

Heart of the Garden

By Edward Bolme

Fourth Day of the Month of Doji

Iuchi Shahai burst into the Imperial Gardens, then immediately slowed her pace to a sedate walk. Powder as white as porcelain covered her face, concealing the ragged flush of her cheeks. Her years of spiritual training held her face as still as a mask, a perfect example of samurai decorum. Yet despite all this, the burning, welling sensation in her eyes blurred the flowers of the garden beyond recognition.

She walked the garden's paths, navigating the hazy view by instinct until the artfully hued flowers, melted by her emotion, resolved at last into the face of her father.

She had last seen him in Gatherer of Winds Castle. He had held court not to honor her, nor to announce an engagement, nor to feast her ascension to a new level of mastery, but to be present at her utter destruction.

She knelt with her head bowed to the floor while the unwanted stares of hundreds of eyes crawled across her back. Though filled to capacity, the room felt empty, devoid of anything save the occasional whisper of a silk kimono. She could try to scream, but no one would hear; it would be improper to notice such an outburst, no matter how justified. It was a nightmare.

Quiet footsteps ascended the steps next to the dais, and a voice softly called her name. She rose from her bow but remained kneeling. On the dais sat Iuchi Daiyu—her father and her daimyō. A Seppun courtier kneeled to one side of the dais, facing her.

“Lady Iuchi Shahai,” said the herald joylessly, “you are invited to the Imperial City to live as an honored guest of the Emperor in his very household. You bring honor to your clan to be such an esteemed guest, you whose company His Majesty so desires. People will speak for generations of your faithfulness to your duty and the wisdom of your teachings in the Eternal Palace, and you will find your rest within its walls and gardens.”

Such pretty language—like a katana: artful, yet created to destroy. She, the honored guest of the Emperor, whom she would never be allowed to see. Housed in quarters with bodyguards to ensure she was safe from assassins—and secure from ever leaving the city again. Her life would be protected at all costs, for she was honored to serve the Emperor by spilling her people's most closely guarded secrets, becoming a traitor to her clan, her family, and her father. Forced to break her oaths, she would teach the names of the world to the Seppun family, those who had guaranteed the safety of the Imperial family for a thousand years, and who feared and coveted the foreign magic of the Unicorn Clan.

She looked at her father, who once would have held her close, protecting her from the teasing



of her half siblings, tending to the pain of a scraped knee, or reassuring her after a wicked dream. He looked back...not at her, but at the center of the space she occupied. Space that would soon be empty. His eyes stared blandly, as if he were watching a poorly written play. Even his hand, normally expressive and active with minor flourishes, rested with perfect stillness on the armrest of his throne.

The courtier politely cleared his throat, nudging her for a response.

She dropped her eyes. "I am—" Am what? Happy to go? Ready to do the Emperor's bidding? Eager to live as an Imperial guest? The willing servant of the court? Honored by having been selected? No, none of these. They were all lies.

"I am under the Emperor's authority," she said at last. A pause, then she murmured, "And I will do all I can." It was the truth, but it promised nothing. She bowed again.

The courtier extended his arm, holding out the Imperial summons. Shahai arose and extended her hands to take it reverentially. She bowed again, paced backward several steps, and bowed one last time. Her father's position had not changed, nor had his glance, staring disinterestedly into the empty space where his daughter had once knelt before him.

When would she see this court room again? Her father again? In a sense, it didn't matter, because nothing would ever be the same. Without a glance back, she left the chamber, looking neither to the right nor to the left. She walked straight to her steed, intending to leave immediately before her emotions got the better of her.

Hot tears spilled out of her memory and onto her cheeks. *I thought I left my heart behind, but I can still feel it breaking.* She snapped her fan open by reflex and covered her face,



swallowing down the sobs that threatened to erupt from her throat. Once she could draw a tattered breath again, she daubed her face with the sleeve of her kimono, removing the tears and no small amount of powder. *I can't do anything right, can I?* She wiped the rest of the powder off as well.

Looking up, she was relieved to find herself alone at the end of a small side path. She glanced about. No one had seen her

lose her composure.

Then she looked at the path again, at how it ended in moist, dark soil that one was not allowed to step into.

A dead end, she mused. How fitting.

Sixth Day of the Month of Doji

Iuchi Shahai strode into the Imperial Gardens, then slowed her pace to a sedate walk. It was such a relief to be away from her personal servants, a trio of handmaidens whom she had already dubbed “the stable hands.” It was their job to provide for her needs and conceal from her the fact that she was nothing more than a prize animal stuck in a stall, a goat to be milked of all her knowledge until she was fit only to be slaughtered. For her sanity, she’d have to carefully carve out time away from them. As much time as possible.

