

Red Petals Scatter

By Robert Denton III

Hour of the Rat—The Forbidden City, Guest Quarters

This was the third time this evening that heavy footsteps thumping past her room broke Shahai's concentration. At this rate, she would *never* finish her father's letter. She wrinkled her nose at her brushwork mistake, then crumpled the paper up and tossed it into the mouth of the ceramic bowl lantern. Briefly, her sparse room became even more amber cast.

What time was it? It had to be the Hour of the Rat, at least. She was used to restless nights, but at least it was a chance to compose her letters or carve cuttlefish bone molds for casting her *meishōdō* jewelry. She was also used to the nighttime silence of the palace. But tonight was different. Why were people rushing past her door at this hour?

It wouldn't be servants. Servants were quiet, and they used the servant paths between the walls, not the main hallways. Guards, then? She sat up. What was going on?

Never mind. It didn't matter, really. What did she care about the intrigues of the palace? Whatever it was, would it improve her sorry lot or free her from this prison?

Shahai gathered her writing implements and tossed them along with a roll of papers into her satchel. Then she donned another kimono over her sleeping robes. She wasn't going to get anything done here with all the noise, but there was always her special quiet place.

There were a few guards about, but the halls were mostly empty. Only two guards rushed past her as she made her way outside. They were escorting a small entourage of servants, handmaidens judging from their garb. They, like everyone else, paid Shahai no attention. She forgot them as soon as they passed.

The garden air was crisp tonight. She could almost set aside her lantern due to the brightness of the perfect moon. Doji Shizue would be at the moon viewing party, assuming it hadn't concluded by now. Shahai had been invited, but she found little appeal sitting among gossiping strangers as they gawked at the sky, nor in accepting an invite extended only out of politeness. That her absence implied insult was of no consequence.

Shahai found the path to her hidden garden copse, pausing only to be sure she hadn't been followed before stepping through. As she walked, the palace came into view, rising above the hedge. The paper windows of the second floor glowed. Shahai couldn't stop looking at them, square-shaped lights against a starless night. She stumbled on branches and swatted at brush, reminding herself to regard the path, but her attention always returned to those windows.



Something really was going on tonight. Was there an intruder in the palace?

No, that would be exciting. Nothing exciting ever happened.

Her foot snagged. Rose thorns bit through her sock, and she stumbled like a foal into the clearing, landing roughly on her hands and knees. In the fog of night and her own thoughts, she hadn't realized that she'd already arrived at her destination.

She hadn't realized that she wasn't alone.

Hantei Sotorii sat on a thin blanket near the center of the clearing, half-painted in the light of a nearby paper lantern. Before him lay several sheets of mulberry paper and a wet inkbrush. A blade shone awkwardly in his hands, trembling and dipping with its own weight, the tip tracing a finger's breadth from his stomach, as if he was going to...

He looked up. Eye contact. He tensed like a startled deer.

She held her breath. If she moved, he would bolt. He had that look about him, of a fawn caught nibbling medicinal herbs in her father's garden. Her eyes bounced between the naked blade and his reddening face. A voice within, sounding like her father, suggested she should feel some alarm, or even compassion. But she couldn't stir up anything. Just a sense of absurdity, like she'd interrupted a poorly acted play.

"W-what are you doing?" she found herself asking.

"Nothing!" He sheathed the sword in an instant, jamming it into his obi. He pawed up his papers and swiped up the lantern, dragging himself up in shambles. Had he been crying?

"You saw nothing," he barked, voice cracking. "Forget this ever happened! I wasn't here!" Apparently forgetting his blanket, he crashed through the brush, dropping several papers in his retreat.

Shahai stood in the dark, her own breathing filling her ears. After several moments, she brought her hand to her face, gripped her cheek between her thumb and forefinger, and tugged.

Yes. She was awake. Sotorii had been here. That had happened.

A snaking breeze rustled one of the fallen papers. Absently she picked it up and read the words brushed there.



Red petals scatter

Black feathers sweep the floor clean

My hands are filthy

Shahai read it again. And again. This was a death poem. The last words of a samurai, written just before they passed.

He was committing *seppuku*. Honorable suicide. The last resort of the disgraced, a death by evisceration that absolved the dying of disgraceful action. He might have even gone through with it, had she not interrupted him.

She repeated the thought to herself several times. Each time it became more real. Sotorii—Daisetsu's brother and the crown prince of the Empire—had wanted to die.

Good. Perhaps death would improve him.

As she read it once more, a smile worked its way across her features. She didn't understand *all* of the imagery, but it seemed as though he felt guilty about *something*. If Sotorii felt guilty enough to fall on his sword, then why shouldn't he go through with it? And if Sotorii did, then wouldn't that make Daisetsu, as the next surviving kin, the proper heir to the throne?

