

The Stained Cup

By Josiah "Duke" Harrist

Hantei Sotorii woke in a cold sweat. He did not know how long he had been sleeping. A thin, sweet strain of incense curled through the darkness around him, cutting through a scent of musk and clay. Ceramics—urns, jars, cheap teacups—lined the walls of the cramped, dark room. A faint layer of reddish grime covered every surface.

A figure stirred in one corner of the room and rose to stand over his tatami mat. A pair of dark eyes looked down at him, unblinking.

"Wh—who are you?" Sotorii asked in a trembling voice.

The figure extended one long, hairy arm and undid a latch, then pushed a window open. The room flooded with a thin, watery light. A crisp coldness filled Sotorii's lungs as fresh air blew through the hovel. The old man's thin face, shrouded by matted hair and beard, suddenly came into view. He smiled down at the prince with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Call me Yotsu," said the man. His voice was low and gravelly.

The window opened onto a bleak, muddy vegetable garden that gave way to a steep meadow. Beyond it rose the craggy granite spire of a tall mountain wreathed in otherworldly mist. Several weathered farming implements rested against a knotted fence.

Sotorii leaned upright, then felt a shock of pain in his back. He yelped and fell prone. The pain crept up his back and into his abdomen as he breathed.

"Don't sit up," said Yotsu.

"I cannot move my legs."

"When I found you, you were passed out in the ravine. You must've fallen."

"I demand you take me to a physician, then."

The old man snorted. His breath smelled awful.

"When you can walk, perhaps."

Sotorii tried to move his foot. A sharp pain, followed by numbness, spread up his calf. He felt his face go red as he stiffened his posture, trying to look as lordly as possible.

"I am Hantei Sotorii, a prince of the Imperial family. It is your duty to help me!"



The old man laughed. "But I am helping you."

"I mean—I need you to do as I command!"

Yotsu chuckled, then rose and retrieved a bowl from a dark corner of the room. Upon returning, he pulled the prince's blanket back and, grabbing him bodily by the shoulders, rolled him on his side. A stinging pain shot up the prince's spine as the old man rubbed some foul-smelling ointment on his skin.

"The softness of your hands told me you came from money, but I had no idea I had found a broken prince!" the old man croaked.

Sotorii's skin prickled as a soothing numbness spread down his lower back.

"Do not mock me, old man."

"Am I the very first to see the royal prince's bottom?" Yotsu cackled. Gently, the old man turned him back and drew the blanket up. His cracked lips broke in a wry smile.

Sotorii felt his face grow hot. "How dare you disrespect the heir to the Throne! You dishonor yourself."

"I'm already dishonored enough, thank you," Yotsu said gravely.

The old man went to the other side of the room and sat cross-legged in front of a potter's wheel. He placed a lump of wet clay upon the wheel and began to shape it with cracked and mud-caked fingers.

"Once you can walk again, I will take you to the village. It's a day's walk down the mountain, and very treacherous."

The prince scoffed. His eyes drifted to the mean decorations around the old man's hovel. A weathered *wakizashi* lay in its sheath in a place of honor against one wall. A stick of incense burned slowly before it, the tip glowing dully in the murk. Arrayed on a table were fifteen rough teacups along with several old rags, a faded scroll, and an ornate cloth bearing the *mon* of some family he could not recognize.

The prince sulked in silence as Yotsu made several more teacups, then began shaping a large bowl.

"I demand you carry me down the mountain."

A smirk tugged at the old man's lip.

"If I carry you down the mountain, you'll groan and ache all the way."

"I am strong," cut in the prince.

"Surely the prince is very strong," said Yotsu. "But the incredible force of the prince's complaints will catch the attention of a wolf or a bear. And I don't think wild beasts care whether or not one is a prince."

"When the Imperial Guard rescue me, I will tell them how you have tormented me and held me hostage," Sotorii said darkly.

The old man did not respond.

Sotorii stood at the edge of a precipice, staring down at the spine of mountains, rolling plains, murky thickets: the body of Rokugan. His hair flew in stray wisps around his face as dark clouds gathered above, churning in strange patterns. A sudden peal of thunder boomed, followed by a bolt of lightning that struck a lone tree on the fields below, setting it on fire. A gale howled in the prince's ears as the clouds broke. He could see, somewhere in the shifting thunderheads, something of his father's face: the pitch of his nose, his piercing eyes, and his mouth, open as if screaming...

"Leave me in peace!" Sotorii shouted into the furor.

The gathering storm—his father's face—grew larger, and the mouth opened wide and descended upon him. Sotorii flung his arms up to cover his eyes as the wind blew harder, cutting his face with stray rocks and dust. Another peal of thunder. And then, a gathering wind.

A low rumble rippled through Sotorii's body. He was surrounded on all sides by formless shapes, swiping at each other with sharp blades. A sudden wild, animal fear gripped him as two colossal figures clashed overhead, spraying gouts of blood. All around him was the din and clatter of battle, and a horrible rip and tear of fabric and flesh, and screams, and prayers, and the sounds of dying.