If only she could burn these gardens, see them all consumed in smoke and ash...destroy something precious to the Imperials the way that they had destroyed her family. But the gardens were the best refuge she could find. They were too manicured to feel like the wide outdoors, but at least the trees, bushes, and reeds helped conceal the fact that she was surrounded by the stone walls of the Emperor’s palace, the very gates of which were barred to her, making the entirety of the palace grounds her prison.

It might have seemed like a very large prison to some, but she had galloped the endless plains. She turned her face upward, toward the Nameless Sky. If only she could leave the entire Imperial City behind, like a small clutch of stones huddled by the banks of a muddy river. *To ride again like the wind...*

Yes, despite appearances, the Imperial Palace in Ootosan Uchi was in fact a very small prison, and bonds of “welcome” and “generosity” and “honor” chained her as surely as would iron.

She found herself again at the dead end from two days ago. Somehow it was already her spot, her place in the gardens. A place where she could try to unravel...everything.

So this is what it feels like for your life to end.

This is what it feels like: nothing.

Not the nothingness of the Void, not the peace of no-thought, not at all like the perfect inner stillness of meditation and clarity. She had found that profound balance—that gentle, spinning stillness—twice in all her meditations, and she feared she might never know that peace again.

No, this was the emptiness of nightmare. The emptiness of eternally falling. The emptiness of grief—the hollowness of grief when one has no one with whom to share it. The emptiness of being cut off from the world, yet still being able to see it. The emptiness of your father’s eyes showing no sorrow as you are cast into a tar pit, there to starve and die of thirst and sink, rotting, into the blackness.



And yet, somehow it all made sense. The Emperor naming her as an honored guest when he had no intention of seeing her. The Seppun stable hands lavishing their generosity on a prisoner. The Imperial Court, finding mortal danger to the Empire itself in the form of a young Unicorn maiden. A life crushed with smiles and bows and banquets and all the wonderful facets of courtliness and Bushidō.

She was truly alone. The Imperial Court would not trust her to betray her people. Her people would not trust her to keep their secrets. No one was left; she would have to forge her own path.

Her siblings—all three—appeared, walking toward her: Shinjo Shono, Shinjo Haruko, and Shinjo Yasamura.

Half siblings, *she reminded herself*. Altansarnai's blood did not flow in her veins.

She was trapped at the dead end, could not depart from their presence without losing face. Her eyes darted, taking in the awkwardness of their expressions, the uncomfortable shifting in their stances. She knew them so well, but she could not think of why they might be here, unless...

"Sister," said Shono, "we have a gift for you." Using both hands, he held out a blade with an antler handle.

Shahai's mind reeled with outlandish conjectures. "I—I cannot accept," she said. "Such a fine blade should be given to one more likely to have need of it than I."

"We had it made especially for you," said Haruko, displaying a similar blade, "as our sister. We made one for each of us."

Shahai shook her head. "I am not worthy of such a—"

Yasamura leaned in, his easy manner quelling her protestations. "You," he said, gesturing to encompass Shahai and the others, "are always...one of us." He nodded. "You will accept our gift, sister."

With trembling hands, she reached out and accepted the offering. She smiled, her hopes and fears twisting it to a rictus. She wanted to thank them. More so, she wanted to believe them.

But she didn't dare raise her eyes to find out.

Eighteenth Day of the Month of Doji

Iuchi Shahai drifted into the Imperial Gardens, then increased her pace to a sedate walk. She strolled slowly, always down the middle of the path. The earthy scent smelled faintly of home.

To which she could never return.

But she could have her small revenges. Through "accidents," deliberate misunderstandings, and well-timed fits of rage, she did everything she could in her daily life to ensure that the stable hands always had a lot to muck out.

As she walked, others in the gardens found convenient reasons to take a different branch in the winding paths or turn onto a grassy verge to sit on a bench, or even to study a blossom





very, very closely—whatever they had to do to avoid interacting with her. They all knew why she was there. The entire city knew why she was there. They feared her, scorned her, looked upon her with disgust, but if that meant they left her alone to her thoughts, then that was fine.

That very morning she had been instructed to start teaching a trio of the Seppun *shugenja* the most basic concepts of *meishōdō*. The blade had finally fallen, the time had come, her doom was upon her.