Yes, Daisetsu would become Emperor! Not that brat! Daisetsu!

She had to tell him.

Carefully she folded the paper. Her hands shook with excitement. He'd want to see it, no doubt. She would present it to him, like a gift. Yes, it was a present for the *rightful* heir. The better heir. One that didn't play warrior with the Imperial ancestral sword when no one was looking, one that didn't terrorize the servants or injure the Ruby Champion to make a point. Someone admirable. Looking up, the cloud-raked moon almost looked like an eye touched by a smile. When had she last felt such hope for the future?

Tucking the poem away, she made for the palace, where some windows on the third floor—and the Imperial domicile—were just starting to light up.

“Come no closer!” The Seppun guard thrust out his palm just as Shahai turned into the hallway. There were five others, dressed in Imperial green and gold, unarmored but holding sheathed *nagamaki* and tensing at her approach. The one in charge, with the flowing jacket nearly dragging on the floor, laid his hand on the handle of a *tachi* hanging from his silk belt. “This is a restricted area. Leave immediately!”

“That is the Iuchi woman!” one of the younger guards announced. He was vaguely familiar. “What are you doing here? Go back to your quarters!”

“Your brother is in my class,” Shahai remarked. She frowned. “He performs poorly.”

Snickers arose from the others. The guard gripped his oversized *nagamaki* handle.

“Shahai-san?” came a gentle voice.



Daisetsu stepped into the hallway, pushing past the clustered Seppun. Shahai started to greet him, but something about his expression stopped her. He was listless, his hair let down, his face without the usual dusting of makeup. Over his bedtime *yukata*, he wore a pearl-hued sleeping jacket. His *obi* belt was sheet white.

Those were mourning garments. Had Sotorii gone through with it? Did Daisetsu already know?

The sergeant of the guards blocked Daisetsu's path with an extended arm. "Your highness, please return to your bedchambers. This guest is simply... lost."

"Let her through," he said. "I wish to see her. I wish to talk with her. Leave us alone."

The guard hesitated. "Your highness... I cannot do that. Given the circumstances—"

"She is a shugenja. I seek spiritual guidance. I must confide in private." Daisetsu offered a challenging look. "In this dark hour, would you deny this to your prince?"

The guard paled. "Of course not, my lord!" The guards parted, and Shahai stepped between them, crossing over the polished threshold and the red *torii* arch built into the hallway. The floor chirped beneath her steps, and she smelled agarwood burning. Beyond, she saw an octagonal room of pine and silk, built around a coal box with an iron kettle suspended over it by a chain. A tea room, perhaps. So, this was the entrance to the Imperial domicile.

"A few minutes," the guard said to her. "Then we will escort you to your room."

Daisetsu sat on an emerald cushion. "Bring us some tea, while you are leaving."

The guard bristled at the instruction, but his mask of self-control remained in place. As he closed the door, another Seppun sprinted from down the hall, face red and puffing. "My lord, we've searched the floor, but we still cannot find—"

"Silence, fool!" the guard hissed, and shut the door behind Shahai. She heard them retreat down the hall.

They were searching for someone. Sotorii?

She gathered her thoughts. "My prince—" she began.

"I said I wished to be alone."

She blinked. Began to reply. But then what she'd assumed to have been a wall slid aside. Daisetsu's *yōjimbō*, armed and displeased, stepped into the room. He offered her a look that could curdle soybeans.

"My lord," he protested, "I will not leave you alone in your family's guest chambers with an older woman at this time of night. My duty is to protect not only your life, but your honor, and so I must—"

"I said leave!" Daisetsu shouted.

Shahai jumped in her seat. The prince's shrill voice cut through the chamber like a lightning bolt. The *yōjimbō*'s eyes went wide.

He shouted again. "I order you to go!"

The *yōjimbō* fell to his knees.



“I am your prince!” He rose. “You will do as I say!”

The yōjimbō pushed his forehead into the floor.

“Go!”

Shahai’s wide eyes followed him as he backed out of the room on all fours. He never lifted his head once, not even when he opened the door.

They were alone. Daisetsu fumed in the corner. Her tongue turned to lead, heavy and mute. She’d never seen him explode like that.

Daisetsu spoke. “Father is dead.”

Shahai felt as if she’d been pushed into an icy pond. Every part of her that could move was frozen. The Emperor. The Son of Heaven. A guilty thought pushed to the surface of her mind: What did this mean for her?

