

Risen from the Flames

By Robert Denton III

A week later, in the Phoenix lands to the east...

Tsukune was midstride across the threshold of the forest shrine before she realized her mistake. She winced as her right foot touched the blessed ground on the other side of the *torii* arch before her left. Before her peers and in the home of her ancestors, she'd barged into her family's shrine like a Lion.

When they had both progressed beyond the entrance, Tsukune whispered to the man matching her stride. "I did it again."

"No one noticed," Tadaka replied. "Just keep going."

Tsukune tucked her hands into her kimono sleeves and matched her pace with that of her charge, keeping their place in the wordless procession of topknots, Shiba family *mon*, and creamy white obi. Their path was a winding upward twist of stone steps and fiery *torii* arches. The crisp breeze stirred the sloping glades of pink moss to either side, sweeping up their petals to scatter along the way. It was a blessing in the unseasonable spring warmth, even as it painted the temple arches with thick coats of pollen.

Tadaka whispered prayers while he walked, passing a string of beads between his large hands, one jade orb at a time. He towered a full head above the rest, his elaborate layered kimono making his broad back into a lone banner for the Isawa family. In each backward glance he drew from the others, Tsukune saw eyes brightening with respect. Those cast at her, she could not read.

At the top of the stairs, their path finally opened into the stone temple courtyard. A mortuary tablet still stood at its center, but the other trappings of the previous day's funeral had long since been cleared away. The procession poured into the courtyard, the Shiba samurai dividing themselves into small groups as they awaited their turns in the sprawling two-story *honden*. Tsukune ladled water onto her hands and forearms, then yielded the blessed waters to the next in line. She left the smothering crowd to gaze into the nearby reflection pool, where



shrine maidens fished fallen peach blossoms off its surface. In the wavering mirror at her feet, a seventeen-summers girl looked back at her.

"You're obsessing," remarked Tadaka, appearing at the pool beside her.

"I cannot make such mistakes," she whispered. "Not here. If I err during tonight's ceremony—"

"No one will notice," he reassured her. "They will be too busy watching themselves to care about you. Well," he added, "except for the ladies. They will be watching me."

Her mouth twitched upward. "I'll bet you truly believe that."

They stood in silence, watching the *miko* work: the steady dipping of the net into the glossy pond and the ceremonious sweeping of the stone rim, interwoven with the singing of nightingales.

"You know," Tadaka said, "if either of us should worry about tonight, it would be me."

"That would be a first," Tsukune replied.

"Exactly." Tadaka smiled. The wind shook the white-pink canopy, releasing a cascade of blossoms and filtered light. His eyes twinkled at the shrine maidens' distress as the flowers scattered around him. "When the breeze steals the peach tree's flowers, it appears spontaneous. But in fact, it was a planned event. That the breeze would come, that the tree would be here, that the petals should fall just so... These things were determined at the time of its birth. In light of this, what sense is there in worrying?"

"That seems fatalistic," Tsukune said.

"I take heart in it." He stepped closer to the pond. Patches of light moved across Tadaka's body as they reflected from the water.

"I have seen encouraging signs," he whispered. "The masters favor me... well, most of them do." He chuckled. "Tonight's ceremony will grant me the clout I need. When they see the wisdom of my plans, I will go to Crab lands to complete my research. And you will come with me. There, we will plant the seeds of the future." He paused, then softly added, "Our future."

His knuckle grazed hers. In the reflection pool, the girl's cheeks adopted the shade of the blooming camellias.

"Do my eyes deceive me, or has Isawa Tadaka-sama come down from his mountain?"

Tsukune stiffened as Tadaka grinned toward the new voice. A bright young man approached from the courtyard gathering. Above his white obi, imprinted over the chest of his elaborate silks, was a fiery wing surrounding a *naginata*, the mon of the Heaven's Wing.

Tadaka crossed his arms at the newcomer. "Tetsu-san! I was wondering when you would have the courage to approach me." They laughed together while Tsukune watched, as a child might spy on adolescents.

"Congratulations are in order," Tetsu said. "It is a great honor Master Rujo has bestowed upon you."

"I shall endeavor to be worthy of it," Tadaka replied. "I understand you too will be



participating in the ceremony?”

Tetsu nodded. “*Hai*. Tonight, I will demonstrate sensei’s additions to the Heaven’s Wing *kata*. Although I will certainly fall short of his grace and expertise, I will give my all in honor of his memory.”

