

O-Ushi's unit returned. All accounted for. She released a sigh. *Good.*

"Where is Commander Etsuji?" she demanded. No introductions. They all knew who she was.

One defender, a lieutenant, approached. "You just missed him, my lady. He is leading the offensive to drive the attackers away." He bowed. "I am his lieutenant, Hida Nagayasu. Commander Etsuji entrusted this tower's defense to us." He looked hopeful. "Are you here to reinforce our position?"

Hiruma Kyokai shook his head. "Charging out into the battlefield? Does he really think he can take on those numbers by himself?"

"You've never served with Etsuji," Shizuko replied. "I once saw him confront twelve-to-one odds and come out on top. He's like a tsunami. His tactics have served him well so far."

"We're on borrowed time," came the Kaiu's urgent reminder.

O-Ushi turned to Etsuji's lieutenant. "We're leaving. Grab whatever you need." She glanced up at the smaller watchtowers along the courtyard's perimeter. "Send someone to signal Etsuji back to the keep. We'll fight our way to the dock. I trust the boat is still there?"

The lieutenant didn't budge.

"I just gave you an order."

"With respect," Nagayasu replied, "you are not my commander."

Faces turned to regard her. He was right. They were samurai pledged to Etsuji's personal service. She could not supersede him. She didn't have rank.

She spoke through clenched teeth. "Hida Etsuji is my father's cousin. You are pledged to serve my family."

"But not you," he replied. "Our orders are to hold this tower. We'll die before giving the Shadowlands so much as an inch."

His words were measured, but his tone hid nothing. He wasn't about to follow the orders of a teenage girl. Not when it meant facing the rage of Lord Etsuji, and his power to strip them of station, to brand them as cowards.

She caught the eye of a nearby Mantis. "I suppose you feel the same?"

He said nothing, but the glance he shared with the others suggested they didn't care for the idea of dying here. Which was good, because she needed them to sail the *Poison Tide*.

Perhaps she could withdraw without Etsuji's men. But that would mean abandoning them to their fates. The Crab could not afford that. And if they fell, their bodies would only add to



the invaders' numbers. She had to try to convince them.

"The Great Bear has called you back," she said.

Eyes widened. Whispers arose among Crab and Mantis alike.

Nagayasu raised his voice. "Remember your orders! Think of the glory that Lord Etsuji will share when the Crab celebrate how he retook this tower! He would not pull back! The Great Bear would never order his samurai to abandon their posts! Trust Lord Etsuji's plan, which has brought us this far, and—"

O-Ushi slammed her fist into Nagayasu's gut.

He crumpled and lay still.

She raked her gaze across bewildered faces. They were tired. Injured. But also proud. They'd followed their commander into the jaws of hell itself. For some, this may have been their only chance to be remembered by history, to have their families elevated through service to the clan. Each one was an asset to the Crab. Each one with a family awaiting them.

I am not leaving anyone behind.

"A crab will sometimes change its shell, especially when it is broken." She let her words settle over them. "Hida Etsuji has led you not to victory, but to ruin! He has abandoned you to seek his own glory, left you in crumbling defenses that will not hold. A worthy leader does not waste lives to make some point. If you fall here, you weaken the Crab. You will give your bodies to the Shadowlands, to rise again, to draw blade against your kin! What is so admirable about dying here when you could still do good? About obeying a leader who disregards your very lives?"

"But if you pledge yourself to me, there will be other chances at victory. Other chances, but only if we survive!"



In the distance, something cracked. Like stone splitting, or a hundred bones breaking.

The ground exploded in the courtyard. The dust fell, revealing a massive boulder, surely a chunk of the broken curtain wall. A mass of armored bodies fell away from the projectile, and a dozen more crawled up from the dirt beneath it. Animated skeletons. They drew corroded blades.

There was no more time for speeches. Deeds, not words, was the Way of Hida.



She slammed her fist into the skull that charged her. It shattered like porcelain.

She shouted. "You can die for Etsuji, or you can live for the Crab!"

Their voices returned as one: "For the Crab!"

The defenders rushed as one into the wave of undead. As stone subtly controlled the unstoppable current of a river, O-Ushi guided the overwhelming momentum of her spinning warhammer until she was a constantly moving thresher of broken bones.