She had been taught amazing secrets by her instructors. Her father—and Grandfather Iuchi—had trusted her. Embraced her. How could she preserve the secret names without disobeying the Emperor's personal command? She could find no answer to that puzzle.

To buy time, she made plans: plans to be incomplete in her instruction, plans to use terms that would confound the untrained ear, plans to phrase things in just such a way that her students would likely make a wrong assumption. She had to appear as though she were sincerely helping, of course, lest they figure out she was defying the Emperor's edict. However, if her students were slow to learn and prone to mistakes—why then, a few well-placed temper tantrums could ruin several days' work, and maybe even get them replaced. Then she could start the cycle again.

But how long she could prolong it? How long she could delay teaching them how to bind and compel a spirit by name before her duplicity was found out?

A shadow fell across her path and she stopped abruptly. A dour samurai stood just enough out of her path to avoid actually blocking her, but so close that she had to acknowledge his presence. She quickly appraised the hand casually resting atop the silk-wrapped hilt of his katana, the quiet look in his eyes, and the Seppun family imagery artfully sewn into his brown kimono. He bowed, and she returned the motion. She looked past him and bowed more deeply at the young man a few steps farther down the path.

"Your Highness," she said in her most perfect porcelain voice, balancing fear and familiarity. "Again we meet in your beautiful gardens."

"Iuchi Shahai-sama," said he with a smile. "It...might happen less often were you not so predictable."



The prince's good favor could help her forestall her fate. They'd had this conversation before. She forced a coy giggle, and permitted herself the slightest hint of familiarity toward him. "My prince is very kind to take notice of one small guest among the many courtiers and petitioners who seek his favor."

"Favor...yes." He looked around. "It's...well, I...every day I see a vision of sadness glide through the garden like a ghost wrapped in iris and lavender." He inhaled sharply. "How can I not take notice?" He clapped his hands, rubbed his palms together. "Well, Sanosuke-san, let us leave the young lady to...admire the gardens in peace."

Shahai stepped to the side and bowed deeply as the prince and his bodyguard walked past, neither making any further acknowledgement of her presence. She looked in their direction once they were out of sight. "He speaks such pretty words," she murmured to herself. She shook her head. He was probably practicing the oratory taught by some ancient Seppun appointee.

Worthless, all of them.

She continued on her way. The gardens were pretty too, to be sure, although in that perfectly balanced, artfully arranged, overly painted geisha sort of way.

She found her way back to her place, her dead end. As she stopped, a smirk curled her lips. Even here, they couldn't make things perfect. There, to the side of the path, footprints in the damp soil strayed into the margins. One of many such imperfections she had seen while walking in the garden over the past two weeks.

In this place, though, in the dead end, the sight of them brought a hot tear to her eye. Out there, mud flying from a galloping hoof was a sign of freedom. Here, to stray off the path even a footstep was considered unthinkable, a blemish to be cleaned up and covered over. *Just like... me.*

*Footprints in the mud
Here despoil the perfection
They must be buried*

Fourth Day of the Month of Bayushi

Iuchi Shahai glided smoothly into the Imperial Gardens, her kimono whispering behind her. She passed slowly along the paths like a swan, arriving at last at her favorite spot.

She knelt, closed her eyes, and breathed in the scents that perfumed the air. Blooms, grasses, earth. The plants were still beautiful, even though they, like she, were caged.

"Shahai?"

She started, rose quickly from her kneeling position, turned, and bowed deeply. "My prince," she said, her voice clearly flustered. "My deepest apologies. I did not hear you approach."

"Indeed. You looked to be in the deepest meditation."



"I, um—yes, I was," she said, still looking down. She pulled a shock of hanging hair back behind her ear, using the move to mask wiping a tear from her face.

He canted his head. "What were you meditating on?"

"Nothing," she replied quietly.

Sanosuke bristled. "The prince asked you a question."

Daisetsu raised his hand again. "The young lady said she was meditating on nothing, and I believe her."

Sanosuke shifted but did not reply.

Daisetsu looked at her attire, her stance, her downcast eyes.

"Is there something my prince requires of me?" asked Shahai.

"What is it that you have in your right hand, Shahai, that you are so carefully trying to hide?"

Shahai stiffened, then, very slowly, she revealed a long, thin, antler-handled blade.

Sanosuke glided forward between them, his blade drawn and ready to strike.

"Sanosuke-san," said Daisetsu quietly, "I asked her to show me."