Tsukune looked away as they chatted. Their voices faded into the ambience of the temple courtyard, a carpeting din of exchanged greetings, shouts of recognition, and steep bows. They were old, young, and *gempuku* fresh, more members of the Shiba family than she could recall ever having seen in one place. Above, the wind stirred the tapestries hanging from the slanted roofs of the stages used for the sacred dance. Gifts from other temples in other provinces, they were like the Shiba beneath them: vibrant splashes of color amid the gray stone and polished wood of the shrine. All save for one: a rustic and faded depiction of a waterfall, thrust high above a pine canopy. The column of stamps in a dry corner told its story: Lion in origin, completed in Phoenix lands. Among the others, its colors were faded, inexperienced, and unbalanced.

Tsukune decided that she liked it. She could relate.

“After all, I must make it up to Tsukune-kun,” Tadaka teased, her name snapping Tsukune back to attention. Tadaka was perhaps the only person who could call her “kun” and get away with it. “It is because of my presence that she has no break from her *yōjimbō* duties, even when all the others do.”

She shot him a hot glare. A playful smile was his reply.

“Tsukune-san is quite diligent,” Tetsu offered. His soft smile touched his eyes. “It is good to see you again. You were missed at the Kanto festival. Some others talked, but I assured them you would have been there if your duties had permitted it.”

As she always did when she had no recourse, she merely nodded and replied, “As you say.”

Finally alone in the inner sanctum, Tsukune reverently placed her incense bowl over the hot coals. Within moments, twin coils of agarwood smoke arose, entwining the marker of the recently deceased, a lacquered box of ashes displaying a slip of paper. In the hazel candlelight, Tsukune read the words on its surface: *Shiba Ujimitsu, Champion of the Phoenix*.

Tsukune held the string of beads just as the miko had shown her. She tried not to think about what she’d overheard from that miko: that the Phoenix Champion had passed before his time. That it had strongly affected his brother. Instead, she closed her eyes and lowered her head, whispering a prayer for the spirit of the deceased.

He’d sat at the head of the banquet hall during the *gempuku* ceremony at which she had come of age. She recalled how he had appeared then, his squat frame and plain features mismatched with his glorious winged *kataginu* jacket, unfurled broadly as if to take flight. To his right was the seat belonging to his most promising student, another seat of high honor.



Shiba Tetsu sat there on that day, in the seat she imagined would have otherwise gone to her brother—had he been alive.

A clatter resounded from outside. The memory faded. Tsukune looked up at the stone statue of Shiba, the founder of her family. He was kneeling in this depiction. It seemed larger to her now than ever before. Outside, she heard the chiding of a priestess as she directed the shrine maidens in preparation for the ceremony.

Just one night. Then she and Tadaka would return to their simple lives. To their future together.

Quietly, she reached into her white obi and withdrew a thin cloth. Frayed at the edges, no longer than her forearm, the plain cotton still displayed the cracked mon of her brother's dojo. Her fingers clasped the cloth, his *tenugui*. She released a quiet breath. And for a moment, it was as if he were here, removing this cloth from his forehead and wrapping it around the tiny scrape on her knee, smiling at his little sister.

"I will do my best," she whispered. Above, the stone face of Shiba looked down at her.

In the moonlit courtyard before the shrine, Tetsu's slender naginata traced the stars with its blade. It spun in silver arcs around him, not pausing between his steps. Tsukune saw not two entities, man and blade, but one body in a dance of light and steel and emptiness. Encoded into each graceful gesture was the death of an invisible opponent, each silk-rustling swing a final breath. Tetsu froze, one foot tucked behind the other knee, balanced on a single leg, spear outthrust. In that moment, he became a bamboo rod floating on a stream that reflected the sky.

Tetsu placed his weapon on its stand and pressed his forehead to the ground. As he rose, the courtyard brightened with the afterglow of his performance. The fiery braziers licked moths from the night air in their jealousy. He returned to his seat, a lone *sakura* among the gathered maples.

There was none other who could have performed the Heaven's Wing kata so flawlessly, not even if Ujimitsu were alive. If the late champion still dwelled in this world, surely it was in the skill of his highest pupil.

