

# The Stories We Tell

By Nancy M. Sauer

“First, I know that you are a wise man, and I wish the world to share that wisdom. I am certain that you can bring the dead to life on our wedding day.”

Doji Shizue stopped and frowned. Her delivery was perfect, but the gesture with the fan needed work. At this point in the story Doji-no-Kami was scornful of Kakita, but her heart would soon turn toward him, and her telling had to reflect that. When one had the opportunity to tell stories for an Imperial prince, only perfection would do.



Over and over she practiced, the fan sweeping through the air like a graceful bird, until she found the exact path that simultaneously expressed Lady Doji’s grace and subtle condescension.

“Second, I know you are a knowledgeable man...” A discreet knock on the frame of the door interrupted her, and Shizue fought the impulse to throw her fan at the door. How could she practice amidst all these distractions?

“I am very sorry Shizue-sama,” the servant in the hallway said. “But two letters have just arrived—they are from your siblings.”

The temple to Fukurokujin, the Fortune of Wisdom, was the same as it had always been, with polished wood gleaming in candlelight and the scent of incense heavy in the air. As Shizue walked to the inner sanctuary, the weight of long centuries of prayer and meditation settled around her like armor, but the words contained within the two letters stung like an open wound.

Shizue stopped before the gilded image of the Fortune and composed herself for prayer. She clapped her hands twice, and bowed. “Gracious Fukurokujin, wisest of Fortunes, hear me. Guide my thoughts, so that I may bring honor to my clan and my ancestors. Aid me in being a true daughter of Lady Doji.” Shizue paused. Did she dare speak the words aloud? But how else would the Fortune hear? “Grant me your wisdom to discern the truth in the matter of Lord Satsume’s death.”

The candlelight wavered as if in a breeze. Her sister’s words echoed in the silence.





*We cannot afford to act rashly in this matter. And to jump to the implication of murder is truly rash! We must allow the Emerald Magistrates to conduct their own investigation, and then the Crane shall stand by their verdict. They are the agents of the Emperor, and the arbiters of his laws. Let them do their duty, and we shall see to ours.*

So it seemed that Hotaru was content to stay her hand—for now. But what had she and Bayushi Kachiko, the Imperial Advisor, spoken about that time? Could Hotaru be acting upon some newfound clue she had withheld from the rest of the clan?

Or was she pursuing a subtle form of revenge?

To Hotaru, Doji Satsume was a tyrant and a terrible father. Hotaru had never forgiven him for his part in his wife's suicide. Now, she seemed ready to let his own death stand unchallenged. It was a child's duty to avenge a parent's murder, and Duty was one of the seven pillars of Bushidō. Hotaru would never directly violate the dictates of Bushidō, but she seemed certain there was nothing to avenge. She had looked appropriately somber at Satsume's funeral, but the next day she had delegated to Shizue the task of going to the various temples in the capital city and arranging for prayers and incense in their father's memory.

And yet, Hotaru truly had other concerns to deal with. The death of Akodo Arasou at her hands, and the ascension of her longtime friend Akodo Toturi to the position of Lion Clan Champion as a direct result. The continued siege of Toshi Ranbo. The broken engagement between the Lion and the Unicorn. The newly anointed Phoenix Clan Champion.

It was possible that Satsume's death was simply an unfortunate tragedy—natural but unexpected. But rumors swirled in the Imperial Palace, and Shizue could not be certain.

Her brother's words told a different tale.

*Satsume's death was far too sudden, and his loss has only served to cement the Scorpion Clan's position over ours in court! While we protect our holdings on the Osari Plains from the Lion, those in the capital must get to the bottom of this, and take action.*

Weeks had passed since Kuwanan had written the letter, which was uncharacteristically stained with mud. He must have been on the front lines, writing from some nowhere village where he'd been stationed—and felt powerless to act beyond writing the letter.

At least he'd known better than to directly blame the Scorpion in the letter, or to call out Hotaru by name, for it was all too easy for the Clan of Secrets to intercept his correspondence.

To hear Kuwanan's side of the story, Doji Satsume was an exacting but just father. Kuwanan loved Teinko just as much as Hotaru did, and had mourned her just as deeply, but he was the son Satsume had always wanted. His father had lavished all of his love on Kuwanan, and he was incapable of seeing Satsume as the cold taskmaster that Hotaru saw. For him, his parents' deaths were separate issues. No vengeance could be taken for Teinko's suicide, so nothing could be done about his mother. He believed his father had been murdered, and so the murderer had to be found and made to pay—it was his duty, a duty he proudly embraced.

Which story should she believe? Teinko had taken Shizue in and lavished the same love and





care on her as she had on Hotaru and Kuwanan. Satsume had formally adopted her, not just giving her a family but making her one of Doji-no-Kami's own line. He had been a gruff and distant father figure, as so many parents were, but he had never been unkind to her. Others in the Doji family had whispered disapprovingly of her twisted leg, but he had only mentioned it once to her. "Your lameness will make people underestimate you," he had said. "Make sure they are wrong."