"My prince—"

"You may leave us."

"My sworn duty is to g—"

"To obey your prince." When Sanosuke did not move, he added, "If she chose to attack, she might...possibly...kill us both. If you are away, she can only kill me, and her clan will be destroyed in vengeance."

"But you are—"

"Not the heir," said Daisetsu. "Leave us."

With a great show of objection, Sanosuke sheathed his katana, glowered at Shahai, then bowed to the prince and departed. Shahai listened as he walked to a position just barely out of sight. She was sure that Sanosuke could see them through the foliage.

Shahai took a deep breath. "Is there something my prince req—"

"You came here to kill yourself," said Daisetsu plainly. "A blade through your heart."

Shahai opened her mouth to answer, but nothing came out.

"Do not try to answer." They stood there for a long moment in silence.

This is not how the afternoon was supposed to go. She was again lost, lost in nothing, with no landmarks to guide her. Daisetsu and she together, here in this corner of the garden—

She found her eyes locked to those of Daisetsu. Had he asked her to look at him? She couldn't remember...

"You have been brought here to teach the Seppun family your clan's secrets. This is for the protection of the Hantei Dynasty, the Emperor's life, my brother's, and my own. You are a guest of my family. Why, then, the path of seppuku?"

"They say it's for your safety," she blurted. "Perhaps they even believe it! But teaching our



secrets breaks my every oath. It betrays my very blood! And it puts the Seppun blade at the Unicorn throat; if they say we are a threat, then all the other clans rally against my people."

Now you've done it. How dare you speak these words aloud?

But...

Daisetsu cocked his head. "I thought as much." He took a long, slow breath and continued. "Have you really thought your actions through?"

"Better I cut out my own heart than stab my family in the back," said Shahai, another tear streaming down her cheek.

"And if you kill yourself, then what? At best, another of your clan is forced to come here and do what you would not. Probably someone you studied with, a favored student of your master. And that person would also find themselves here, in this garden, meditating on...nothing. But do you know what is far more likely?"

"I do not, my prince," answered Shahai.

"That your suicide becomes undeniable proof of the guilt of the Unicorn clan. They would say that, rather than reveal the evils you participate in, you killed yourself to hide your family's great shame."

"But that's not true!" yelled Shahai, forgetting herself again. She looked down quickly, flushing.

"I know. Your clan is a model of Bushidō: compassionate, brave, and loyal." He sniffed. "Yet, here you are. I have learned that what we believe is the truth becomes the truth. And *they* believe that your clan is a danger."

"And what do you believe the truth is, my prince?"

"I believe that the...wave in your hair is very beautiful, and without it the Empire would be diminished. I believe that you love your mother. She was taken from you, yet you wish to take yourself from everyone else. And I believe that you are playing by their rules." He gestured at the beautiful gardens all about. "Consider this place...have you noticed that everyone walks only upon the paths that were laid out for them hundreds of years ago? The gardens are beautiful, but why are these the only paths?"

Shahai stood silent. The blade felt heavy in her hand, given to her by...her family. They had not deserted her.

She shook herself out of her reverie and sheathed it. "My prince is very wise," she said.

"Forgive me, I did not mean to interrupt; I shall leave you to your meditations," he said. "Remind me to tell you the tale of how Kakita won Lady Doji's heart when next we meet. Good evening, Lady Iuchi."

Shahai bowed deeply as the prince turned and left. The edge of his sandal had a smear of mud clinging to it. The mud left just a hint of a partial footprint on the path as he walked away, rejoined immediately by his bodyguard.

So even the prince wasn't as perfect as the Imperial Court portrayed him. Whoever was in



charge of his wardrobe should be executed for leaving his sandals soiled so. It looked like he'd been—

She bent down, picked up a small clod of the dirt, and looked at the color closely. She stood and looked down the pathway where Daisetsu had gone.

Shahai turned around and looked at the margin, the muddy dirt that edged her dead end. Then she saw them: a set of footprints in the soft earth, leading off the dead end near a cluster of rose bushes.

The daylight was fading. She looked about to ensure no one else was near, then stepped off the path, carefully placing her feet in the prints left for her by Daisetsu. A dozen steps later, she could see behind the rose bushes that adorned the path. A wild, untamed splash of red roses and thorny branches, left unkempt where no one would be able to see them, a cascade of red and green bursting with light and chaos, away from the meticulously designed borders of the garden's walks.

In the last light of the waning day, the splash of color was as the dawning of the sun.