A body bumped into her. She spun into the face of a Mantis samurai. He flicked viscera off his farming implements. "So you're O-Ushi. Kudaka sent you?"

"My father sent me," she replied. "Can your boat take us all downriver?"

"Lady, if you can get us out of here and neck-deep in a *shōchū* bottle, I'll take you all the way to the Island of Silk."

Fair enough. She lifted her voice, "Fall back to the docks!"

Then she sprinted towards the nearest ladder leading up onto the wall, sweeping shambling bodies aside. Shizuko appeared beside her, spear in hand. "Docks aren't this way."

"Someone needs to signal Etsuji." Perhaps he'd made the wrong call in trying to hold the keep instead of drawing back. But he was still family. He was still Hida. Better that he should live to learn from his mistakes than die for them.

"Perhaps the enemy drew him out on purpose."

O-Ushi grimaced. "Then this will be a quick errand."

The wall had three tiers, with ladders reaching up to each exposed floor. Narrow slits in the wall afforded space for archers to aim at the bottom of the wall, and battlements allowed a view of the Shadowlands beyond. O-Ushi strapped her hammer to her back and climbed up to the first floor, Shizuko following wordlessly. Her hand went to the conch shell horn in the pouch by her side. Would Etsuji be able to hear it?

From her vantage, she spotted goblins crawling over the debris of the collapsed hall, squeezing through an opening at the top. From the other direction, cracking bodies swarmed impossibly without muscle or flesh. If they reached the bottom of the ladder, she and Shizuko would be trapped, nowhere to go but up...

Shizuko plunged her spear into the floor, then strung her bow. "I'll hold them off," she said. "You'll have plenty of time to signal Etsuji."

"No good. You'll be overrun."

"I can bottleneck them at the foot of the ladder. You've seen how fast I can fire arrows."

"And if they rush you, you'll have to deal with them alone."

She placed a hand on O-Ushi's shoulder, met her eyes. "Yoritoko-chan. Please."

O-Ushi hesitated. Few ever addressed her by that name, her *true* name, a name chosen to honor her grandmother, not a nickname that caught fire. Hearing it transformed Shizuko into the girl who headbutted her during a fencing lesson, a girl who snuck in pastries and shared



them in secret when they all should have been sleeping. A girl who once shot three pheasants with one arrow. If she trusted anyone with her life, she trusted her *doshi*, her dōjō partner.

"If something goes wrong," she replied, "I'll toss you off myself."

Shizuko grinned and nocked her bow.

O-Ushi's mind raced as she scrambled up the ladders, trying not to focus on the sound of Shizuko's bow beneath her, or to keep count of how many arrows she'd loosed. Instead, she recalled one of the standing orders hammered into Hida students at the dōjō: to pull back at the war-shell's call, to "return to the wall." Etsuji would know what it meant.

Third floor. The battlements before her. O-Ushi flung herself to the edge and kissed the horn's bronze mouthpiece.

Her hand fell limply to her side.

Beneath her was a sea of walking bones. Skeletal remains marched shoulder to shoulder in strict formation, while goblins rushed between their ranks. They stretched across the horizon, a flood of claws and skulls and fangs, mixing in a chaotic array that made O-Ushi's head spin, yet marching, steadily, to the drumming of her panicking heart. Flickering shapes arose among them, as if spontaneously bursting into being. Maws attached to headless torsos rippling with muscle. Monstrous centipedes with human hands for claws. Enormous spiders with the horned heads of bulls. A horned giant with glowing lava flowing in the cracks of its stone skin. They were the Kuni's encyclopedia of oni sprung fresh from the page and given nightmarish life. Even in the tapestries hanging from her father's grand hall, she'd never seen so many twisted beings in one place.

Something wet and quivering rose from their mass. Her eyes caught on the headless, limbless body, its red-stained armor glinting wetly, like a cockroach's shell. The corpse was carried on a flat palanquin, the columns of which were the torn and reconnected limbs of a riding pony. His severed parts had been messily pinned to the armor, flailing limply, as if their bones had been dissolved. Where the head had been, rose instead the stained personal banner of Hida Etsuji, driven far into the neck stump, replacing his spine. Painted over his personal heraldry, the symbol of the trisected diamond faintly glowed in unearthly fire. The watchtower commander, now one of Jigoku's warbanners.

Beyond the horrors rose a mountain.