Sotorii awoke, sweating, in the potter's hovel. His legs ached; he had been there for over a week. The old man's face was a crescent moon, outlined by flickering candlelight. He brought a steaming cup of tea to the prince. Sotorii raised it to his lips, then recoiled at the smell.

"Are you trying to poison me, old man?"

"It'll calm your mind," Yotsu growled. "Drink it."

"I do not want to."

Sotorii had no time to react as the potter tipped the cup back and forced him to drink; the hot liquid burned as it ran down his throat. Coughing, the prince looked murderously at his caretaker.

"No one has ever treated me as terribly as you have."

"I don't doubt it."

The old man's hand trembled as he raised his own cup to his lips, then drank. A long, serpentine scar ran the length of his forearm, visible in the hazy candlelight. The prince's mind wandered back to the Imperial Palace; to his father, turned away from him in his study; and to the warmth of summer evenings. And then he was in a deep and restful sleep.

One morning before dawn, Yotsu lifted the prince from his mat, wrapped him in a blanket, and carried him outside, where he draped him over his back like a child. It was still dark.

"Where are we going?"

The old man did not reply. He breathed through his mouth, puffing white steam in the cold morning air. Sotorii knitted his fingers together as the potter carried him past his sullen garden uphill.

"Your breath is horrible," the prince whispered.

"So is yours," grunted the old man.

Overhead, the stars shone in a dance of light and color. Sotorii held his breath, then exhaled loudly. The ground underfoot sloped steadily upward; the spine of the mountains blocked the stars in an outline. Yotsu puffed loudly in his ears.

"You could have taken me to a physician by now," grumbled the prince.

The potter did not reply.

The grade of the mountain grew steeper. The old man began to climb, hand and foot, edging past pocked boulders and shrubs. Sotorii turned his head to look behind them; the eastern sky had begun to glow with sunrise. The illumination burned through the cloak of mist, alighting upon dewy blades of grass like an otherworldly flame. For a moment, Sotorii lost himself, staring out at the golden rivers and numinous pools down below.

And then the potter carried him through a rocky eye to a quiet, still lake. Bare trees stood at intervals around the water, and a white sandy shore fringed the edges. The sky continued to redden with the advent of dawn, turning to a polychromatic display of violet, magenta, and azure.



Something in his heart tightened, then relaxed. He had never seen dawn before. Or at least, never like this. All his life, he had woken up when he felt like it, always when the sky was bright and easy. There was something bracing and unknown in the cold morning air. Yotsu eased Sotorii off his back, then strung a longbow with an oiled string. His face gathered in creases at the eyes as he did this, and his posture changed to match. He suddenly had the bearing of a soldier.

"Why did you bring me here?"

"Be quiet. You'll scare the game."

Yotsu knelt on the cold sand next to him. Sotorii's mouth watered at the thought of roast duck and stayed silent. It didn't take long for movement to cross the lightening sky. A lazy crane rose, scooping air with its wings, and flew up from the water, followed by many smaller birds. With strange ease, Yotsu readied his bow, trained it on his target, then loosed a shot, and another. Two birds fell with a splash.

"Why didn't you shoot the crane?" Sotorii asked.

"It would be a disrespect," said the old man. "Also, I can't carry both a prince and a crane down the mountain."

The sky was clear and bright now. Yotsu sloughed off his clothes, revealing a knotted back covered in deep scars, and walked to the edge of the water. He dove in and paddled to the

center of the lake, then returned with two fat pheasants. Dripping, the potter tossed the birds onto the shoreline and stretched his arms up toward the sky. Behind him, the water seemed to glow with the sunlight.

As Yotsu re-dressed, the prince looked at him with a curious expression.

"How did you get so many scars?"

"I fought in the Emperor's wars."

"Which ones?"

"All of them."

The old man bound the pheasants with twine and hung them from his obi, then leaned down and extended a hand to the prince.

"I—I cannot."

"Be strong."

Wincing, Sotorii took the potter's hand and pulled himself to his feet. His shin wobbled as he put weight on it for the first time in weeks, but he could hold himself up, if only barely. A dull pain pulsed in his legs and lower back, but it had lost its sharpness. The prince let out a surprised laugh, then promptly fell back down.

"You see now," said Yotsu.

Sotorii couldn't help but smile.

Several days later, Sotorii emerged from the mouth of Yotsu's hut, leaning on a cane. It was midday and the sun had eaten the mist from the mountainside, affording the prince a breathtaking view of the forest and fields south of the range. Past a crown of granite and fir trees, a small village nestled in a crook of the river below.

Gingerly, the prince sat down and continued painting a small teacup as Yotsu sat next to him. Nobody of any significance would hold this cup. Sotorii painted a cherry blossom tree, then a maiden holding a fan. The paint ran in thick rivulets down the side, blurring the shapes.

"This paint is bad." Sotorii raised the cup.

"It wasn't bad paint. You used too much," Yotsu said. "But it'll still sell at market."

Sotorii huffed. "But when will you sell it?"

"When you're ready to walk."

"I can walk now." The prince set the cup aside.

The old man cocked an eyebrow but didn't reply.

"I need to see a physician," Sotorii pressed.