A dull chime raked the sky, signaling the Hour of the Rat. The collective witnesses of the courtyard turned as one to face the temple entrance. The shrine's painted doors slid aside. As one, the Shiba bowed. Among the procession of shrine maidens, priests, and *shugenja* that silently entered the courtyard, Tsukune caught the glint of moonlight tracing the edges of a lacquered palanquin.

Resting on a cypress stand was a curved sword. The detailed feathers intricately carved into its sheath drew the light of the braziers, glowing crimson and burnished gold. Even from where she sat, Tsukune could see each pearl set into its manta-skin handle, the untouched ribbons



of silk woven flawlessly around its pommel, and the curved bronze wings that were its *tsuba* handguard.

Ofushikai. The ancestral sword of the Phoenix, wielded by every Phoenix Clan Champion since the dawn of the Empire.

The last to leave the shrine were five figures in elaborate silk robes, their winged kataginu each marked with a different mon of an element captured within a perfect ring. As they entered the open night, Tsukune recalled the five elements as Tadaka had long ago taught her: Fire, Water, Air, Earth, and Void. Five natural elements, and one Elemental Master for each.

At last, she spotted Isawa Tadaka as he took his place beside the Master of Earth. Tadaka looked even more resplendent than before in his ceremonial robes. The empty space in his backward-cast shadow tugged at her, but she walled her heart against the instinct to join him and remained in her seat. Only those beloved by the *kami* could preside over this part of the ceremony. If he felt odd without Tsukune there, he gave no sign. Towering over his sensei and half his age, Tadaka was a tall pine beside a withered oak. There were other apprentices as well, one for each Elemental Master. As one, they lowered their heads, lips moving in unison. Their words did not carry to the crowd, instead rising directly to the Heavens.

Tsukune instinctively felt the weight of another's gaze. From his seat upon the courtyard dais, the temporary lord of Shiba Castle looked at her: Shiba Sukazu, former *hatamoto* of the clan champion, as well as his brother. The braziers cut faint wrinkles into his face and lit the streak of silver that adorned his temples. The white of his obi nearly glowed, as did the scroll clutched in his hands. The final words of Shiba Ujimitsu, his death poem, were enclosed within that scroll.

She froze in his expressionless gaze, the guilt of having met his eyes flooding her face with heat as she struggled to identify what mistake she had made to draw his attention. But there came no reprisal from the castle's lord. He merely nodded, then returned his attention to

the ceremony. She followed suit, head swimming in the wake of her relieved sigh.

The first apprentice to step forward was she who accompanied the Master of Air. Five shrine maidens surrounded her. The rhythmic sound of *taiko* drumming filled the clearing. Each thundering boom was a slap against Tsukune's heart. As the maidens weaved in an elaborate dance, the shugenja drew a small conch shell and placed it against her lips. As the sound reverberated throughout the crowd, a



gust of wind raked the canopy, sending down a shower of white peach blossoms. The kami had accepted the offering.

It was Tadaka's turn now. With his ceremonial robes and impressive stature, he dominated the clearing. The shrine maidens shifted their dance. It was heavier now, more centered. Tadaka held out a ceramic bowl, revealing a verdant sprout within. He rotated through his prayer beads with the other hand, murmuring inwardly. Slowly at first, then all at once, the sprout parted and bloomed with white petals.

Tsukune winced as gasps arose from those around her. They swiftly grew quiet again, but even so, she could imagine the elders' thoughts about this younger, more unruly generation.

Next was the student of Fire. The sacred dance shifted into lively steps and energetic twists. The young man drew a candle and offered it with an outward thrust. He closed his eyes and murmured. The light of the courtyard flickered and grew with each inwardly whispered prayer. The crowd craned their necks, all eyes on the candlewick.

The student stopped. His eyes opened. Nothing changed. He blinked his confusion. Then came a loud cry as one of the courtyard tapestries burst into flame.

The crowd swung toward the sudden flash of light. Fire consumed the aged fabric. A gust of wind tore at the flames, lighting the shrine's thatched roof ablaze.

Tsukune felt bodies push at her. Screams pierced the night as servants broke from their stations and ran. Shiba Sukazu rose, but his face did not change. His mouth moved, giving commands. The assembled samurai burst into action, evacuating the courtyard, fetching water. Some ran toward the shrine. She realized she was one of them.

The fire greedily peeled off hard strips of lacquer, tossing them aside before biting deep into the ancient wood beneath. Already it had touched ground, like spilled paint.