“They found him an hour ago. They say his heart just... stopped.” Daisetsu looked at her with wounded eyes. “I am sorry to burden you, Shahai. I did not want you to see me like... like this.” His tears glittered in the dim light as they traced down his cheeks. “But as you are a priestess of the kami, I ask you: he is at peace now, yes? In Tengoku? With grandfather.” He shuddered, a brittle leaf in the wind. “How does one properly mourn the loss of the one who gave them everything?”

A wave of guilt crashed through her, leaving her cold and numb. He needed her now, her priestly guidance, her sympathetic ear. But her mind was filled with the image of Sotorii curled over a blade. The rough mulberry paper scratched against her collar.

“What is it, Shahai?” Confusion flickered across his features. Shame brought heat to her cheeks. Even in this state, he had concern to spare.

He deserved to know. She produced the paper and offered it. “You should see this, my prince.”

As his eyes traveled across the page, growing ever-wider, she continued in a low tone. “I found your brother in the garden just now. I interrupted his seppuku. In his haste to leave, he dropped this paper. I believe it was meant to be his death poem.”

At first, Daisetsu simply stared. Then slowly his fingers curled. The paper crumpled. His knuckles turned white.

Shahai was suddenly aware of her quickening heartbeat. “I... I could be mistaken.”



His voice was eerily calm. "There are mistakes in the brushwork. This is a practice version written on good paper." He lowered the page. "You are not mistaken. This is my brother's."

Her mind shouted commands in the following silence. *Say something. Do something. Anything, anything except sit there staring at his viper-like glare while all your heat drains through your feet into the floor.*

"Why don't I go see him?" He sprung up and made for the door. "Yes, I think I will. The guards don't know where to look, but I do. I should congratulate him on this *most excellent poem.*" He glanced at her from the entrance. "You may come if you wish."

She didn't. But neither was she going to leave him alone. There was something about his gait, the calmness of his voice, the violence with which he gripped that paper. All disparate. She couldn't leave him alone like this. So, she followed as he descended the staircase, his mourning jacket fluttering behind him.

Three darkened hallways, into a study.

No one there. Fine. Next.

Two halls and a cloister. A darkened dōjō. No one. Next.

The halls were dizzying, the rooms never-ending. She kept pace, glancing at his stony expression, his eyes full of purpose. They passed no guards. *Where were all the guards?* Shouldn't the palace be swarming with them? Just yesterday, she couldn't turn a corner without receiving a glare from—

There. A flickering light within a tea room. He was hunched over the coal box, wakizashi still tucked into his obi, feeding papers to the coals. He froze, and again Shahai's mind filled with what she'd seen in the garden.

Daisetsu stormed in and extended the page. "You forgot one, Sotorii!"

"Give that to me!" He swiped for it, but Daisetsu stepped back, holding the page out of reach.

"This was to be your death poem?"

The heat of the coals was nothing compared to Sotorii's glare, and Shahai cast her eyes to the floor. "What of it?" the elder brother hissed.

"It just seems too honest for you," said Daisetsu. He held it up. "Red petals. 'Your hands are stained.' Did you know father died tonight, brother?"

Sweat glinted on Sotorii's brow. "I don't... I..."

"I know a confession when I read one, even one so clumsy." Daisetsu spoke through clenched teeth. "What. Did. You. *Do?*"

It seemed that Sotorii would protest. He braced himself, as if to face down a charging steed. But then his expression fell with his shoulders, and he was on his knees, face in his hands.

"I killed him. I killed our father."

Shahai's hands cupped her mouth. His own father? The Son of Heaven?

Sotorii's words came heavy with anguish. "I didn't mean to. It just happened. It was so fast... I can't even remember doing it. It was as though I'd lost control."



Shahai's head swam, the sheer blasphemy robbing her of breath. In that instant she saw her own father's face, his loving smile, his proud eyes on the day of her first horseback ride. She loved her father. She could never imagine taking his life. How could any child?

Sotorii looked suddenly to her and pleaded with his eyes. "I wish I could take it back. I'd do anything to go back, to fix it."

"Then split your belly."

Shahai blinked. Had Daisetsu really said that? Sotorii seemed just as confused, as if he hadn't comprehended the words.

"Go on," Daisetsu continued. "Kill yourself. You had it right. Seppuku is the only way." He paused. "But then, you are not worthy to use a wakizashi, are you? No, that is for *honorable* samurai, after all."

Sotorii spoke weakly. "Stop it. That's—"

"You would probably fail to do that too. You learned nothing from Satsume-sama, after all. You cannot even hold a blade properly." He sneered. "We didn't think you would pass *gempuku*, but thankfully father was able to offer a few favors. Not that you were ever grateful."