"If you can already walk, do you really?"

The prince's face grew hot. He rose, shakily, to his feet and started to hobble toward the woods. Yotsu stayed seated, cross-legged, painting ceramics.

"We'll go when you're stronger," the old man said.

"When your lord commands, you should listen." Sotorii glared at him.

"You aren't my lord," said the potter. "And you aren't strong enough to go down the mountain."

"I order you to carry me!" seethed the prince.

"I ask that you trust me."

Biting his lip, Sotorii turned to face Yotsu. He let out a long breath. In his belly, it felt as though two tigers were fighting, clawing at each other.

"I will go alone, then. But I will remember how you forsook your duty to the Emperor."

Yotsu stretched one arm out toward him as the prince turned and walked toward the woods. The old man said something he couldn't understand. It didn't matter. He braced himself and fixed his eyes on the village in the distance, and the forest between. Muttering a curse, he started to hobble downhill, putting one foot in front of the other.

The forest grew denser as he descended. Twice, Sotorii nearly tripped on a jutting stone and had to grab onto a tree trunk to keep from tumbling down. Soon, he crossed a winding path and followed it, stopping occasionally to rest.

The path led him to a high rocky shelf over a deep ravine. Down below, a waterfall fed a shallow creek. Across the ravine, someone had strung a narrow rope bridge, knotted and reknotted in places.

Sotorii was out of breath, so he sat down. This was surely the reason the old man would not take him to the village. The bridge looked ready to collapse. But how had Yotsu gotten him across in the first place? His head hurt thinking about the accident. Was this where he had fallen?

"Greetings," a voice sounded.

Across the abyss were a trio of *rōnin*. They looked scrappy and unwashed; the leader was a beautiful woman with a scar on her right cheek. They looked as though they could carry him across easily.

"What good luck!" He smiled, rising unsteadily.



"I am Risa, and these are my brothers. Do you need help crossing?"

"Yes, I do." Sotorii smiled again. Within moments, the trio had crossed. One of the brothers put a reassuring hand on Sotorii's shoulder to steady him.

"Who are you?" Risa asked.

"I am Crown Prince Hantei Sotorii," the prince said proudly. It felt good to say it again. The three *rōnin* bowed.

"It will be our pleasure to assist you, your lordship."

"Thank you for your help."

Risa nodded, then rose. "What brings the prince to such a remote place?"

"Misfortune," said Sotorii. "I had an accident, and a stubborn old man took me in."

"An old man?" one of the brothers asked in a deep voice.

"What was his name?" said Risa.

"It is of no consequence. He was poor company."

A look passed between the rōnin and her brothers, and she smiled passively at the prince. As soon as she opened her mouth, though, a rough voice sounded just up the path.

"Leave the boy alone," barked Yotsu.

Sotorii gave a start as he turned to see the potter standing outlined against the bright sky, his weathered longbow strung over his shoulder.

Risa gave a wolfish grin upon seeing the potter. Hand on her hip, she turned from the prince and rested her other hand on the hilt of her katana.

"Lady Matsu has put quite a price on your head, old man."

"I'll pay it," said Yotsu.

"I am afraid that time is past," said Risa. She nodded to her brother, who locked Sotorii into an iron grip, holding him close.

"Leave him alone," seethed Yotsu. "He's nobody."

"He told me he is a prince."

The old man smiled grimly. "The poor boy's been addled. Do you see his limp? He fell very far and hit his head."

"You must be addled if you think you can fool me, old man."

Yotsu smiled, then drew his bow.

"Give yourself up, and I'll let the prince go," said Risa. "I might even let you live."

"Now you're the one who's addled." The potter snorted.

As Yotsu strung an arrow, Risa was already halfway up the path to where he stood. The old man drew back the bowstring and shot at the rōnin. She let out a pained scream as the arrow pierced her shoulder, then struck with her katana before the old man could shoot again. The prince heard a watery gurgle.

A sudden despair coursed through Sotorii. Risa turned and wiped the blood from her blade while the old man swayed drunkenly, holding one hand to his throat. Dark blood gushed through his fingers. His eyes rolled back in his head as he fell.

The prince's blood ran cold. The stubborn old man who had nursed him to health was bleeding out on the ground. He launched himself away from his captor and limped up the slope to Yotsu, feeling as though a heavy weight were pressing him down. His legs ached as he knelt before the potter. The old man's rough and knotted hand already felt cold.

"I'm sorry," Sotorii stared into Yotsu's blank eyes. He found it hard to swallow as his vision blurred with tears. His hands were sticky.

Risa stood uncomfortably close.

“Get up,” she said.

Sotorii wiped his eyes and nose with the back of his arm. The rōnin loomed over him, unblinking.

“I said get up.”

The prince rose slowly and glowered at the rōnin, then drew his hand back to strike her. She caught his fist with hers, then kicked his shin. The prince collapsed like a sack of vegetables.

“Do as I say, prince. We wouldn’t want you to injure yourself further.”

Sotorii kept his face like stone as he stood, then stared at the old man who had saved him, bled out on the ground like a common animal. He looked down at his hands. They were stained with dark, viscous blood.