The Elemental Masters stood unmoving near the burning shrine. Their illuminated faces watched the spreading flames with calm interest, as if they were reading a scroll or judging a painting. Two seemed to exchange words, but Tsukune could not hear them. A piece of smoldering tile broke against the ground beside the Master of Water. She did not even flinch. And Tadaka watched among them, the lone remaining student in the courtyard, indistinguishable save for his massive silhouette.

Tsukune ran to his side and found her breath. She seized his arm. "Tadaka-sama! It's too dangerous. Come with me."

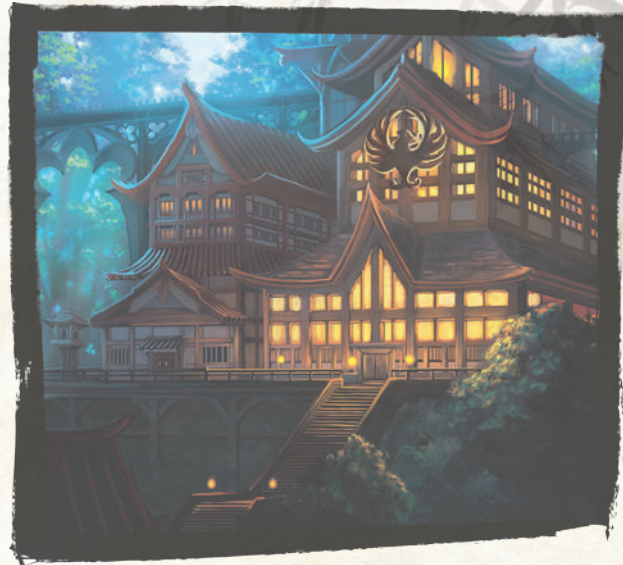
"No!" Tadaka's uncharacteristic bark froze the blood in Tsukune's veins. He spun, eyes glowing, his outline traced in orange light. "Forget me! The inner shrine! The library!" Genealogies, prayers, star maps, incantations. Priceless knowledge. Irreplaceable.

Someone ran past her. As she turned toward the shrine, she glimpsed Shiba Tetsu, his resplendent silks fluttering with his dash. As he leaped into the flaming shrine, his face was that of a man at peace. And then he was gone, swallowed up by the light.

She followed. The heat pricked her flesh and tears fell from her stinging eyes, but she



pushed forward toward the inner sanctum, where Tetsu must have gone. All was blazing yellow light or iron-black smoke. She could not continue. Spinning around, she saw no exit. Only a few steps away, her path was curtained with flames. Should they be so fast? She remembered her brother's tenugui and pulled it from her obi. Pressing it to her face and sucking air through the fabric, she crouched low beneath the smoke and looked for options.



Above the fire's din, she heard a desperate voice. "Help us, please!" It came from the side room that had once been the administrative office. There, she found two servants and a shrine maiden. One servant was pinned beneath burning furniture, the other calling for help. The miko just stared as flames cascaded down the walls.

Tsukune slammed the case of shelves with her shoulder. It rocked, but it did not budge. The cloth fell from her hands as she pushed. The shrine maiden, snapped out of her trance, appeared by her side and did the same. Together they forced the case away. Tsukune did not have to look at the man's leg to know it would be no use to him.

A river of smoke rolled above them. Tsukune searched for an exit and found none—none but the flame-licked wall before her: a wooden frame, thick paper, and thin plaster.

"This way!" she shouted, and with all of her strength, she threw herself against it.

The heat seared her cheek, and the flames curled around her. But the paper wall broke, tearing a jagged hole into the shrine's garden. She fell into a bush and rolled into a facedown pile. Behind her, the miko led the limping servants out of the burning portal and into the night.

Tsukune started to rise, but froze. She was at the feet of a man in grand ceremonial robes, his shadow splayed behind him like unfurled wings. The mon of the Elemental Master of Fire beamed proudly on his chest. He stared into the flames, hands pressed tight against a long string of amber beads. His face was stone serious, yet prayers tumbled out in his rising voice in a tone that was almost pleading. He twisted his palms. The string snapped with a loud pop, scattering beads to the ground.

By the time the final bead fell, the last of the shrine's flames were extinguished. The Master closed his eyes and whispered, "Thank you, kami of flame, for accepting this gift."