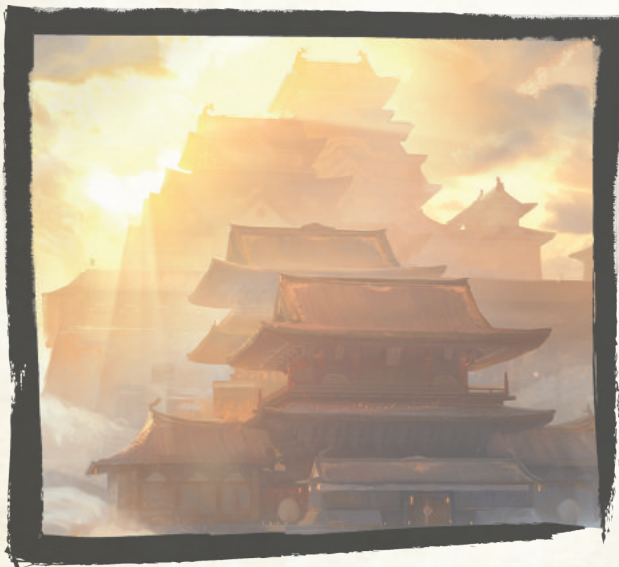
The opposing stories waged war within her heart. Shizue owed her champion her obedience, which meant accepting Satsume's death. Kuwanan and Bushidō demanded vengeance, which required action.

Both stories could not be true.

She stared at the statue of Fukurokujin for a long time.

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The guard opened the door and Shizue slowly entered the prince's sitting room. As protocol demanded, she immediately knelt down and pressed her head to the floor in respect.



"Shizue-san, it is a pleasure to see you," came the prince's gentle voice.

"Please come and sit before me."

Long practice had given Shizue the ability to look graceful while picking up her cane and climbing to her feet. She moved forward at a decorous pace, using the time to catch a glimpse of the prince to gauge his mood. Hantei Daisetsu always looked thoughtful, but today he seemed even more pensive than usual. He was dressed somewhat casually, and his unbound hair cascaded around his

shoulders and down his back in a lavish display. Soon he would have his *gempuku* and it would all be cut off. Shizue mourned the loss of such beauty, but it could not be helped: the Imperials were very traditional regarding the length and style of men's hair.

Shizue knelt on a cushion placed before the low dais the prince was seated on. "Thank you for summoning me, Your Highness," she said humbly. "It is a delight to serve a member of the Imperial Family."

"It is a delight to hear your stories, so we are both favored this afternoon." He made a small signal and a servant came forward to pour him a cup of tea. A different servant placed a cup before Shizue. "It will be a moment of calm amidst the troubles that surround us."

It was an unusually philosophical thought for one so young. "It is one of the many gifts a





story can provide,” she said.

“And the Crane are experts at gift-giving,” Daisetsu said. His smile made it a jest and not a taunt. “And since you are a Crane, I suppose you have already heard about the new Phoenix Champion.”

“Shiba Tsukune,” Shizue said. “I know little about her except that she is somewhat young.”

“Very young, which makes her an odd choice to replace Shiba Ujimitsu’s experience,” the prince remarked. “She apparently trained as a *bushi* with the Lion Clan for some time. Perhaps that influenced the choice: there are signs of trouble between the Phoenix and the Lion.”

“She would surely have greater insight into Lion motives than most Phoenix samurai,” Shizue agreed.

“On the other hand, your brother Kuwanan has trained with the Lion, and it does not seem to have helped matters any.”

Tension arced through Shizue as the conversation shifted to dangerous ground. She steadied herself and smiled sadly at the prince. “I am afraid one needs no special insight into our conflict with the Lion. Our possession of the Osari Plains is perfectly legal, and the Lion are resorting to violence because that is what they know. We merely strive to safeguard the lands the Emperor has granted us, and to use the bounty they provide to further our duties to the Empire.”

“The Crown Prince is in favor of officially ignoring the issue altogether, and allowing your two clans to settle it on the battlefield.”

Daisetsu’s tone implied that he was not entirely in favor of the idea. That the Imperial princes were divided in their opinions of the conflict was crucial information. She would have to inform Kakita Yoshi soon.

And yet, to hear that Daisetsu and Sotorii’s relationship was not unlike Hotaru and Kuwanan’s... She wished she could say she understood, but she would never speak of her family’s internal struggles with an outsider, especially one so prominently placed.

With fresh determination, she returned to the point that Hotaru would be most interested in. “And what does His Majesty think?”

His answer was a smirk and a short laugh. “I am surprised you didn’t ask what my mother thinks! Or do you simply assume that she favors her former clan?”