Sotorii's jaw dropped. "What? You... you're saying father—"

"Oh yes," Daisetsu crooned, eyes narrowing. Shahai could sense the malice dancing in them. "They never told you. I cannot imagine what boon he must have offered so they would let *you* pass. Walking through these halls with your chest puffed out, but deep down you know everyone here loathes you. They talk about you behind your back. Even if you did sit on the throne, it's not like anyone would take you seriously. Name one friend of yours among the court. I'll bet you haven't even bothered to learn anyone's name."

"Shut up!" Sotorii shouted. "Shut up!"

Daisetsu smiled, reveling his brother's anguish. He knew just what to say, just where to stick the knife. Whatever had held him back before, it was gone now. Shahai watched in mute horror. She'd never seen Daisetsu act like this. Never seen him so cruel.

Don't ever let me become like him.

"That's enough," she whispered.

No one heard her. Daisetsu stepped boldly into Sotorii's reach. "Well, you will discover who your friends are soon enough. Because I will tell *everyone* what you have done. Even if it never leaves the Forbidden City, the court will know that you killed father."

Sotorii snapped, his voice booming. "Then that makes us even! Because *mother wished she were dead after you were born!*"

Stunned, oppressive silence.

And then.

Daisetsu pushed Sotorii to the floor.

"Stop!"



But they didn't listen. They fought like enemies. Like brothers. Biting. Nails raking skin. Punching. Kicking. They were squabbling rats.

Until the blade slid free. Daisetsu held the wakizashi high. Naked steel caught the light. Sotorii weakly shielded his face with his hand. The blade came down.

"*Daisetsu!*" Shahai's cry filled the room.

The blade stopped. The boy turned. His lips curled from his teeth in a feral grimace, his nose wrinkled, his eyes ablaze. It was a demon's anger, coated in hate.

"What are you doing, Daisetsu?"

The anger dissolved. He blinked, confused, hesitating. It was as if he'd awoken from a dream. This wasn't who he was.

Sotorii lunged. Daisetsu reeled from his backhand. The sword clattered to the floor. Sotorii scooped it up.

This couldn't be happening. Shahai leaped forward to grab the sword. Sotorii spun, striking her in the cheek with the pommel. Lights flashed in her vision. She stumbled back. His irrational anger burned in the coals.

She drew a *meishōdō* trinket from her obi as he advanced. She knew the name of the kami that could calm him, soothe his—

He swung. The sword struck the trinket, sending it smashing against the wall.

No! Shahai stepped back. The wall stopped her. He pressed forward, the sword arcing.

But she still had her antler horn dagger.

Reflexively she drew it from her obi, freeing the blade with a slash.

Sotorii screamed, reeling back.

A thin cut against the meat of his hand, little more than a scratch, wept red.

"You cut me!" he cried. He clutched the tiny wound and hissed. "I'm bleeding!" Anger, hate, humiliation, it all poured from his eyes in a river of tears. He threw back his head and shouted.

"*Guards!*"

Above, the thundering sound of heavy steps. A stampede.

From the nearby halls, the sounds of swords drawing free.

The world fell away. The floor collapsed beneath her. She slid down. Everything was numb.

I'm undone. I'm finished.



The circumstances wouldn't matter. She'd attacked an Imperial heir. Injured him. Her life was officially forfeit.

I'm dead.

A hand on her wrist. Daisetsu, dragging her to her feet, onto solid ground. They were running. Both of them. Voices clattering in the halls behind them.

"You need to leave the city," he said.

Another fake wall slid aside. She was in a servant's hall. Running. Her heart pounded in her ears as she gasped for breath. Running. To where?

"Just run!" Daisetsu shouted behind her, as if reading her thoughts. "Just run!"

She did. Shahai ran into the darkness.

Daisetsu packed her things by the light of the lantern's glow. It was risky to return to her room, but then, as he'd reasoned, that made this the last place the guards would look. Had it been any other evening, had it been just an hour ago, the notion of a boy alone with her in her room at night would have turned her cheeks red. It didn't seem to matter much now.

Shahai sat with her knees tucked against her chest. Daisetsu's frenzied shadow moved along the wall. He was going through everything, tucking some things into a small traveling pack he'd seized from a servant's quarters, tossing others aside into a "leave behind" pile. If she was to survive this, she had to escape the Forbidden City. She had to run away.

It meant shaming her family. Humiliating her father. It would compromise the Unicorn at court. Worst of all, running away was a violation of an Imperial edict. If she escaped, that would sign her death warrant.

But she'd already done that, hadn't she?

Daisetsu paused, considering two of her kimono. He discarded the silk one, the courtly one, and packed the one made from hemp.

