

Chapter 1

A cool breeze brushed at the pines dotting the hillside. The ache in Shura's temples flared hot and sharp. Her blood tingled with anticipation, an itch she couldn't scratch. Feng sniffed at the breeze beside her and let a growl trickle from his throat. They were close. Shura eased her net-cannon from her back and held it at the ready, its familiar weight an anchor for her nerves. She had spent half the night wondering if they had taken on more than they could handle. If this was the night she got somebody killed. It would almost be a relief when the fight was joined. Her finger settled on the trigger, steady. The shrubbery beside the path rustled as if the countryside was warning them away. Wallace jumped at the sound, bumped into Jin.

"Watch where the fuck you're going," her twin brother hissed. His broadsword gleamed dully in the moonlight, the blade a hand-breath wide and five feet long. Far too heavy a weapon for most men to wield, but the width of Jin's back and the knotted strength in his forearms, thickly twisted like the mooring lines of a ship, made such a feat look frighteningly easy.

Wallace swallowed hard. "Sorry."

Shura almost pitied him. Soft brown eyes wide and alert, fingers shaking as they fumbled over the arrows in his quiver. It was understandable. He was only fifteen, and he hadn't been hunting demons nearly as long as the rest of them. Still, he had his uses.

Wallace finally managed to nock an arrow. "Where—"

"*Shut up.*" Jin inched forward, eyes on the bend ahead. The path snaked between the hills, winding back upon itself every thirty yards or so. Blind spots everywhere, the perfect ambush. And where chūnari were concerned, an ambush was often fatal.

Feng, eight hundred pounds of liquid muscle and shock-white fur, padded along beside her, silent as smoke on the wind. Shura scanned the shadow-soaked landscape, the hulking silhouettes of the hills beside them, the pinprick lights of the village in the valley below. Her temples lanced with pain again, the itch in her blood spiked violently, and then she saw them.

The chūnari came slithering out of the shrubbery, two on either side. Man-sized serpents with a woman's head, a horrifying visage of glittering green eyes and poison-coated fangs. Two stunted arms protruded from their torsos, far stronger than they appeared, and from their tails sprouted a stinger sharp enough to punch through armor.

Wallace wheeled on the spot and let fly before he had sighted properly. The arrow flew wide. Shura grimaced and leveled her net cannon. She set her legs, braced for the kick, and squeezed the trigger. The blast set her ears to ringing and sent a shock through her gut, but the weighted net flew true. The closest chūnari hit the ground and rolled down the hillside, flopping madly about with the net tangled around her. Feng leapt clean over the flailing demon and buried the second beneath his bulk. Jin waded in among the other two on the opposite side, a bellow erupting from his lungs that sent a chill down Shura's spine.

“Shoot her!” Shura cried to Wallace, pointing at the trapped chūnari. The other had its tail free, poised to strike at Feng with that lethal stinger. Shura reached within, past the stabbing in her temples, past the frenzied itch in her blood and the hammering of her heart, and let loose. A day-bright wave of radiance blasted from her body, searing against the darkness. Only the demons remained cloaked in shadow, charcoal silhouettes that no light could touch, now recoiling blindly against the brightness. Shura's eyes stung at the sudden glare, but she forced them open. Jin cut one of the chūnari nearly in half, shearing through armored scale, muscle, and

bone, then lost his weapon as the dying demon thrashed about with the blade stuck between her ribs.

Feng's chūnari let loose an agonized shriek as he tore an arm loose with his teeth and gouged at her face with a paw the size of a cannonball. The stinger came down and grazed the tiger's flank as he twisted aside to bite at the demon's neck. Shura whipped a single-shot black powder pistol from the back of her belt, one of two, and cocked the hammer. The stinger came up again. A steady breath out, a squeeze of the trigger, and the chūnari's tail spasmed wildly as the ball of lead blew a bloody, ragged hole into her flesh.

Shura pulled the second pistol from her belt, leveled it again, and pulled the trigger. The chūnari's tail went limp, the muscle ruined, then she twitched her last as Feng ripped a chunk of sinew from her neck. Feng let out a whine and staggered down the hillside until he keeled over on the path. His flank glistened with blood, a red smear against the snow of his coat. Shura glanced over her shoulder, where Wallace had emptied half his quiver into the chūnari held under the net, then over to Jin on the other side of the path.

He had caught hold of the last demon's tail, holding the stinger at bay a foot from his face with his other hand wrapped around her throat and a knee planted on her torso. Her two strong, spindly arms pried at Jin's wrist, pulled his grip free, and then her head shot forward to bite down on Jin's fist. His face twisted in pain, a guttural groan escaped through his teeth. Wallace pulled an arrow from his quiver. Shura unsheathed the katana on her hip and sprinted to her brother's aid, shouting for Wallace not to shoot.

"Alright, then—" Jin shoved his fist down the demon's throat. Her eyes bulged wide as her mouth was forced apart by the mass of his forearm. She clamped down harder, tracing bloody streaks up his flesh. Jin yanked on her tail, pulled her taut like a bowstring as he forced

his arm further down her gullet, working against the combined effort of her own two arms. His veins stood out like cords, his forehead slick with sweat, face contorted with rage.

Shura raised her blade. "Hold still!"

She slashed down from overhead, a perfect strike. The keen-edged metal sliced through the chūnari's upper arm and sent a gout of blood surging from the stump. She shrieked and thrashed, livid with pain. Jin struggled to his feet and stomped down on her tail. "Come on," he growled as he pried away inside her throat. Shura pivoted to the chūnari's tail, stretched tight between Jin's foot and fist, and hacked away until the stinger detached in another sheet of blood.

Shura turned towards the demon's head, but there was no need. Jin yanked viciously at her insides as she struggled in vain, choking on his arm. Jin punctuated each tug with a grunted curse, dark eyes manic with hateful intent. "Ugly—fucking—whore!" There came the sound of ripping tissue, sick and wet and fleshy, and his arm burst free with a trail of viscera dangling from his fist. The chūnari gasped out a death rattle and collapsed to the blood-slick grass.

Jin discarded the mess and took stock of his wounds. The jagged cuts went up to his elbow, deep and dark with welling blood. The white of bone shone dully where his hand had been ripped open. "Fuck," he muttered under his breath.

Shura glanced back at where Feng lay, breathing laboriously. Wallace knelt beside the tiger, one hand on his heaving flank. "Is he going to die?" he asked.

She did her best to stem the guilt welling in her gut, only partially succeeding. Feng had never failed to protect her. She should have drawn quicker, shot quicker. All she could do now was try to save her friend. "Maybe not—she only grazed him. But he'll need some help."

"You plan on carrying him back to town?" Jin fell back against the hillside, clutching at his arm. His rugged features, as if carved from a block of iron, had gone pale and sweaty. He was

in for a rough night, but he would live. Whether it was due to their Shikōken lineage or some remarkable innate fortitude, Jin had always proved quite difficult to kill.

Shura ignored him. When it came to killing, Jin was peerless, but he wasn't much good for anything else. "Wallace, leave your pack and go. Tell them what happened."

With little more than a parting nod, Wallace shucked his pack to the ground and tore off into the night on long, lanky legs. The sound of his boots punching at the dirt faded, faded, and then it was just her and her headache. And Jin, and Feng, the crickets and the crows, and the mess of dark red demon blood smeared across the gently-waving grass.