“Empress Hochiahime is a wise and gracious woman,” Shizue said primly. And yet, her failing health was no secret, and it was rumored that she would be absent from the ceremonies and festivities of the Kiku Matsuri in order to convalesce. “She would never discuss Imperial policy in front of the Emperor’s children.”

This drew a real laugh from the prince, and he gestured for the servants to clear away the teacups. “You haven’t even started your story and already I am entertained,” he said. “What have you brought me today?”

“Your Highness, I have brought the story of Kakita’s courtship of Lady Doji.” Shizue slipped the fan from her obi and opened it with a snap. “After the first Emerald Tournament, the







Emperor Hantei and Kakita had become fast friends,” she began.

The story flowed through Shizue, told with words and quick gestures of her fan: Lady Doji’s three impossible requests, Kakita’s long search, and the wise old fisherwoman who had helped him.

“For my bride,’ Kakita began, ‘you asked me to bring the dead to life for our wedding day.’ From a small bag, Kakita pulled a piece of seasoned driftwood. ‘I found this on the shore of a small fishing village, miles from the forests. Its death

was long ago, in a winter that tore it from its mother tree and cast it to the ocean. It drifted for seasons since, withered and lifeless on the summer rains. Certainly, this qualifies.’ An amused Hantei raised an eyebrow in curiosity as Kakita drew a strange stringed instrument from his bag.”

Shizue mimicked the movement, gently proffering a phantom instrument in her hands.

“From a piece of the wood I have shown you, I have carved this gift.’ With gentle fingers, Kakita evoked a love melody from the *biwa*, the first such instrument ever created in Rokugan. The *biwa* sang pure and echoing notes throughout the palace. Everywhere that the music could be heard, the populace stopped to listen in wonder at the beauty of the piece. When he was done, none could argue that the *biwa* had indeed come to life. Lady Doji could only nod.”

Shizue’s body grew rigid as she donned Lady Doji’s persona, nodding at her audience with only the slightest hints of fear and hope escaping her tranquil façade. With another shift in posture, she re-assumed the genial character of Kakita.

“Secondly, gentle daughter of Amaterasu, you asked that I tell you how wide the world is, and how long it would take to walk from one side to the other. The answer to your question is not in the journey, but in one’s companion. If a man were to awaken when the sun rises from the sea, and travel the land by your mother’s side, surely he would find himself at the other side of the world when she sought her rest in the western lands.’ Kakita’s smile was pleasant and broad. ‘Thus, as Amaterasu herself is my guide, it takes but one day to travel the world.’ The court smiled, and Hantei had to struggle to contain his laughter at this eloquent answer. Lady Doji blushed slightly in response and hid her smile beneath a swiftly upraised fan.”

Shizue opened her fan and drew it to conceal her face, smiling instead with her brows.

“Kakita smiled at Doji and continued, ‘Lastly, my lady, you asked me to bring you an example of perfect beauty—a beauty which could not be contested, even by you.’ Kakita reached into his bag again, and there was subtle whispering in the court. ‘It was difficult, my lady, to find the most beautiful thing in Rokugan, but I believe I can show it to you.’ With





closed hands, he drew the final object from the bag and held it before her. Lady Doji leaned toward it inquisitively, and Kakita opened his hands.”

Daisetsu, too, was leaning in, and Shizue paused dramatically.

“Held carefully between Kakita’s fingers was a small golden mirror, poised so that Lady Doji could see her own reflection. Lady Doji’s heart was fully won. The wedding of Kakita and Doji was held immediately, and the festivities lasted for seven days.”

When she finished, Shizue was exhausted but pleased: her performance had been flawless. She bowed once more, and resumed her place on the cushion. Nevertheless, as she looked up at him through the corner of her eye, Daisetsu had a slight frown on his face, and her heart skipped a beat.

“You are as skilled as your reputation claims, Shizue-san,” he said. “I could see the events as if they took place before me, but that made me notice something I hadn’t before.” He paused in contemplation of his next words. “Kakita cheated—the driftwood really hadn’t come back to life. It was only part of a biwa, not a living tree.”

No one had ever questioned one of her stories before. Nor had she ever needed to defend one of the founders of her clan without insulting an Imperial prince. “That is right, Your Highness,” Shizue smiled as she quickly sorted through possible responses. “It is true that the piece of wood was no longer a living tree. But the story Kakita told about it, with his words and music, made it truly live again in Lady Doji’s mind.”

The prince seemed to be turning something over in his mind. “So the truth is merely what one believes it to be.”

She could not contest him, for appearances were reality in Rokugan. A rakish courtier was a perfect husband so long as his wife was never confronted with his infidelity. A sake-loving samurai was not a drunkard so long as she performed her duties to her lord.

In the end, it did not matter whether Satsume had been killed or simply died.

All that mattered was what Hotaru and Kuwanan believed. And they each believed differently.

Shizue kept her face completely still, and bowed deeply. “His Highness is wise indeed.”