Tsukune watched curling trails of smoke rise from a prayer bead lying inches from her face.



The next moments flooded quickly by as the Phoenix Clan samurai took stock of the damage. The honden fared better than it had seemed. Thanks to Shiba Sukazu's commands and the expertise of the Master of Fire, the flames had never reached the inner sanctum, nor the holy-of-holies. One third of the outer structure was destroyed, but the remaining sections had not collapsed. Other than a broken *shimenawa* rope now emptied of its hosted spirit, relatively little of importance was lost. The shrine maidens would begin floating lanterns down the babbling stream to guide the lost spirit back to the shrine while a new blessed rope was prepared. The priests gave offerings in the hope that the shrine's state would not offend those remaining. In time, these scars would heal.

Some Shiba stepped out of the shrine. They carried artifacts, documents, and a hearth's worth of ashes and burns. Seeing herself in the reflection pool, Tsukune noted she had fared no better. Dark smudges marked her cheeks and forehead, and her dark-brown hair was now black and stiff. Her good kimono was flame-licked, stained, and sooted. She frowned and smacked the ash from her sleeves.

Then she looked back through the hole she'd torn in the shrine wall. Beyond the yawning portal stretched a black layer of charcoal petals and wisps of smoke. She stared at the place where she recalled having dropped her brother's cloth. Now it was like him: only scattered ash, nothing of him left in this world.

"Tsukune!"

The voice was Tetsu's. He was with the Elemental Masters, returning the pine box of Ujimitsu's ashes, which he had rescued from the flames. A cache of ancient scrolls peeked from a satchel slung around his immaculate kimono. He approached Tsukune, eyes wide with concern. Although he smelled of smoke, he hadn't even the faintest hint of ash or burn.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You shouldn't just leap into a burning building like that, Tsukune-san!"

She just stared at him, charred and sooty, like a bird with singed wings.

"Come with us," whispered the Master of Fire as he stepped beside Tadaka. "You need to hear this."

"Tadaka nodded, following the Master of Fire to the cabal of Elemental Masters to ensure their words would be private. He stood beside his sensei, Isawa Rujo, the Master of Earth, and ignored the older man's disapproving eyes.

"Your student has accepted full responsibility, Tsuke-sama," said Rujo.

The Fire Master's frown deepened. "It is a shame that I must dismiss him. He showed great promise."

"It cannot be helped," Rujo replied. "We must preserve face and prevent a panic. He is noble to have done what is necessary."



"Even so," murmured the Master of Fire.

"It has gotten...worse," breathed the decrepit Master of Air. He leaned on a jade-studded cane and struggled over a few breaths while the others waited. "We cannot...keep waiting for the imbalance...to correct itself. We must...become directly...involved."

The Master of Water nodded. Her face was hidden behind twin waterfalls of black hair cascading from her cone-shaped hat. "Even a pebble will cause ripples. The other clans will soon have questions. Better that the Phoenix provide the answers."

"Perhaps it would be wiser to temporarily suspend the ceremony," Rujo suggested. "The destruction of the shrine is an ill omen."

One by one, they turned to the Master of Void. Isawa Ujina had already drawn a circle on the ground. Rising, he reached into one of his many pouches, procuring a handful of polished stones. As the others watched, he tossed them into the circle. Then he squatted beside it and studied the stones with a deeply furrowed brow.

Tadaka stepped forward. "Father?"

"The ceremony must continue." Ujina looked back. "The Phoenix Clan needs a champion."

Tsukune took her place in the ring of Shiba. To her right stood Tetsu, eyes reverently lowered. Even Shiba Sukazu joined the circle. They all stood together, shoulder by shoulder, with the Master of Void at the center. In the Master's hands rested the ancestral sword of the Phoenix.

"Ofushikai," the Ujina spoke, "We humbly beg you, reveal to us your chosen." Then, he turned to the man directly before him and bowed, extending his arms and offering the sword.

Shiba Sukazu received it with a lowered head. He held it for a few moments while the others watched. Ujina rose. From her position on the other side of the circle, Tsukune detected relief in Sukazu's smile.

Sukazu turned to the Shiba at his right and offered the blade. It was accepted. The samurai held the blade, but when nothing happened, he bowed his head and offered it again. The blade passed from one Shiba to the next, slowly and reverently, beneath the ever-present eyes of the Void Master.