Her vision blurred. Her eyes refused to focus on the leviathan rising from the hordes, limp bodies falling away. Her clouding vision caught sight of its rusty iron-scaled flesh, three serpentine tongues writhing independently of its abyssal maw. Its thick mane was a forest of webbed nightmares, each spine a clawed tree trunk sprouting down its back and reptilian tail. And even though it was too distant to make out further details, when it opened its eyes, and three pinpoints of light grew into glaring torches, a diamond shape that overcame her vision, the hairs on O-Ushi's neck stood from her flesh, and all warmth fell from her numb limbs.





It saw her. It knew her.

Its name tumbled from her lips.

“Akuma.”

And then she was falling.

Her hand caught a ladder’s rung, wrenching her shoulder and banishing the clouds from her eyes. O-Ushi reeled from the pain. Every fiber of her being rejected what she’d just seen. Only the most depraved storytellers whispered of the oni lord, a being sprung from the hubris of an Elemental Master in the earliest days of the Empire. It was slain centuries ago. It did not exist.

No one knows his strategy. No one prepared for him.

That is the greatest advantage of all.

Her feet hit the floor running. A thousand thoughts battled for her mind. In the Crab’s history, there had only been a few nightmares that could be called “oni lords.” The Crab had never stopped any of them from entering the Empire. But the Kaiu Wall hadn’t existed back then, either. If they could rally, if she could get to her father...

A cry from below. Shizuko fell, entangled with a goblin, off the edge.

Ice crystalized in her blood as her friend’s body crumpled against stone debris. Red splashed onto the mortar, but O-Ushi could not tell if it was hers, or the goblin’s. Shizuko lay still, *far too still*, as if to contrast against the hammering of O-Ushi’s mortal heart.



She let go. Pain stabbed through her ankles as she tumbled down, sliding next to Shizuko's red-drenched side. Four skeletal horrors and six dead goblins lay nearby. Even drowning in worry, in the wake of what she'd seen, O-Ushi felt pride at how many foes her friend had slain.

It didn't look so bad. Most of the blood was the goblin's after all. She cast her friend a reassuring look. "Don't move. I'll carry you. We need to—"

Shizuko's eyes, dull and wide, were not moving.

It was as if all warmth, the very motion of her heart beating, was sapped into the cold ground. The earth moved beneath her knees, brown clouds still drifted across the rusty bowl of the sky, and yet she felt anchored in place. Her breathless chest threatened to tear as she was pulled in two directions: a past where her sunshine-faced friend was alive, and the present moment, where she wasn't.

Numbly she drew her small knife and ensured her friend would not rise again. She forced herself to her feet.

And stumbled. Her vision blurred again, a tide welling into her eyes and down her cheeks. She felt her stomach twist like Etsuji's bloody banner in the wind, writhe like the tongues of the marching oni lord.

I told you not to hold them off! I told you! I...

She trusted her. Trusted her to live. Like Shizuko had trusted O-Ushi when she'd led them all into this dark place. Shizuko had plans. There were maps she wanted to draw. There were boys she liked. There were foods in Iuchi lands she'd wanted to try, Asahina sakes she'd wanted to drink. They were going to see the sumo championships in just a few weeks. They were going to go together. Now, she wouldn't even receive a burial. She was the Shadowlands' now. Her body, her future, and perhaps even her soul. Once again, a friend had set aside her own future and followed O-Ushi into these cursed lands. And once more, she would return alone.

Just beyond, Kaiu Fusao watched, stunned. Returning for her. Searching for words.

Would he be the next? How many others would she lead to their doom? It was never easy for her to make friends. Those she had, who really understood her, were precious. How many more would the Shadowlands take away? How long until she was completely...

No. Don't be selfish. Now is not the time.

She made no effort to hide the tears streaking her cheeks as she stood again. She squared Fusao in her determined gaze. "We are out of time."

They sprinted for the docks. She carved a path for them both through the bones and blades. They said nothing. Shizuko's lifeless face, and the coal-beacon eyes of Akuma no Oni, burned into her mind. She couldn't afford another moment. She had to warn her father.

There would be time later, time to burn Shizuko's favorite incense. Time to record her name and recall her deeds. To ask for forgiveness. To mourn her loss. A time would come for the dead. But now, she had to tend to the living. She had to tend to the Empire.