But even if she did escape, where could she go? Not back to the Unicorn. Not back to the Iuchi! Her family would be forced to disown her, to turn her in. Nor could she hide in the city. They'd all be looking for her there. If anyone recognized her, she would be killed on sight.

And with what she knew about Sotorii...

Yes, that made her *quite* dangerous to him, didn't it? The Seppun would pursue her anywhere. Other clans would seek her because capturing her meant earning Prince—no—Emperor Sotorii's favor. There was nowhere she could hide. She was finished.

And when she died, how would Emma-Ō judge her?

Daisetsu found her box of meishōdō talismans. Judging them important, he tucked them into the traveling satchel. Good idea. She might not know the names of the kami where she was going, and she'd need the ones resting inside those trinkets. It felt like ages since she'd learned the names of the kami dwelling around the palace, crafted their unique trinkets, invoked their



true names to draw them inside...

Wait. But didn't the palace have wards to protect the Emperor? To alert his guards? She'd felt them—they were obvious to any shugenja. They should have come to life when the Emperor was slain.

But what if the kami that she had gathered were the ones powering those wards? They were in her *meishōdō* talismans awaiting tomorrow's demonstration when they would be released. A demonstration that now would never come. Without kami, any wards were just powerless runes.

Could she have undone the palace consecrations? But only temporarily. Just for one night. What was one night? It should have been harmless.

Was all this her fault?

She swallowed a dry lump. No, she couldn't think about that now. Sotorii was the one who had slain his father. Even the kami's presence would not have changed that.

She said nothing as Daisetsu finished packing. She'd be taking the kami with her, leaving parts of the palace empty and without its elemental spirits. But what did that matter now that the Emperor was dead? She'd release them later anyway. They'd find their way back to the Forbidden City. The spirits always did.

But for now, she needed them.

"Done." Daisetsu placed the traveling pack at her feet. "We've risked too much already. You need to go now."

"You should tell them," she uttered through her knees. "What he did."

He agreed. It was plain on his face, in his angry eyes. "What good would it do? One way or another, it would be covered up to preserve the family name. To preserve the honor of the Hantei, my father will never receive justice. Such is the cruelty of *Bushidō*."

The cruelty of samurai, she heard herself think. She normally would have rejected such thoughts, but now the cold words felt somehow comforting.

"This will be just another secret forgotten in the halls of the Forbidden City. One of thousands. Nothing escapes." He extended his hand. "Except for us. I know a way out. At least, I think I do. We'll have to risk it."

She raised her head. "We?"

He was wearing her traveling coat. One of her satchels was slung around his neck. His long hair was tied into a bun.

No. She couldn't allow it. She sat up. "My prince, you can't—"

"You said you would do anything, yes?"

She clenched her jaw. *Yes. Anything.*

His expression melted. "Then take me away from here. I cannot be here anymore."

Her breath caught at the glistening of his eyes in the pale light. He seemed so frail just then. So weak. His smooth face was like a child's. It was easy to forget how young he was. That



he hadn't even passed his gempuku. That his father was ancient, that his mother had long ago retreated into her chambers and was almost never seen in public. Even surrounded by elders and guards, he'd always been alone.

"This place is cursed," he whispered. "How can I remain in the house where my father died? Take me anywhere, so long as it is not here."

That would be kidnapping. Kidnapping an Imperial heir. Endangerment of the royal lineage. That's what they would say, anyway. If any of the things she'd already done were not enough to kill her, this certainly would do it.

His glistening eyes. His quiet hope.

She remembered his demon-like anger from before, the viper's eyes. That had not been Daisetsu. This place had done that to him. What would it do if she left him behind?

Drowning in a pond. Drowning in the ocean. What was the difference? Either way, she was dead.

"All right," she said. And she instantly felt better knowing that she would not be alone. Indeed, she couldn't bear the thought of exile alone. Of leaving him behind.

She let him lead her from her room. They'd have to avoid all the guards, sneak to the foyer. Maybe use the servant halls, although the guards would search there as well. And then what?

She looked back one last time. Among the pile of things she would abandon, the ceramic bowl lantern. Inside, the ashes of the letter she was writing to her father.

Had that truly just been an hour ago? One hour prior, she was annoyed, writing to her father, dreading the meishōdō lesson she owed in the morning. In one hour, the entire world had changed.

It wasn't too late. She could stay. She could surrender. She could die. That was what Bushidō demanded. That was the *right* thing to do.

But she didn't want to do the right thing. She wanted to live.

"I'm sorry, Father," she whispered. "I didn't intend for this. I didn't mean to betray you." She closed the door for the last time. "Forgive me, father.

"It must be the Yogo in me."