Tsukune glanced at Tetsu and caught his concerned look. He smiled reassuringly at her. She returned the expression. The mon of the Heaven's Wing and the personal chop of Shiba



Ujimitsu on his shoulders both glowed in the moonlight coating his flawless kimono.

It will be you, Tetsu-sama, she thought. Her smile broadened. *As it should be.*

She bowed when the sword came. It was lighter than the sword of her mother, as if the sheath were empty. For fleeting moments, she watched the moonlight dance along the edges of the bronze handguard and the exquisite pearls inlaid on the sword's hilt. The sheath was exquisitely carved from a single piece of wood, as if real feathers had simply petrified around the blade. She couldn't find a single flaw. The ancient sword lacked the drastic curve of a true katana and the benefits of modern smithing, yet it looked and felt as though it had just been forged. This would be the only time she would ever hold this sword. She held her breath to make the moment last just a little longer.

She turned to Tetsu. *The greatest honor will be passing Ofushikai to you, Tetsu-sama.*

The sword jutted out from the sheath, exposing one inch of flawless blade.

Isawa Ujina gasped. Tsukune froze. From the circle arose whispers and exchanged glances. Across the ring, Sukazu smiled. Tsukune looked to Tetsu. His eyes were wide saucers. Like hers.

"It has chosen!" Ujina announced. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. He locked her gaze, smiling, clasping her arms. "It is you, Shiba Tsukune, Champion of the Phoenix!"

Not even the chirps of nocturnal frogs filled the silence befalling the courtyard. Tsukune wanted to shatter it, to tell them it was a mistake. She couldn't be the one. It wasn't possible.

But to contradict the Master of Void was unthinkable. So instead, she lowered her head, and her voice finally returned. "As you say." She knelt before the Isawa and swore to serve.

Tsukune was alone in the inner sanctum. Moonlight fell in thick shafts through burned holes in the ceiling. They painted her new winged kataginu in silver patches. In her obi rested the map of Shiba Castle and the surrounding province—her new home. She considered lighting incense before the statue of Shiba and the shrine to Ujimitsu, but the notion twisted her gut. This place already smelled of burnt cypress and ash. Were Tadaka here, she would let him light the incense so as not to offend the present spirits. But Tadaka was not here. And after tomorrow, when he returned to his duties, she would remain behind.

She looked down at Ofushikai as it rested in her hands, feeling its weight and the grooves of its carved sheath. Her clumsy hands against the flawless sword were calloused, rough, and dirty. Not like the graceful hands of Shiba Tetsu, hands that had never even had the chance to touch this blade. Now they never would.

In the moment after she was chosen, his eyes were dim and he'd barely concealed a frown. When the blade jutted from its sheath, had it been extending itself to him?

A rapid breath came. Then another. Then a constant stream of them. Her chest tightened as cold hands squeezed her heart. She was drowning. She was burning. She fell upward through the yawning gap of the ceiling. Clouds covered the moon. Thoughts spilled out of her mind like



an overfull cup. *It's a mistake. You shouldn't be here. It's wrong. This is all wrong.*

A gentle weight on her shoulder. Eyes opening. The shrine was still here. She was still here. There was a floor beneath her feet and moonlight filtering through the ceiling. Fireflies had come into the shrine. They flashed, suspended in the air, blinking into and out of existence. Outside, the wind stirred the trees. Inside, all was still.

Tsukune still felt something on her shoulder, a light touch resting, but there was nothing there. She curled her fingers around Ofushikai's handle and, after a moment, drew the sword halfway from its sheath. In the reflection of its mirrored blade, she saw the face of a seventeen-summers girl.

And behind her, the face of Ujimitsu. Gone were his weathered wrinkles and his glorious winged kataginu. He wore simple rustic garb and the hint of a smile. His hand rested on her shoulder. Beyond him were dozens of Phoenix warriors. Old, young, female, and male, their clothes ranging from recent to antique, they filled the chamber, their glowing bodies filtering the light of the moon and casting no shadows. Generations of Phoenix Clan Champions, all standing with her, all offering that same subtle smile.

A thought came in a voice that was not hers, yet sounded so familiar. *You will never be alone, Tsukune.*

She sheathed the blade and released a silent breath.

"I will do my best," she whispered. Above, the stone face of Shiba smiled upon her.





Shiba Tsukune - Resolute Champion of the Phoenix Clan

